

When couples part: understanding the consequences for adults and children

Executive summary

INTRODUCTION

This literature review provides an understanding into the consequences of couple relationship breakdown for adults and children. The review outlines the consequences on the physical and psychological health and well-being of adults and children, includes recent statistical data on couple relationships, and outlines factors that need to be considered when estimating the economic costs associated with couple relationship breakdown. The review also addresses the dilemmas in interpreting the data (e.g. attributing outcomes that are an effect rather than a cause of the relationship breakdown), details factors that are associated with an increased likelihood of relationship breakdown, explores the theoretical and empirical mechanisms seeking to explain the consequences of relationship breakdown, and outlines why some people fare worse than others when couples part. The latter is especially relevant when understanding how to protect and improve outcomes for adults and children when breakdown occurs. By providing such an understanding, this review will be relevant for a broad audience to include researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and students working in the field of parenting, families and couple relationships.

Couple relationship breakdown is more frequent in today's society. It is estimated that 45% of marriages will end in divorce. Alongside declining rates of marriage and more recent reductions in divorce, the married population are arguably becoming more homogenous than ever. This review includes the breakdown of a range of couple relationship statuses (where possible), and thus reflects the changes in relationship formation that have been evident over the last 40 years or so. Recent increases in the numbers of people cohabiting, relationships described as 'closely involved', and children raised by 'single-parent' families support these trends. This increased fragility and diversity of family forms, in tandem with a growing political interest illustrates the timely production of this review.

This review is underpinned by recognising that strengthening couple relationships has profound benefits for adult and child well-being, as well as improved parenting. In acknowledging the detrimental effects of relationship breakdown, this review is able to provide support for developments in policy and practice that can either help prevent relationship breakdown (where appropriate) or minimise the negative effects on adults and children when the relationship is irretrievable. It is important to emphasise that there is convincing evidence that some relationships can be repaired, improved and prevented from breaking down.

The primary focus of this review is on assessing the impacts of couple relationship breakdown on the physical and psychological health of adults and children. Although reference to relationship conflict and relationship support interventions are made, for more comprehensive reviews in these two areas readers are referred to studies cited in the main body of the report.

Presenting the evidence from this review has involved a number of complex issues. One central to this study has been assessing the precise contribution that couple relationship breakdown has on the reported impacts. The key to establishing whether the association between relationship breakdown and outcome is causal, is to assess

the extent to which 'selection' effects are occurring. Selection bias occurs when comparing samples (e.g. married and divorced) that differ in a number of ways (e.g. history of mental health problems) such that any reported impacts that are directly attributed to the breakdown are difficult to discern. The possibility of reverse causation, for example alcohol use *causing* relationship breakdown rather than vice versa, and the inability to rule out other influences such as behaviour, genetics and personality, bring further complications. In appreciation of these complexities, priority in this review has been given to prospective longitudinal cohort studies where, essentially, sample members serve as their own control group with the impact of relationship breakdown observed by comparing outcomes pre- and post-breakdown. Reference in the review is also made to the role of multiple measures, innovative designs and statistical advances that can help unravel some of these complex issues and forge conclusions with more certainty over whether relationship breakdown is causally associated with outcomes.

MAIN FINDINGS

The review has generated a great number of insights into the effects of couple relationship breakdown. With Chapters 1 and 2 providing an important context to the report, including the latest statistics on family formation and dissolution, the following presents a synopsis of the headline findings derived from the remaining chapters. The chapter headings are used to guide readers towards more substantive evidence in the full review:

Chapters 3 and 4 (adult impacts)

1. There is an unequivocal association between couple relationship breakdown and adult ill-health. Mortality statistics for England and Wales (in 2007) show elevated mortality rates for non-married (single, widowed and divorced) males and females, compared to those married, for all age groups between 25 and 64 years. From middle age (late 40's onwards) the single (never married) group show the highest rates of mortality. Evidence of a causal relationship between relationship status and the mortality statistics cannot be confirmed.
2. Overall, the elevation of mortality rates among unmarried groups is greatest among men of all ages. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data from England and Wales show that, between the ages of 30 and 50, single men have death rates about three times that of married men, and single women have rates about double those of married women. There is also evidence of an 'accumulative effect', with the strength of these mortality associations increasing by number of years non-married.
3. Associations between marital status and general health status and more specific health conditions such as Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) and raised blood pressure are also evident, with more detrimental outcomes among the non-married groups. The same association applies to the greater involvement in health-damaging behaviours. Studies indicate that the emotional and social 'protective effect' of marriage operates over and above selection effects (of people being selected out of marriage due to their poor health status) in explaining these health differences.
4. Couple relationship breakdown is associated with poorer adult mental health. Some research suggests that these impacts are observed from two years prior to breakdown, with a peak at the time of separation. This is then followed by a drop in psychological strain over the following two years to a lower level than observed

before the separation (indicating a relief from stress over the longer-term). However, these findings are not consistent with some research showing poorer mental health outcomes over the long-term following divorce or separation. This may be partly due to differences in the ways mental health is measured.

5. In studying couple relationships and health, it is clear that the marriage must be of a high quality to be advantageous. Indeed, evidence suggests that the health outcomes for some single people may be more positive than those reporting unhappy marriages. Therefore, preventing relationships from breaking down (where appropriate) *and* improving relationship satisfaction are both important in maintaining the well-being of adults and children.

Chapters 5 and 6 (child impacts)

6. Evidence from extensive reviews of other studies has reported strong associations between couple relationship breakdown and poor child outcomes. These include: poverty and socio-economic disadvantage (especially), physical ill-health, psychological ill-health, lower educational achievement, substance misuse and other health-damaging behaviours, and behavioural problems including conduct disorder, anti-social behaviour and crime. Longitudinal, cohort studies have shown that these effects may be long-term for some children, and include socio-economic disadvantage in later life, cohabitation or marriage at an early age, teenage pregnancy, and increased risk of their own marital breakdown.
7. These negative impacts of relationship breakdown on children are far from universal. The majority of children are able to adjust to a changing situation after a period of instability whilst others are less fortunate with negative impacts extending into adulthood.
8. The impact of multiple relationship transitions are particularly detrimental to children. Changes in family structure (e.g. from marriage to divorce, to remarriage, involving new half-siblings, etc.) may be more disruptive to children than maintaining a stable family structure, even if that is with a single parent. The effects are also considered to be accumulative, with the increased number of transitions leading to more negative consequences for children. Of those experiencing parental separation for the first time, younger children have a greater potential to face multiple transitions (because of their age) compared to older children.
9. Studying the effects of conflict illustrates that couple relationship breakdown should be viewed as a 'process' with events prior, during and after the breakdown affecting the impacts. There is unequivocal evidence highlighting the detrimental impact of adult relationship conflict and distress on children (that may precede a separation as well as continue afterwards). However, research also indicates that it is not necessarily whether parents are in conflict that is key, but *how* this conflict occurs and is managed. For example, 'destructive' conflict (e.g. physical violence) can be particularly harmful to children, although 'constructive' conflict (e.g. mild conflict effectively resolved) can be important in children learning how to resolve disputes in an effective manner. Similarly, unresolved conflict that involves children as messengers or recipients of negative information is particularly harmful.
10. Paradoxically, divorce following low pre-divorce conflict, compared to high pre-divorce conflict, has been shown to be more detrimental to the health and well-being of children. This is because low levels of conflict often mean children have

little time to anticipate the relationship breakdown, and may result in some children blaming themselves for the separation. Therefore, even though relationships with least conflict may have a greater chance of reconciliation or a less stressful separation, they may result in more harm for children. Consequently, although interventions need to foster a continued parent-child relationship to alleviate the impact of relationship breakdown, they also need to consider ways in which children perceive and attribute the conflict and breakdown.

11. Although divorce is more common nowadays, there is evidence suggesting that the adverse outcomes for adults and children are still equally apparent. This contradicts the argument that increasing divorce rates diminish the negative impacts in line with reduced stigma and greater acceptance of relationship breakdown. Furthermore, the difference in adult mortality rates by marital status, in England and Wales, has actually increased since divorce has become more common.

Chapters 7 and 8 (additional issues and explanations)

12. The dissolution of a relationship results in the loss of the protective benefits from being in a partnership (such as effects on physical and psychological health), as well as in further strains associated with the process of separation. This is illustrated by research showing that never-married women report less detrimental health outcomes in terms of psychological and physical health compared to those who have experienced the stressful events of divorce or separation. However, this does not apply when observing mortality data that show single, never-married people, reporting higher death rates from middle age onwards in comparison to those who were married, divorced or widowed.
13. There are a number of moderating factors¹ that can influence the impact of couple relationship breakdown and explain why, for some, the impacts are worse than for others. For children, these include:
 - parenting quality;
 - financial resources;
 - maternal mental health;
 - children's age (older children tend to face more problems adjusting to new family forms than younger children, although for a younger child who cannot recognise the distress, the removal of one parent may cause confusion and anxiety, and lead to self-blaming);
 - sex of child (mixed evidence);
 - pre-divorce conflict (high levels are detrimental to children although low levels may mean children have little time to anticipate the separation);
 - communication between parent and child about the separation;
 - child's relationship and contact with both parents after separation;
 - supportive family members;
 - new family setting after separation;
 - whether one parent is re-partnering at any one time (rather than at the same time) with the latter presenting greater difficulties.

¹ Moderating factors affect the direction and/or strength of the relation between, in this instance, relationship breakdown and its impacts. Essentially, they can exacerbate or protect people from the effects of relationship breakdown.

Moderating factors affecting the impact on adults include social and economic support, ability to forgive, and consideration of who initiated the separation.

14. When considering the moderating factors that may influence how much children are affected by relationship breakdown, there is a strong case for all being mediated to some extent through the parent-child relationship. Therefore, good and effective parenting, although not always possible, may be one of the most potent means of reducing the negative impacts on children. In addition, with the unequivocal link between couple relationship satisfaction and supportive parenting, the role of strengthening couple relationships (including new, post-separation relationships) in order to minimise the impacts on children is clear. In view of these various risk and protective factors, there is a powerful argument that the way a family *functions*, rather than the family *type*, may be more important in shaping child outcomes.
15. Review evidence on the predictors of relationship breakdown suggests that demographic factors (especially those more volitional) are more predictive of marital breakdown compared to socio-economic factors. These factors are: early age at marriage, pre-marital conception, pre-marital cohabitation, previous partnership breakdown, and parental divorce. The latter is particularly important and maintains a predictive effect when controlling for early age at partnership, premarital cohabitation and premarital childbearing.
16. Evidence from prospective longitudinal designs shows that the transition to parenthood is associated with relationship breakdown. The impacts are reported to have increased in contemporary samples due to the greater contrast between the lifestyle and choices open to young childless adults compared to those available to parents of young children. Reasons for the decline in relationship satisfaction through new parenthood include less time together, increased sleeplessness, increased depression (including post-natal depression), and increased fatigue. Protective factors include high pre-pregnancy relationship satisfaction, planned rather than unplanned pregnancy, and a low-demanding and fretful baby.

Chapter 9 (estimating the economic costs of relationship breakdown)

17. Women in Britain are 40% more likely to enter poverty if they divorce than if they remain married. Their income falls by an average of 17% after divorce, with a larger decrease among younger women, particularly mothers, and a smaller decrease among older women. Relative to married and cohabiting families, single-mother families are also found to be the most economically disadvantaged although subsequent partnerships can change the financial outlook.
18. The main economic outcomes of couple relationship breakdown can be summarised as: financial costs in terms of legal fees; moving; the need to maintain two households rather than one; additional childcare costs; impact on employment and earning prospects; impact on disposable income; and impact on services supporting the detrimental health and social impacts of couple relationship breakdown.
19. From an alternative perspective, it is important to note that some groups benefit from the costs of couple relationship breakdown. Divorce lawyers, mediators, counsellors and estate agents derive income from the consequences of couple

relationship breakdown. This income generation should also be considered when establishing the financial impacts of divorce at a national level.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE REVIEW FOR PRACTICE, POLICY AND RESEARCH

The resounding conclusion from this review is that the association between couple relationship breakdown and disadvantage is evident through a wide range of health and socio-economic indicators. There are a number of ways in which this has clear implications for practice and policy. Key points to note include:

- couple relationships can be strengthened and that breakdown, in some cases, can be prevented;
- the opportunities available to minimise the burden on adults and children when breakdown occurs (in light of factors that moderate the impacts);
- the importance of maintaining relationship quality; and
- recognition of opportune moments where relationship strain is more pronounced (e.g. transition to parenthood, the birth of a disabled child, etc.).

This review supports the case for more investment to help strengthen family relationships and to minimise the burden when relationship breakdown does occur. Helping adults to become more informed about couple relationships (e.g. expected transitions and changes), the increased ability (of practitioners and couples) to identify relationship difficulties at an early stage, and the provision of appropriate and accessible support where applicable, are leading requirements.

A further theme central throughout this review is evidence for the link between couple relationships and parenting. Poor quality couple relationships are associated with poor parenting and consequently poor quality parent-child relationships. Conversely, children raised by parents (including those previously separated or divorced) reporting high relationship quality and satisfaction tend to have high levels of well-being. Also, improvements in co-parenting (supporting a partner during parenting) have been shown to improve partner and parent-infant relationships and their well-being. Collectively, this evidence demonstrates the need for parenting interventions that emphasise the importance of the couple relationship in improving adult and child outcomes.

These main findings have highlighted a number of areas requiring further research.

- Research to investigate more precisely why couple relationships break down or why contemporary relationships show more fragility. Although it is clear that attitudes to marriage have changed with shifts in the 1960s and 1970s from the 'companionate' marriage to the more 'individualized' marriage of modern day, the attitudinal and personality-based origins of couple relationship breakdown, relative to the broader socio-demographic predictors, are still under-researched.
- Understanding more about the relationship support needs and unique experiences of population subgroups, for example, teenage parents or those of 'mixed' heritage, is essential in providing tailored support.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of preventative relationship support programmes on couple relationship quality requires expansion, especially in the UK. Research is required among more ethnically diverse, disadvantaged and relationship-distressed couples. More research is also required to understand *how* changes in relationship quality occur in order to inform even more effective interventions.

Perhaps most critically of all, research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of relationships skills programmes has rarely extended beyond 12 months and so the long-term effectiveness of these programmes is, as yet, unknown.

- Given the changing nature of relationship formation, there is a need to develop measures of relationship satisfaction and quality that reflect contemporary trends. Such measures could also help practitioners quickly and opportunistically assess the relationship support needs of adults and help examine the impact of any support provided.
- With the association/causation complexities between couple relationship breakdown and impact outlined earlier, there is a need to assess, through advanced research designs and statistical techniques, the ways in which evidence of causation can be derived with more certainty.

CONCLUSION

Although the evidence demonstrating the impact of couple relationship breakdown is highly complex, the overriding conclusion is the association it has with adult and child disadvantage. This association remains strong despite the fact that divorce and separation is widespread in today's society with research showing that the negative impacts have not diminished through time. Rather, the increased exposure of adults and children to couple relationship breakdown means that more people are affected compared to those of a previous generation. Hence the urgent need to increase the policy recognition of promoting family functioning and stability.

Indeed, while much of the evidence of impacts is relatively well established, arguably one of the more innovative strands for practice and policy has been the increased understanding of the factors known to prevent long-term detrimental outcomes for children in particular. With couple relationship breakdown becoming more widespread, and the impacts not thought to diminish through time, establishing the protective factors for adults and children is a necessity for ongoing research and practice developments in this field. The recent policy directive from the Dept. for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 'The Children's Plan: One Year On' (DCSF, 2008b), outlines the importance of minimising harmful outcomes as a priority for 2009:

"Introduce new ways to support parents at times when their relationships come under strain, and give more support to children when family relationships break down" (DCSF, 2008b, p.7).

Although the 'protection' offered by couple relationships (in terms of social support, companionship and intimacy) has been shown to explain the association between relationship breakdown and health over and above selection effects, the relative contribution of this to economic support still remains unanswered. The issue of poverty and economic resource remains central to our understanding of the impacts of relationship breakdown. There is a case for well-being being affected mostly by a decline in economic resources which, in turn, have arisen from relationship breakdown. At the time of writing, the recession and rising unemployment and financial stress among many families is most pertinent to this conclusion.

Although many factors may affect well-being, some of which are unknown and unmeasured, the role of poverty and financial disadvantage must not be understated. Research has shown that financial capability (often reduced following a separation)

acts as a powerful protective factor against the potential harmful outcomes from relationship breakdown. With positive parenting, linked to the quality of the couple relationship, offering an additional protective factor, family functioning and within-family effects (from finance and parenting especially) may be particularly significant in shaping the outcomes when couples part. Moreover, although the impact of couple relationship breakdown can be considered detrimental as an 'average effect' (which may disguise instances of differing impacts), the financial situation and positive parenting are important influences on adult and child outcomes that must be integrated in any related practice and policy.