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Investigating the Media’s Divulgence of Divorce

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Makenzie Moe is a senior Sociology major at Augsburg College. Makenzie has enjoyed the last few years living in Minneapolis studying Social Psychology and Public Sociology, but is very excited to head out of the big city and relocate to Ankeny, Iowa where she will work until attending law school. Makenzie hopes to someday complete a law degree and work in health care law.
The transformation of the American family from an intact family unit into separate parts is a contemporary phenomenon that affects millions of Americans each year. The process of divorce is often painful, traumatic, and life altering. Over the past decades, divorce has become increasingly common. It is possible that the media has adjusted the way that divorce is portrayed and discussed since 1980 because divorce rates have fluctuated since the no-fault divorce policy was implemented. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, a content analysis was conducted to compare and contrast articles from four different publications throughout the last three decades. The content analysis evaluated the following criteria: the year of publication, the consequences of divorce, the effect of divorce on parents and children, the effect of divorce on society, the effect of divorce for males and females, explanations of divorce, expert citations, statistics, personal narratives, and an evaluation of overall negativity. An analysis of the frequency of the topic in selected popular media will also be conducted to discover if divorce is more commonly discussed now than thirty years ago. These fifteen variables were examined in order to evaluate if or how media adjusts the way divorce is depicted over time. This analysis also examined several variables in depth: the way the media depicts the way divorce affects children, the way the media portrays the relationship between divorce and gender, and the way the media discusses the effect of divorce on society as a whole. The data collected on these variables helps us to make conclusions about how the media portrays the phenomenon of divorce and its consequences. These conclusions give us a bigger picture about how the media presents the issue of divorce and what its consequences are.

*Literature Review*

The institution of marriage and the practice of divorce in America has changed dramatically since the period of colonization. The colonies in New England identified most with Calvinism and Lutheran, which allowed divorce in few circumstances, including instances such as adultery or desertion. The general attitude toward divorce at the time was negative—it was tolerated under particular circumstances although it was an unhealthy practice (*Journal of Marriage and Families* 2009). During the 1800’s, many individual states changed their divorce laws, making divorce an easier process to go through, although it was still frowned upon. As the 19th century approached, there was concern throughout the nation about the rising divorce rates that was addressed by the national government (*Journal of Marriage and Families* 2009). The 19th century brought about dramatic changes in the economic, social, and demographic sectors. As the notion of individualism grew among American citizens, divorce was beginning to be seen as an individual right, which contributed to the growing attitude that divorce is acceptable and even necessary in some cases (*Journal of Marriage and Families* 2009).

California was the first state to pass a “no-fault” divorce policy in 1969 (Adams & Coltrane 2006; *Journal of Marriage and Families* 2009), and other states in the union soon followed. This change in legislation made divorce attainable for couples without creating roles of “victim” and “victimizer,” the way that earlier divorce policies had done. This policy made divorce a much more viable option for unhappily married people, making divorce privatized (Adams & Coltrane 2006). The divorce rate rose and divorce began to be seen as a more accepted practice in society. This divorce reform made divorce a more accepted phenomenon that still affects our society today.

Phenomena in society are often depicted through the institution of the media. Sociologists, and other social scientists, often study the association made between the stories in the media and the occurrences in society. These associations in both popular media and scholarly
journals are assumed to be related to public attitudes (LaRossa 2009). Divorce, being such a common phenomenon, has been depicted in the media for decades (Usdansky 2009). The study of divorce in popular media is not only a study of attitudes, but a study of culture. The media often portrays issues that are important to American citizens because these “hot” issues sell more than stories that nobody cares about (LaRossa 2009). However, topics that are discussed in popular media often reflect popular opinions about attitudes within the culture.

The way in which divorce is depicted in the media has changed over the past few decades. In the beginning of the 20th century, divorce was represented in the media was generally a negative and critical of individuals who actively sought divorce (Usdansky 2009). Often, the media blamed couples who divorced for social disorder. This created a victim and victimizer attitude of divorce which still remains in our culture today. However, this practice of using morality in magazine and journal articles declined by the 1970’s, which is congruent with the changing value of marriage through the century. The more Americans accepted divorce, the less critical the stories about divorce were in the popular media throughout 1998 (Usdansky 2009). Popular press changed the way it portrayed divorce to reflect the changing attitudes in the society.

The media not only reports general attitudes and beliefs, but it may influence those beliefs as well. Individuals who regularly watch television, particularly programs that air once a day, such as Soap Operas, report more dysfunctional relationship beliefs than those who do not (Haferkamp 1999). Frequent television and soap opera viewing is positively associated with the beliefs that sexes are different, and that partners cannot change (Haferkamp 1999). The images portrayed in popular media can shape our perceptions of reality to a point where those beliefs are reflected in everyday life (Haferkamp 2009). Therefore, the images of divorce as a damaging and unhealthy practice may have influenced unhappy couples to remain married in the 20th century, but today the ambiguous acceptance of divorce in popular media may be encouraging unhappy couples to separate. It is even suggested that divorce depictions in media today are too harsh because they are trapping unhappy couples in an unhappy marriage (Adams & Coltrane 2006). The influence the media has on society is important to recognize when analyzing the way the media is covering divorce.

Divorce is an ever changing phenomenon which is evolving society’s views on marriage and families. The depictions of divorce in popular media may be influenced by the beliefs of American citizens, by the increasing divorce rate, or it may be influencing divorce itself. Given what has been studied so far on the subject, it is reasonable to conclude that the way divorce is represented in the media has changed over time until 1998. However, little research has been done since that time. The research conducted during the 1990’s was often a study in comparison to something else. For example, the Usdansky study (2009) was a comparison between how divorced parents and how single-parent families were represented in popular media. The study conducted by Adams & Coltrane (2006) was a comparison of articles from the era of divorce reform. The missing pieces of information may be imperative to fully understanding how we as a society today reflect divorce in popular media.

**Method**

The sample consisted of 50 magazine and newspaper articles from four different mainstream media sources which include *Time Magazine, The New York Times, Newsweek,* and *U.S News & World Report*. These articles were selected because their databases dated back to 1980 and were available to the public. Articles selected in the sampling frame specifically
addressed the topic of divorce in America and were written between 1980 and 2010. Articles were located through Academic Search Premier through a systematic random sample. Articles in the search were assigned a number, beginning with 1 and ascending through the last article in the search. A random number table was used to determine which articles to include in the sample, using a periodicity of 4.

A content analysis was used to analyze the data and compare and contrast the articles. The content analysis examined fifteen variables: the year the article was written, if the article gave any explanation for divorce and/or divorce trends, if the article discussed consequences of divorce, the number of “expert” citations used, if personal narratives/stories were in the article, if any mention of the effect of divorce on children was mentioned, the effect of divorce on parents, the effect of divorce for males and females, the effect of divorce for society, the number of expert psychologist citations, and a subjective evaluation of the negativity in the article. The year of the article is a nominal level measure. The negative evaluation is an ordinal level of measurement, which will be scored on a scale ranging from 1, the most negative, to 5, the most positive. The rest of the variables are interval/ratio level measurements.

Measure
Negative Conceptualization

Articles in the sample ranged from a negative to a positive depiction of divorce. Articles that were classified as negative were lacking in constructiveness, helpfulness, or optimism. A lack of constructiveness, which means they cited no offered improvement that divorce offered individuals or society, was apparent in quotations such as “divorce is the greatest disaster in American history” versus constructive quotations such as “divorce is an American value.” A lack of helpfulness, which means they offered no explanation that divorce was helpful to any individual or society, was seen in quotations such as “a lousy marriage beats a good divorce” versus helpful quotes such as “there are good divorces.” A lack of optimism, which means they had no enthusiastic outlook on divorce or divorce rates, was seen in quotations such as “marriage is a broken institution” versus optimistic quotes such as “the American family is surviving”. All three defining features of negativity were considered when scoring an article as either positive, meaning it included all three characteristics, or negative, meaning it lacked these characteristics.

Expert Citations

Many articles cited outside sources of information, ranging from the U.S Census Bureau to marriage therapists. Expert citations for this purpose were defined as any outside source, meaning information the author did not take credit for, as a piece of information that originated from an individual or group that focuses their attention on the specific area that the information produced from. For example, any statistics about the divorce rate from the U.S Census or any explanation of the effect of divorce on children given by a child psychologist.

Content analyses have several issues with validity and reliability. Content analyses are a strong method of research because they are quite reliable, meaning the information produced from a content analysis is quite easy to reproduce. The same results will be found if the same criteria are used in the coding instrument. Content analyses are not, on the other hand, overly valid. It is difficult to create a clear picture of the significance of the data found in content analyses; they are mainly to be used to collect quantitative data. Content analyses are useful, however, because they can be generalizable.

Data Analysis
Twenty-five articles were written between 1980 and 1995 and twenty-five articles were written between 1995 and 2010. The equal number of articles published throughout the time period suggests that publishing remained constant over time. Just under half of articles (44%) did not mention the consequences of divorce. Of the articles that did mention consequences of divorce, 46% offered one to five consequences of divorce ranging from poverty to custody of children. The highest number of consequences in one article was 14. Of the articles that mentioned an effect of divorce on children (60%), the mean was 2.26 with a standard deviation of 3.41. The majority of articles (61.7%) did not discuss the effect of divorce on parents. Of the articles that did, the most commonly discussed effect for parents was the issue of custody of children. Exactly half of the articles (50%) discussed the effect of divorce for women, while 40% of articles discussed the effect of divorce for men. The majority of articles (69.2%) discussed the effect of divorce on society.

The majority of articles (60%), attempted to explain divorce and/or divorce rates. The mean number of explanation references was two. The majority of articles (84%) used expert citations, ranging from the U.S Census Bureau to authors. Only 22.4% had expert psychologist citations, with a mean of 0.531 and a standard deviation of 1.39. Almost all of the articles (90%) used statistics, ranging from one to sixteen with a mean of 4.84 and a standard deviation of 3.88. Over half of the articles (64%) used personal narratives, with a mean of 1.74 and a standard deviation of 2.16. Each article was evaluated for negativity based on previously established criteria. The negative conceptualization was broken up with 28% of articles labeled very negative, 26% were labeled negative, and 16% were labeled neutral. 22% of articles were labeled positive, and 8% were labeled very positive.

**Divorce and Children**

Divorce was often mentioned hand in hand with children, as divorce is not just about two people but about a whole family structure. Of the articles that discussed the effect on children, most mentioned children only once (20%), but there were as many as fourteen references in a single article. The effect of divorce on parents was focusing on the legal issue of custody. This was also reflected in the effect of divorce for society, as 10% of articles discussed increased court cases while only 4% of articles considered single parents an effect of divorce for society. 12% of articles discussed that one effect for society was psychologically damaged children. Most expert psychologist citations were in regard to the damaging effects divorce has on children, ranging from emotional instability and a fear of rejection to post-traumatic stress disorder and learning disabilities. For example, one author stated that divorce “left children to fend for themselves.” Multiple articles suggested that boys are more traumatized by divorce of parents than girls. The cycle of divorce was used as an explanation of divorce in multiple articles, meaning that children of divorce are more likely to divorce themselves. This phenomenon was also refuted in many articles. Of the eleven articles that were labeled “positive,” seven were written by divorced parents stating that divorce isn’t as hard for children to deal with as dysfunctional married parents.

**Divorce and Gender**

The way that the media portrays the effect of divorce is different for men than it is for women. The effect of divorce on women was discussed more than the effect of divorce on men. The most common effect of divorce for men that was mentioned was the legal issue of compensation (10%), followed by personal anguish (8%). An effect of divorce for men was the
issue of an impaired job performance, which was mentioned in 4% of articles. This same effect for women appeared in none of the articles. An effect for women that did not appear for men was the regaining of personal freedom. The effect of divorce for women that was most common was becoming a single parent (10%), followed by the issue of personal anguish (8%), a fear of the future (8%), and changing gender roles (8%).

**Change Over Time**

Divorce in the media has not changed dramatically since 1980. Overall, divorce is portrayed in the media as a very negative phenomenon. Just over half of the articles (54%) were labeled very negative or negative, while 16% of articles were neutral. This remains relatively consistent over time. 16% of articles written between 1980 and 1989 were labeled negative or very negative, 24% of articles written between 1990 and 1999 were labeled negative or very negative, and 18% of articles written between 2000 and 2010 were labeled negative or very negative. 2% of articles written between 1980 and 1989 were labeled neutral, 4% of articles written between 1990 and 1999 were labeled neutral, and 10% of articles written between 2000 and 2010 were labeled neutral. 10% of articles written between 1980 and 1989 were labeled positive or very positive, 10% of articles written between 1990 and 1999 were labeled positive or very positive, and 10% of articles written between 2000 and 2010 were labeled positive or very positive. A changing trend from articles written between 1980 and 1989 to articles written between 1990 and 1999 was the perceived effect of divorce on society. Articles written between 1980 and 1989 were the most common to not mention the effect of society at all (42%), and not one article attributed a decrease in family values to divorce. In comparison, 75% of articles that were attributed a decrease in family values were written between 1990 and 1999. This figure changed again, as only 25% of articles that attributed a decrease in family values to divorce were written between 2000 and 2010.

**Conclusions/Implications**

From the data collected, several conclusions can be made about how divorce is portrayed in selected media and how it has changed since 1980. The content analysis provided information about trends and the phenomenon of divorce that can be divided into four larger categories: divorce is about children more than parents, divorce is a different experience for men versus women, divorce is an example of decreasing family values, and there is conflicting information about the phenomenon of divorce.

The media mentions the effect of divorce on children more than it mentions the effect of divorce on parents. Children are part of the family structure, and their inclusion in this phenomenon cannot be ignored. However, a large number of articles focused on the traumatic effect of divorce on children while ignoring the effect it has on parents. This was consistent over time according to the data. When marriages break apart, children’s lives are changed—they no longer have two parents in the same house, they are forced to move between homes, and they are more likely to live in poverty—but so are the lives of the parents. Selected media articles have focused largely on the negative consequences of children of divorce, often stating that parents should stay together for the sake of their children, and that “a good divorce never beats a lousy marriage” when discussing the psychological effect it has on children. The articles often put an emphasis on the “lasting damage of divorce” that children must bear forever such as a fear of abandonment or rejection, emotional instability or possibly becoming part of the “divorce cycle” and will end up divorced themselves. Divorce is a phenomena that doesn’t affect just the two
people involved but a whole variety of family members, such as children and in-laws, and the larger society as a whole, as these children often grow up to divorce themselves.

The selected articles in this sample portrayed divorce as a different experience for men than it is for women. This is also consistent over time according to the data. Women were often portrayed as “picking up the pieces” after a divorce, and they are often left with children to feed and no job to support them. This is also apparent in the coding of the effect of divorce on society, as a decreased standard of living for divorced people is made reference to in multiple articles. Children of divorced parents are more likely to live in poverty than children with married parents. This also ties in with the effect of divorce on parents, as many articles discussed the legal issue of child custody. The idea of “joint custody” was a relatively new phenomenon in 1980, and the selected media articles didn’t begin discussing it as a common occurrence until the 1990’s. Before then, women were always granted custody of children which would often put them into poverty. Men, on the other hand, were often portrayed in this study as having to pay child support and compensation. This differing focus on men and women in these selected articles suggests that women are more negatively affected financially by divorce, and even more so if there are children involved. The data suggests changing gender roles as an effect of divorce on women but not equally for men. Men, however, were portrayed as being more affected negatively at work than women. The way that these selected media articles portrays divorce as a different experience for men than women could contribute to the gender schemas that are present in American society.

Divorce is seen as a cause of decreasing family values according to these selected media articles. Before no-fault divorce policy was passed through legislation, divorce was an infrequent occurrence that could be attributed to a small portion of the population instead of a systematic error in reasoning. Now, divorce rates are suggesting that divorce can be as frequent as one in every two marriages. Divorce can no longer be seen or portrayed as just a small percentage of people who marry the wrong person, but instead it is a flawed institution that is contributing to the “social ills” of this country. Some articles in this study discussed the value of divorce because it is reflective of people pursing happiness instead of staying in a bad marriage to appease their peers, or because divorce gives room for personal growth. However, most articles refuted the claims that there is such a thing as a “good divorce.” Divorce is often portrayed as one of the “social ills” in this country. Divorce rates are so high, in fact, that the media often blames them for the reasons that not as many people choose to marry. Several articles mentioned that marriage is no longer “a necessary institution” because divorce will end it anyway, which explains why so many couples choose to cohabitate instead of marry. In the age of divorce, there are “increasing motivators to stay single.” Divorce is portrayed as the cause of the increasing popularity of these trends.

Divorce is a controversial issue that will always have differing schools of thought. Expert opinions in the 1980’s believed that the age of “carefree divorce” was over and that “intact family values” were returning. Some articles predicted that divorce would be obsolete by the 1990’s. Different psychologists argue that divorce affects children in such a negative way that any marriage is better than any divorce, while others suggests that growing up in a dysfunctional home is more cause for concern than divorce. Statistics about the prevalence of divorce are constantly debated between scholars. Some argue that divorce rates are rising and over half of all marriages ended in divorce in the 2000’s, while others say that figure is grossly overestimated and impossible to prove. Time and opinions have shaped the way that divorce is portrayed in the media.
Divorce is an ever present phenomenon in American society. This study examined the way divorce is portrayed in popular media. The data in this study shows that the hypothesis presented is in fact true—the media adjusts the way it depicts divorce over time. Each variable was analyzed to examine to what extent they were discussed in these selected article. Variables that had statistical significance led us to conclusions that help us understand the phenomenon of divorce as it is presented in the media. These conclusions help us see the bigger picture of how the media portrays divorce as it affects children, gender roles, and societal values. These trends in the media could potentially influence the way an individual understands divorce. Therefore, there should be future research in this area on how people’s attitudes are affected by the way the media portrays divorce.
References


