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Marital Reconciliation Interests Of Divorcing Parents: Research And Implications For Practice¹

William J. Doherty, Brian J. Willoughby & Bruce Peterson

The research and follow up work presented here began with the practical experience of a family court judge whose meetings with divorcing couples convinced him that at least some couples would be interested in an "exit ramp" from the divorce highway to explore the reconciliation option. When he looked at his own court system, he saw assistance for nearly every situation of divorcing couples (legal, financial, protection, parenting education) except for reconciliation. He then invited a University of Minnesota colleague to explore this issue with him, beginning with conversations with a group of divorce lawyers. Although fully committed to a constructive, non-adversarial divorce process, the group almost unanimously believed that by the time couples entered the legal divorce process, they had abandoned realistic hope for their marriage and would have little interest in reconciliation help. Even in the situation where one party wanted to preserve the marriage, the other surely did not. After these conversations we decided to shed light on this important question by gathering data from divorcing parents themselves.

We could find no studies that asked divorcing people if they would be interested in exploring marital reconciliation via professional services. The study sought to identify how many parents in the divorce process believe that reconciliation is still possible and how many are interested in services to help them reconcile their marriage. The second purpose was to explore predictors of interest in reconciliation, and in particular: educational

level, gender, age, number and ages of children, who initiated the divorce process, and past experience of marriage counseling. In addition to the original study, we present updated information that extends the original research via additional data and implications for practice.

Study Method

The study took place in Hennepin County, Minnesota. The sample consisted of 2,484 individual divorcing parents who completed a brief survey at the end of parenting classes, which at the time were mandated by district court policy. Approximately 45% of the sample was male while 55% were female. Their average age was 39 and the average length of marriage was 12 years. They averaged 2 children. Their relatively high educational levels (54% were college graduates) reflected the demographics of Minnesota married couples.

Belief about whether their marriage could be saved was assessed by one item: "Even at this point, do you think your divorce could be prevented if one or both of you works hard to save the marriage?" Responses were yes, no, and maybe. Interest in a possible reconciliation service was assessed by one item asking participants "If the court offered a reconciliation service, I would seriously consider trying it." Responses were yes, no, and maybe.

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their background including how

long they had been married, how many times they had been married, their age, the number and ages of children, who initiated the divorce process, and their educational background. Responses to the item regarding the initiator of the divorce were "you," "your partner," or "both of us together." They were also asked if they have done marriage counseling as a couple (yes/no); 54% indicated that they had received marriage counseling.

Results

When asked: "Even at this point, do you think your divorce could be prevented if one or both of you works hard to save the marriage?" 11.5% of the individual spouses responded "yes" and 14.4% responded "maybe." Males were more likely to say they thought their marriage could be saved. When asked: "If the court offered a reconciliation service, I would seriously consider trying it." 12.9% of individuals responded "yes" and 15.9% responded "maybe." Males were more likely to indicate they would be willing to try a reconciliation service.

Originally we had data only on individuals, not matched couples. More than half way into the data gathering, we discovered a way to match individual parents as couples by asking for the wedding date in addition to the number and ages of their children. Because the sample size was smaller ($N = 329$) and in order to simplify the presentation of results, the yes and maybe categories were collapsed. Couples were then categorized into three groups: one where both partners indicated yes or maybe, one where only one partner indicated yes or maybe, and one where neither partner indicated yes or maybe.

Findings for the belief that the marriage can be saved showed that in about a third of the sample, at least one partner believed that the

marriage could possibly be saved even at this point in the divorce process. In 11.7% of couples both partners independently indicated that their marriage could still be saved. For interest in reconciliation services, in 34.2% of couples one partner was interested but the other not, and in 10.5% of couples both indicated interest in a reconciliation service. Overall, in about 45% of couples, one or both partners expressed some degree of interest in reconciliation services.

We used multinomial logistic regression analyses to examine predictors of interest in reconciliation services. The only strong predictors of reconciliation interest were gender, with males being more interested in reconciliation than females, and initiator status, with far greater interest among those whose partner initiated the divorce. Otherwise, findings were consistent across most demographic (age, education) and marital factors (number of marriage, number of children together, and experience with marriage counseling).

Discussion of the Research

This study offers the first research data on the reconciliation interests of divorcing parents. The findings of the current study are generally consistent with the limited prior research that bears indirectly on the topic. Using a large national data set, Wineberg found about one-third of separated couples tried to reconcile and that one-third of these couples succeeded (a rate of 10% reconciliation among those who had separated).² Using a probability sample of couples in Colorado, Bloom and colleagues reported that 23% of separated couples tried to reconcile and 12% succeeded in reconciling.²³ And Morgan reported a reconciliation rate of 15% in a large national data set.⁴ Given the 10.5% rate of matched couple interest in reconciliation services

found in the present study, it is plausible to suggest that around 1 in 10 divorcing couples might be candidates for reconciliation, with higher percentages likely among those identified earlier in the process.

There are several important limitations of the study. Because parents completed the survey after taking a class that dealt with the effects of divorce on children, their responses may have been affected by the class content. Not all parents comply with the requirement to take the class, and we have no information about those who did not take the class. Because participants were parents of minor children in one geographical region, the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population of divorcing couples. It is also important to keep in mind that the findings refer only to beliefs and intentions, not to behavior. We cannot estimate how many couples who express an interest in reconciliation services would follow through to access services, and research on behavior change suggests that even people who would "seriously consider" services (as the survey question indicated) would be quite diverse in how close they are to taking action.⁵ Finally, the findings cannot speak to the question of how many couples would achieve a successful reconciliation.

Overall, the current study suggests that many people in the divorce process hold beliefs and interest in reconciliation that have not been taken into account in current literature and practice in divorce work. The fact that participants were well on the way to divorce (the majority took the parenting class towards the end of the divorce process) suggests the possibility the number of couples open to reconciliation might be even higher at the outset of the divorce process when the divorce process itself has not caused additional strife. Subsequent surveys that included a question about stage in the legal

divorce process confirmed this assumption: individuals who were earlier in the process expressed more interest in reconciliation.

Updated Information

In order to gain a more nuanced look at divorcing people's attitudes toward divorce and reconciliation, we developed a typology of different attitudes towards getting divorced and surveyed an additional group of divorcing parents after parenting classes. The language of the four attitudes was developed in consultation with a group of divorce lawyers with many years of experience. In subsequent surveys, parents were asked to check which one of the following attitudes is closest to their own:

1. I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes.
2. I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure.
3. I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes.
4. I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard get us back together.

We administered this question to 445 parents taking classes, 220 parents who were mailed a survey within a month of filing for divorce in Hennepin County, and 78 clients at an initial consultation with an attorney practicing collaborative law. Overall, we found that about 65% of parents fell into category #1 (the marriage is definitely over), and 35% were divided among the other three categories. (These figures refer to individual spouses, not couples. See Table 1 for the breakdown by categories.) Newly filing parents were less apt to say that the marriage was definitely over (62% of newly filing versus 67% after classes), and more apt to say that they did not want the divorce (13% versus 5%). Lawyers' clients at intake were least apt to indicate that the marriage was

definitely over. Although not presented here as a formal research study, this data does provide additional support for the original study by showing that number of parents potentially open to reconciliation (around 30%) was not dependent on the wording of the questions in the original study or to the fact that the surveys were administered after a parenting class.

Follow up Services

This study was developed to provide empirical data on a topic that has been largely left to opinion and conjecture. One upshot has been the development of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project at the University of Minnesota. Its mission is to develop and disseminate best practices for lawyers, therapists, clergy, and other professionals to assist couples who are uncertain whether divorce is their best option. A new service informed by this research is called Discernment Counseling, a form of brief, focused counseling for individuals and couples who are ambivalent about whether to divorce or work to repair their marriage. The goal is clarity and confidence in the decision, including whether there are avenues for reconciliation that the couple had not yet explored. It is not framed as marriage counseling to improve the relationship, and “leaning out” spouses are not pressured to be better partners at a time they are not sure they want to stay married. The decision is framed as: whether to continue toward divorce or to carve out a reconciliation period of six months to work hard on saving the marriage; and then make a decision on divorcing or staying married. Discernment counseling has a maximum of five sessions.

When one partner is “leaning out” of the marriage and the other is strongly interested in saving it, the counselor works with them separately on their agendas. The “leaning

out” spouse is helped to make a decision that has integrity for self and others, and the “leaning in” spouse is counseled with a “hopeful spouse” protocol. The goal is for “hopeful spouses” to bring their best self to this crisis (instead of the worst self, which an unwanted divorce often elicits), to use the crisis as a wake up call for self-reflection and constructive personal change, and to neither pursue nor distance from the partner while the partner makes a decision. There are two potential positive outcomes from this counseling of the hopeful spouse: either the partner decides to try the reconciliation path or they both continue more constructively on the divorce path.

It has become clear that new forms of practice such as these are needed for ambivalent couples on the brink of divorce. Traditional marriage counseling tends to be ineffective because the counselor either expects both parties to work on the relationship — rendering the leaning out spouse the uncooperative one; or encourages the hopeful spouse to just let go of the marriage —leaving that individual feeling undercut and angry. Similarly, when divorce lawyers try to determine if clients are ready for a divorce, they may do so in a cursory way by asking questions such as “have you tried counseling?” or “is a divorce something you are sure you want to do?” With a spouse who does not want the divorce, they may inform him or her that under state law one spouse can unilaterally divorce the other, and then focus their attention on matters pertaining to the divorce, leaving the hopeful spouse feeling unsupported in his or her quest to save their marriage and sometimes determined to mount roadblocks.

A group of local divorce lawyers are developing more nuanced skills in reconciliation-related conversations with clients, and then suggesting Discernment

Counseling to appropriate clients. Several clients have reported that they are grateful to their attorney for reading cues and then talking with them about options to explore their readiness to proceed with divorce. And some attorneys have reported that those clients who went through Discernment Counseling and opted to proceed with divorce, were more emotionally ready for the work ahead. The Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project is conducting more research and training on these issues, including preparing marriage therapists and mental health professionals to provide better services to couples on the brink of divorce.

A general conclusion from the research and follow up work presented in this article is that, although most people who enter the divorce process have probably made a final decision to end their marriages, those who are uncertain or open to reconciliation deserve more systematic attention than they receive in the current system.

Notes

¹ For a full presentation of the research study that this article summarizes and extends, see William J. Doherty, Brian J. Willoughby & Bruce Peterson, *Interest in Marital Reconciliation Among Divorcing Parents*, 49 FAM. CT. REV. 313 (2011). See <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2011.01373.x/full>

² Howard Wineberg, *Marital Reconciliation in the United States: Which Couples Are Successful?*, 56 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 80, (1994); Howard Wineberg, *An Examination of Ever-Divorced Women Who Attempted a Marital Reconciliation Before Becoming Divorced*, 22 J. DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE, 129, (1995).

³ Bernard L. Bloom et al., *Marital Separation: A Community Survey*, 1 J. DIVORCE 17, (1977).

⁴ Leslie A. Morgan, *Outcomes of Marital Separation: A Longitudinal Test of Predictors*, 50 J. MARRIAGE & FAM. 493, (1988).

⁵ James O. Prochaska & Wayne F. Velicer, *The Transtheoretical Model of Health Behavior Change*, 12 AM. J. HEALTH PROMOTION 38, (1997).

William J. Doherty, Ph.D., is Professor and Director of the Citizen Professional Center, University of Minnesota. He has been a researcher, teacher, and practitioner of family studies and therapy for 33 years, and in recent years has developed the Families and Democracy Project to engage with communities in solving social problems. He also directs the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project at the University of Minnesota, which is developing best practices for working with couples at risk for divorce who are interested in considering reconciliation. He is past President of the National Council on Family Relations, the oldest interdisciplinary family studies organization in the United States.

Brian J. Willoughby, Ph.D., formerly a doctoral student of Dr. Doherty, is now Assistant Professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University. He has conducted research on the formation of marriage and other intimate relationships, and has specialized in quantitative data analysis.

Bruce, Peterson, J.D., is a judge in the Family Court, Hennepin County, Minnesota. He has served as a judge since 1999, including six years on the family court where he has provided leadership for innovation in the divorce process and in ways to serve the special needs of non-married parents seeking help from the court.

TABLE 1

PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THEIR DIVORCE

Attitude	Parents After Mandated Parenting Classes		Parents Mailed Surveys within One Month of Filing for Divorce		Parents at First Consultation with a Lawyer	
	(N = 445)		(N = 220)		(N = 78)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes	286	67.3	137	62.30%	42	53.80%
I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure	79	18.6	31	14.10%	11	14.10%
I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes	37	8.7	24	10.90%	12	15.40%
I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard to get us back together	23	5.4	28	12.70%	13	16.70%