

**Nicholas H. Wolfinger****Understanding the Divorce Cycle: The Children of Divorce in their Own Marriages.**

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It has long been known in the research literature that children whose parents divorce are themselves more likely to divorce than those whose parents' marriage remains intact. In seven brief chapters, Wolfinger walks us through the reasoning and the theoretical/empirical steps he has followed to explain this phenomenon. The author analyzed two large American data sets, the General Social Survey (years 1973-94) and the National Survey of Families and Household (years 1987-88) with sample sizes of over 10,000 persons each. This book constitutes a substantial contribution to the field because it brings new empirical insights on the topics of divorce, stepparent families, remarriage, and even cohabitation.

Wolfinger's general finding is that the transmission of divorce from parents to children, which he refers to as the divorce cycle, can be attributed to the lessons children learn about marital commitment rather than to marital conflict, for instance. (In contrast, marital conflict is a key variable in the explanation of problems that a proportion of children experience during their parents' marriage and divorce.) He begins by reviewing the shortcomings of the best-known explanations for the effect of divorce on children and in particular of its transmission. He then proceeds to document his main results with controls for key variables such as parents' socioeconomic background, race, and religion.

First, his results indicate a weakening of the effect of divorce over time. For instance, teen marriage after parental divorce has declined substantially between 1973 and 1994, although it remains comparatively high among children of divorce. Nevertheless, controlling for life course, children whose parents divorce and especially remarry have higher rates of teen marriage (which is also related to higher rates of divorce) but, after age 20, have lower rates of marriage than those from intact families. In turn, these children have a higher incidence of cohabitation but, combining marriage and cohabitation, they still experience a lower rate of live-in relationships of any kind and their cohabitation is less likely to result in a marriage.

Third, Wolfinger finds that these children are more likely to marry homogamously, that is, with other children whose parents have divorced — but mainly so for those who do not go on to higher education. Fourth, when both spouses have divorced parents, they are even more likely to divorce because "both partners are more likely to bring low commitment and problematic interpersonal skills to the marriage" (p. 56). Fifth, the more marital transitions experienced by parents, the higher the children's chance of divorcing and of divorcing serially. As more serial divorces are now occurring than in the past, this trend may counterbalance the historical weakening of the divorce cycle.

A last result mentioned here is unexpected. It shows that children of divorce are not more likely to dissolve their cohabitations than are those from intact families — nor are children whose parents have experienced multiple divorces. As well, having a stepparent seems to be related to an increase in cohabitations that result in a marriage: "Stepparenting often restores children's faith in the institution of marriage" (p. 101). However, because stepparenting constitutes an additional family

transition, it is also related to a higher rate of these adult children's marriages ending in divorce.

In short, Wolfinger's statistical analysis is well developed and sheds light on some paradoxical aspects of the divorce cycle. He also offers his thoughts on social policies pertaining to divorce and on the future of divorce itself. This book should be read by researchers interested in the topic of divorce and related issues. It might serve as a textbook but only in more advanced courses that would focus on marital disruption. His presentation is clear and relatively easy to follow as he formats his results in very approachable graphs and occasional, uncomplicated tables.

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Ambert's latest book was published in April 2005: *Changing Families: Relationships in Context*. Toronto: PearsonEd. In 2003 for *CJS Online* she reviewed *The Changing Experience of Childhood: Families and Divorce* by Carol Smart, Bren Neale and Amanda Wade.

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