Attitudes of Kuwaiti Young Adults toward Marriage and Divorce:
A Comparative Study between Young Adults from Intact and Divorced Families

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Abstract: This study investigates whether parental marital status affects young adults' attitudes toward marriage and divorce. There exists a vast amount of literature on the impact of divorce on young adults in Western cultures; however, no previous empirical studies have been conducted on the attitudes of young adults from intact and divorced families in the Gulf region or in Arab countries in the Middle East. The sample of the study consisted of 661 young adults from Kuwait University (from divorced and intact families). The findings reveal that adults whose parents divorced show fewer positive attitudes toward marriage than do those individuals from intact marriages. The study also suggests that adults whose parents were divorced carry more positive attitudes toward divorce compared with individuals from intact marriages. Furthermore, gender was found to be an important factor in shaping attitudes toward marriage and divorce. A longitudinal study is recommended to look at the changes in young adults' attitudes toward marriage and divorce over time, which will help to identify the influence of other factors of attitudes toward marriage and divorce.

Key Words: Adults, marriage, divorce, attitudes, Kuwait, Arabs, Muslims.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of parental divorce on children was reported to be associated with a stressful experience for children at any age (Cooney, Hutchinson, & Leather, 1995; Mahl, 2001). Parental divorce was reported to be the most stressful event that children experience in their lives (Wolchik et al., 1993). Likewise, children of divorced families are at an increased risk of social and psychological problems which may continue into their adult life (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Moreover, Amato (2006) in a review of a 20-year longitudinal study found that younger adults of divorce have weaker ties with their parents, experience more conflict in their future marriage, and are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriage.

In Kuwait alone, According to the Ministry of Planning of Kuwait (2005), 30% of all first marriages end in divorce. Alqashan (2009) reported that because of the increased rate of divorce, almost 45% of all Kuwaiti children under the age of eighteen live in a single-parent divorced home, compared with Tanner's (2002) report that 40% of children in the United States will experience parental divorce by the age of sixteen. Meanwhile, almost 40% (38.9%) of adolescents from divorced families in Kuwait indicated not being in touch with their fathers since their parents got divorced (Alqashan, 1999). As a result,

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divorced fathers were evaluated negatively by their children due mostly to their lack of interaction with their children. Indeed, parental divorce has major effects on young adults. A study by Kapinus (2004) found that the relationship between parents' divorce and children's divorce attitudes is stronger when children are under the age of 25 at the time of the divorce than when they are over 25.

Attitudes toward marriage and divorce of Kuwaiti young adults could be influenced by the teaching of their religion. Since Islam is the official religion in Kuwait, it encourages its adherents to carry positive attitudes toward marriage. Islam also warns Muslims regarding irresponsible reasons for getting a divorce. Although divorce is permitted in Islam (Alqaradawi, 1997), Islamic law does not encourage Muslims to seek divorce for minor reasons. It is reported that the Prophet Mohammad said "Among Lawful things, divorce is most hated by Allah" (Abu Dawood, 2/254/2177). At the same time, although marriage is regarded highly in Islam, it is not considered a religious sacrament (Ibsen al Faruqi, 1985). Muslim men are encouraged to marry when they can offer emotional and financial support for potential wives. Islam views marriage as sharing between the two halves of society. The main purpose of marriage in Islam, aside from human reproduction, is love, mercy, mutual respect, justice, emotional well being, and spiritual harmony (Khan, 2006). Marriage is viewed as bringing two families together, rather than bringing two individuals together (Ibsen al Faruqi, 1985). Yunus and Ahmad (1985) in their book, *Islamic Sociology: Introduction*, defined marriage as "essentially a social contract, solemnized between the bride and the groom with their full exercise of free choice" (p. 69).

Parental Divorce and Young Adults

Although the literature is inconsistent regarding the impact of parental divorce on young adults, some studies report that some negative attitudes may influence the children's attitudes toward marriage and divorce when they grow up. For example, researchers (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990) found that those adults who came from divorced families exhibited lower levels of psychological well-being and marital quality. Other researchers found that young adults whose parents divorced hold more condoning attitudes toward divorce and hesitate more on marital commitment due to fear of repeating their parents' mistakes and getting divorced themselves (Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005).

The impact of divorce on children and young adults receives a lot of attention from researchers. Some researchers have focused on the well-being of adults before and after divorce, while others have studied the short-term impact of divorce on children of divorce (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991). Several studies found children from divorced families to have higher levels of depression (Amato, 1991; Turner & Kopiec, 2006). Others report higher anxiety (Riggio, 2004) and substandard psychological and social adjustment, when compared to children from intact families (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994).

Other researchers found no or less impact of parental divorce on young adults' marital life or their well-being. Consistent with this result, after the initial adjustment period, the majority of children were reported to have done quite well (Ahrons, 2004;

Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Furthermore, Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, and Diener (1998) found that parental divorce was not always problematic on young adults. Another study (Kurtz & Derevensky, 1993) found children of divorced parents showed many healthy coping strategies for stages of post-parental divorce.

Parental Divorce and Young Adult Attitudes Toward Marriage and Divorce

Studies investigating whether parental marital status affects young adults' attitudes toward marriage and divorce have yielded conflicting findings. Kinnaird and Garrard (1986), for instance, found that children from intact families have significantly more positive attitudes toward marriage than do individuals from divorced and remarried families. They also found that although almost all of their participants indicated a desire to marry, children from divorced and remarried families were more skeptical about marriage and more accepting in their attitudes toward divorce than were those from intact families. In a 25-year longitudinal study, Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) found that young adults from divorced families were more likely to marry at a younger age and to divorce more often. Researchers therefore concluded that individuals whose parents divorce are more likely to divorce themselves than individuals whose parents did not divorce (Amato, 1996; Hetherington, 2003; Tallman, Gray, Kullberg, & Henderson, 1999, Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

Moreover, Kinnarid and Garrard (1986) studied the relationship between mothers' marital status and their daughters' attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and premarital sexual activity. The findings revealed that females from intact families had more positive attitudes toward marriage than did those from divorced and step-families. However, no significant differences were reported between groups in term of attitudes toward divorce.

Other studies suggested that women are more likely than men to initiate divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), and divorce attitudes of women are more likely than those of men to predict eventual divorce (Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996). In fact, Larson, Benson, Wilson and Medora (1998) found no significant differences between males and females with regard to attitudes toward marriage. Jennings, Salts, and Smith (1991) investigated the effects of gender and family structure on adults' attitudes toward marriage. They found that females had higher positive attitudes toward marriage than did males. Trent and South (1992), who studied gender differences on attitudes toward divorce, found that females showed more positive attitudes toward divorce than did males.

Researchers found that male children, especially those children whose mothers do not remarry, are more likely to be affected more negatively after their parents' divorce than daughters and those whose mothers do remarry (Goodman & Pickens, 2001). Furthermore, Nicholson (2006) concluded that it is important for male children to maintain a close parent-child bond with their father, which can help them overcome the negative effects of divorce rather than develop social, emotional, and psychological disorders. When a mother does not remarry after a divorce, children of both genders are more likely to experience a higher risk of social, emotional, psychological, and academic problems post divorce, as well as low self-esteem and low self-confidence, poor grades,

and internalizing behaviors, such as anger, depression, and developing anxiety disorders (Nicholson, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The effects of parental divorce on children's attitudes toward marriage and divorce can be evaluated from several theoretical perspectives. At the broadest level, it can be elucidated using social learning theory (Bandura, 1986). According to this theoretical perspective, individuals are thought to learn attitudes and behaviors through imitation, modeling, observation, and experience (Segrin et al., 2005). Social learning theory can also be used to predict and explain relationship characteristics for individuals whose parents have divorced. Parental divorce can cause children to be more likely to observe interpersonal behaviors that weaken attitudes and increase the risk of their own marital instability in adulthood (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Because divorced parents are more likely to carry positive views of divorce (Thornton, 1985), children from divorced households may express positive attitudes toward divorce to conform to the views of their parents. Consequently, this study suggests that a potential reason for such attitudes is that children learn skills and behaviors from their parental models.

Significance of the Study

The present study is unique for several reasons. First, although there is a vast amount of literature on the impact of divorce in Western cultures and there are several Arab studies done in several regions in the Middle East about reasons for divorce (Albakaar 2004; Aljalabnah, 2006; Alqashan, 2009), to the best of our knowledge, only a single study was conducted on the well-being of adolescents from divorced families in an Arab country (Alali, 2004). There exist no previous empirical studies comparing young adults from intact and divorced families in the Gulf region, in Arab countries in the Middle East, nor in Kuwait. Therefore, the data from the current study serve a very important descriptive function that will be beneficial to social workers and marriage counselors in Kuwait and surrounding countries, so that they can better prepare young adults to become successful partners in marriage.

Secondly, the researchers tried to avoid a weakness of other studies by including the self-report assessments of both male and female young adults in the data collection measuring children's attitudes toward marriage and divorce. In addition, most of the previous studies have been restricted to only investigating the effect of parental divorce on the children's psychological well-being; no study has examined how parents' marital status may influence the children's attitudes toward marriage and divorce.

Third and most importantly, it is essential to understand attitudes toward marriage and divorce because they serve as key mechanisms for predicting actual marital behavior (Glenn & Kramer, 1987). As previous research reports, parental marital conflict and divorce may have adverse effects on children, which may persist into adulthood (Amato, 2001).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The literature suggests that divorce is more acceptable in Western cultures (Amato & Booth, 1991). However, it is difficult to discern the data because similar studies have not been conducted on Middle Eastern adults from either intact or divorced family samples. Bean and Crane (1996) reviewed all studies on this subject and found that fewer than 5% of the 2,162 articles published in journals focused on the case of racial minorities.

Therefore, the goal of the present study is to assess the impact of parental divorce on the attitudes of college students toward marriage and divorce in Kuwaiti society. It is assumed that young adults from different cultures may have different attitudes toward marriage and divorce compared with findings done on samples from Western culture.

Research Questions

1. Are there differences in the attitudes toward marriage among young adults of divorced and intact families?

2. Are there differences in the attitudes toward divorce among young adults of divorced and intact families?

3. Are there gender differences in the attitudes toward marriage among male and female young adults of divorced and intact families?

4. Are there gender differences in the attitudes toward divorce among young male and female adults of divorced and intact families?

METHODS

The current study is descriptive, and also comparative. It uses a self-report survey methodology to examine the impact of parental marital status and the participant's gender on the attitudes of college students from intact and divorced families toward marriage and divorce. The study also investigates the likelihood that one would view divorce as an option under certain marital circumstances.

Definition of Terms and Instruments

Marital Attitudes: "Marital attitudes" refer to the views of young adults in Kuwait toward the institution of marriage. The Marital Attitude Scale (MAS; Braaten & Rosen, 1998) measures the marital attitudes of unmarried sons and daughters of divorce. Marital attitudes can be positive or negative, and can be held by an individual of any marital status. A positive attitude toward marriage usually includes an idealistic notion of a model marriage (Blagojevic, 1989).

Attitudes toward Divorce: Attitudes toward divorce refer to the following opinions toward the future of the relationship when a conflict occurs between the partners:

1. Ask for divorce because he or she thinks that if it does not work out, one can get always a divorce.

2. The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage.

The Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale

This scale is a paper-and-pencil self-report measure in which the participants endorse one of five choices for each of the 23 items (Braaten & Rosen, 1998). The participants were asked to rate each item on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding their future marriage. The answers were given on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. The total score could range from 23 to 115, with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward marriage. The scale presents subjects with statements about marriage such as "People should marry;" "I have little confidence that my marriage will be a success;" and "I am fearful of marriage."

For the purposes of this study, we translated the scale into Arabic using the method of back-translation. To ensure the validity of the translated form, and to ensure the maintenance of the themes in the original form, the Arabic version was reviewed by several experts. A panel of professors from the Departments of Social Work and Psychology reviewed the instruments and agreed that the items have good content validity. They suggested minor changes to some items in the Arabic questionnaire, and approved it after amendment. The Cronbach alpha coefficient was calculated to test the internal consistency or reliability of the scale. The scale showed excellent reliability with a correlation of 0.86. (See Table 1).

Attitudes Toward Divorce Scale

This scale was developed by Kinnaird and Garrard (1986) to measure beliefs regarding divorce. The scale consisted of 12 questions answered on a 5-point Likert scale, anchored by (1) Strongly Disagree and (5) Strongly Agree. The scale presented subjects with statements about divorce such as "People should feel no obligation to remain married if they are not satisfied." The total score ranged from 12 to 60, with low scores indicating more positive and more liberal attitudes toward divorce. Our findings suggest that the attitude toward divorce scale is a reliable instrument using Kuwaiti young adults. A coefficient alpha was calculated to test the internal consistency or reliability of the scale. The scale showed a very good reliability with a correlation of 0.92. (See Table 1).

Table 1:   Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Coefficients of Attitudes Toward Marriage & Attitudes Toward Divorce Scales (N=661).

Scale	Mean	SD	Alpha
Attitudes toward marriage	74.87	11.09	.86
Attitudes toward divorce	42.07	10.28	.92

Sample

Criteria for subject inclusion were: (1) subject should be enrolled at Kuwait University; (2) parental marital status should be defined as legally divorced or intact; (3) subject should be offspring of Kuwaiti parents. The sample was chosen from 12 introductory courses from the Department of Sociology and Social Work, as well as the Department of Psychology. The total number of students in each class ranged from 60 to 70.

Advance arrangements were made with the instructors of each course. The researchers and their assistants were given approximately 15 minutes at the beginning of each chosen lecture to implement the study questionnaires. The researchers or their assistants thanked the participants and then explained to them the purpose of the study. The participants were asked not to put their names or any personal information such as phone number or addresses to guarantee and maintain confidentiality. The research questionnaires were administered by trained social workers. The instruments were written in English; however, they were translated into Arabic since that was the subjects' native language.

The valid respondents consisted of 661 undergraduate students enrolled at Kuwait University. The sample consisted of two groups: students from divorced and from intact families. The first group consisted of 480 (72.6%) participants who reported that their parents were not divorced. The males constituted 39.6% of the respondents, the females, 60.4%. The second group totaled 181 (27.4%) respondents, who reported that their parents were divorced. In this group, the males constituted 33.7% of the respondents, the females, 66.3%. The students provided demographic information, including gender, academic year, parental marital status, and age at the time of parental divorce (if divorced).

Within the divorced sample, 87% of the students lived with their mothers (apparently the mother having custody of the child). Only 6.1% indicated living with their custodial fathers and stepmothers. The remainder of the sample lived with relatives or remained within a two-parent household.

RESULTS

The data for this study were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were computed to provide information on all variables and on the background of the sample in this study (see Tables 2 & 3).

The research questions of this study were answered using t-tests to determine whether gender and parental marital status influence the attitudes of young adults toward marriage and divorce by comparing group means. The findings showed significant differences between the young adults from intact and divorced families. The answer to the first question revealed that young adults whose parents divorced have less positive attitudes toward marriage ($M = 60.86$) than those individuals from intact marriages ($M = 80.16$) (see Table 2).

Answering the second question suggests that young adults whose parents were divorced carry more positive attitudes toward divorce ($M = 29.63$) compared with individuals from intact marriages (see Table 2). Recall that low scores indicate more positive and more liberal attitudes toward divorce. This finding means that young adults whose parents were divorced had more liberal attitudes toward the tendency of divorcing when they themselves get married in the future.

Table 2:   Attitudes Toward Marriage and Divorce: Comparison of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families

Scale	Young Adults with Divorced Parents (N=181)		Young Adults with Intact Parents (N=480)		
	Mean	*SD*	*Mean*	*SD*	*t*
Attitudes toward marriage	60.86	9.41	80.16	5.84	-25.77*
Attitudes toward divorce[a]	29.63	8.01	46.76	6.42	-25.79*

[a] Lower mean scores indicate more positive attitudes toward divorce.
*p<.000.

Gender Differences

Regarding the third question, the findings indicate that males and females differ significantly in their attitudes toward marriage. Specifically, the results shown in Table 3 reveal that, among those with divorced parents, males ($M = 68.80$) had significantly more positive attitudes toward marriage compared with female young adults ($M = 56.82$). On the other hand, among those whose parents were still married, the attitudes toward marriage of females ($M = 81.0$) were slightly but significantly more positive than those of males ($M = 79.32$).

Meanwhile, for the fourth question, the results shown in Table 3 reveal that female young adults whose parents divorced had significantly more positive attitudes toward divorce ($M = 28.13$) than did those male individuals who came from divorced parents ($M = 32.61$). On the other hand, males from intact parents showed more liberal attitudes toward divorce ($M = 44.78$) than female young adults from intact parents ($M = 48.74$).

Table 3.   **Attitudes Toward Marriage and Divorce: Gender by Family Type**

	Young Adults with Divorced Parents			Young Adults with Intact Parents		
	Males (N= 61)	Females (N= 120)		Males (N=240)	Females (N= 240)	
Scale	*Mean (SD)*	*Mean (SD)*	*t*	*Mean (SD)*	*Mean (SD)*	*t*
Attitudes toward marriage	68.80 (7.99)	56.82 (7.28)	9.82**	79.32 (6.67)	81.00 (4.73)	-3.19*
Attitudes toward divorce[a]	32.61 (8.83)	28.13 (7.15)	3.43*	44.78 (6.54)	48.74 (5.65)	-7.10**

[a] Lower mean scores indicate more positive attitudes toward divorce.
*p<.01; **p<.001

DISCUSSION

The results from this study show that young adults from divorced families, and females in particular, have less positive attitudes toward marriage when compared with males from divorced but not from intact family backgrounds. In addition, females, from divorced families but not from intact families showed more positive attitudes toward divorce than did males. Indeed, Kuwaiti young adults whose parents divorced appeared to be more polarized in their attitudes, demonstrating more negative perceptions of marriage and greater openness to divorce. Such attitudes could be acquired through exposure to conflict, and contentious interactions could teach offspring that marriage is challenging.

The findings of this current study are consistent with other studies (Gabardi & Rosen, 1993; Nicholson, 2006; Thornton, 1985) which found that males and females from divorced families possess more negative attitudes toward marriage than do young adults from married families. This finding is also supported by Amato and DeBoer's (2001) longitudinal study of 2,033 individuals from divorced and non-divorced homes, which found that adult children of divorce scored significantly higher on measures of rates of divorce and thoughts of divorce compared with adults from non-divorced homes. Gender differences were reported based on social learning theory, in which females typically have closer, more intimate relationships with others than men (Shek, 1995), while men generally are more independent and less knowledgeable and/or influenced by outside sources (Cross & Madson, 1997). Moreover, women were more likely than men to initiate divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). However, our findings contradict in some ways those of Ganong, Coleman, and Brown (1981), who found that females had more positive attitudes toward marriage than did males, regardless of their family type. However, our findings did not support that for young adults from divorced families.

Several explanations can be drawn from these findings for such gender differences in the attitudes of Kuwaitis toward marriage and divorce. First of all, since Kuwaiti women

played a significant role during and after the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, claims of male superiority have eroded (Alqashan, 1995). Kuwaiti women have claimed their right to choose their roles, independent of males. In contemporary Kuwaiti society, women have successfully challenged men in most fields; and this success should be considered when looking at the current findings.

Second, the rapid process of modernization in Kuwaiti society reflects major economic, political, social, and value changes, which have affected the roles of both males and females as individuals and as a group. Therefore, gender differences in this study can be attributed to the sociocultural and economic changes for Kuwaiti women. Recently, Kuwaiti women have participated more in the work force; they are no longer so dependent on their husbands' income. Furthermore, divorced women in Kuwait get financial support from the government when they divorce. Therefore, divorce is increasingly a viable option for young Kuwaitis due to the govermental involvement. The negative stigma associated with divorce in the past is no longer an issue for young adults who are considering marriage and divorce, especially for those from divorced parental backgrounds. Such changes may have had an effect on young Kuwaitis' attitudes toward marriage and divorce, as well as raising the rate of divorce.

Third, Kuwaiti drama on television and the movies may contribute to either unrealistic, idealized marital beliefs, or may inhibit the development of realistic relationship attitudes for females. As it was reported, television may play a significant role in such attitudes. Segrin and Nabi (2002) conducted a study examining college students' beliefs about marriage in association with the amount and genre of television viewed. They found that the genre of television viewed (romantic comedies, soap operas) was positively associated with unrealistic beliefs about marriage.

Fourth, although emotional and financial support from the extended family in Kuwait may lessen the impact of a conflicted divorce and increase resiliency in the child, some researchers have demonstrated that post-divorce conflict between the parents can last for years after the initial divorce process is complete (Forehand, Neighbors, Devine, & Armstead, 1994). In addition, parental divorce and parental custody struggles in Kuwaiti courts can have significant psychological and developmental adverse effects on Kuwaiti children.

Fifth, although most of our sample experienced their parents' divorce when they were very young, they may have still witnessed conflict between their parents, which may have an impact on their social and psychological development and their adjustment in college. It was suggested by Trent and South (1992) that marital and familial attitudes seemed to be shaped early in life and remained somewhat constant throughout life, but that the influence of the childhood environment may have a stronger impact on children's and adolescents' attitudes than on the attitudes of adults, who are no longer in that environment.

Sixth, divorced parent-child interactions may play a role in these findings. Indeed, children of divorce in Kuwait tend to spend less time with their fathers after divorce (Alqashan, 1999); this finding is also the case in Western societies (Amato, 2006; Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, & Maurer, 2001). Taking this point into consideration may also

suggest that the child could be old enough to recognize and possibly understand the conflict between his/her parents and may also be old enough to become involved in the conflict, thereby creating confusion and stress during and after the divorce actually occurs.

The researchers recommend taking two types of action. First, a serious effort needs to be made to raise awareness of the impact of parental divorce on the family as a whole and children in particular. Second, a national campaign needs to be launched to raise public awareness. Such awareness can be done through the local media, religious leaders, community conferences, and the local schools, as well as other venues.

Further studies should include other variables not included in this study, such as inter-parental post-divorce conflict, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and remarriage of one or both parents (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996; Wallerstein et al., 2000). It may be helpful also to further narrow the scope of the research by age at parental divorce, gender, and remarriage or custody circumstances. Moreover, a longitudinal study to explore the change in young adults' attitudes toward marriage and divorce over time will help to identify the influences of other factors.

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