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## Later Life Divorce & the Adult Child

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## Later Life Divorce & the Adult Child

by

Kayla Schwartzhoff, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St.Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St.Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper was to explore what measures are being taken to help adult children (17 years old and older) through their parent's later-life divorce. Using a systematic literature review, articles were analyzed using specific criteria. The findings produced no articles on services for adult children of divorce. Reasons why there is not literature on adult children of divorce were given, as well as a case study of Al & Tipper Gore, which highlights the cultural context of separating the institution of marriage from the needs of biological children. These findings emphasize the need for further research on how adult children are affected by their parent's later-life divorce.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank several people. I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Lance Peterson for his assistance and guidance throughout this project. I would also like to thank members of my committee meeting, Carol Schreier, LICSW and Michelle Erickstad, LICSW. I greatly appreciate your willingness to take time out of your day to support me through this process! Lastly, thank you to all of my friends and family members, especially my parents for their endless love and support.

Without all of your support, this research project would not have been possible!

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### Later Life Divorce & the Adult Child

Despite divorce rates decreasing by 5% every year since 1996, data has revealed that since 1991 people with marital longevity have had an increase in filing for divorce. Divorces occurring in couples married over 15 years account for 20% of divorces (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). In 2010, 872,000 divorces and annulments were filed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). Researchers attribute an increase in long-term marriages to people living longer, which also leads to a higher divorce rate among them (S. Jones & P. Jones, 1994).

Divorce affects all children; however, the experiences are different for each individual based on the age at the time of the divorce (Greenwood, 2012). Even when children are older, divorce may have an impact on them. Divorce when children are 17 years old and older has found to reduce father-child relationship quality. Undergraduate students who experienced recent parental divorce reported great vulnerability and stress from the breakup of their parents (Aquilino, 1994).

When divorce occurs, society focuses on how younger children are affected by the divorce and providing services to help them through it; however the adult children are often neglected (Campbell, 1995). The majority of funding for studying the effects of divorce is directed toward outcomes for young children (Hilpern, K, 2009). With divorce increasing among the older population, there is a need to address the adult children population. Cooney and Kurtz (1996) found there is a need for professional services for adult children involved in divorce because that need is not being filled.

**Importance to Social Work**

Divorce is increasing among adults with marital longevity. With the increase in divorce among this population there emerges a need to provide services to the adult children affected by their parents' divorce. Services are provided for young children when their parents are divorced, and even for the parents themselves; little is known about what is available for the adult children. Yet, adult children also have negative reactions to parental divorce, often making it difficult for them to function socially, psychologically, and emotionally (Campbell, 1995). According to the ethical principle service, the social worker's job is to address this problem and provide service to this population to help them overcome this problem (NASW, 2008). The effect divorce has on adult children can greatly impact their relationships with their parents, and their own partners. In accordance with the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2008), it is the social worker's ethical responsibility to help the adult children enhance their relationships with their parents and with significant others. Providing services to the adult children can help promote healthy relationships to help prevent divorce from occurring in their own life.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine what measures are being taken to help adult children (17 years old and older) through their parent's later-life divorce. What treatments, support groups, and other services are available to adult children whose parents divorced later-in life?

## Literature Review

### Positive Impact of Marriage

“Marriage is the process by which two people who love each other make their relationship public, official, and permanent. It is the joining of two people in a bond that putatively lasts until death” (Psychology Today, n.d.). Married couples have the love and support from their partner, someone who wants them to succeed in their life together (Lerner, 2001). Marriage can provide an emotionally fulfilling intimate relationship, which can impact physical and mental health positively (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2007). Married couples have the benefit of working together, in which they are able to produce more than just working by themselves (Lerner, 2001). Marriage not only improves one’s social support, it also improves one’s mental and physical health.

Marriage can increase an individual’s self-worth, subjective well-being, and gives one a sense of connectedness (Koball, H.L, et al, 2010). “Married men and women report less depression, less anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological distress than do those who are single divorced or widowed” (Waite & Gallagher, 2000, p. 67). The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2007) found that marriage reduces heavy drinking and alcohol consumption in general for young men and women for both African Americans and Caucasians.

Overall, married couples live longer than divorced couples (Sbarra & Mason, 2013). Married couples are more likely to go to the doctor regularly, eat healthy, and obey the doctor’s orders than single and divorced individuals (Koball et al., 2010). Waite & Gallagher found that married women have a 50% higher longevity rate than unmarried

women, and married men have a 250% higher longevity rate than unmarried men (2000). Marriage can lead to better general physical health and improved results for health conditions like arthritis, hypertension, and heart disease (Koball et al., 2010). There are several benefits of marriage and even more negative effects when a couple files for divorce.

### **Negative Impact of Divorce**

Divorced individuals experience lower levels of psychological well-being, including lower happiness, more symptoms of psychological distress and poorer self-concepts (Amato, p.1274, 2000). Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation found that getting divorced increases depressive symptoms and these symptoms are long-lasting, remaining many years after the marital split (2007). Divorced individuals also have more health problems and a greater risk of mortality than married individuals. Divorce not only negatively affects one's health, but it can also affect one's finances greatly.

Divorced couples find their income decreasing incredibly due to going from having two incomes to just one income. Their standard of living drops 25 percent (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). LingxinHao (1997) found that married families had accumulated the most money with a net worth of \$26,000, single dad families had \$22,930, and single moms had a net worth of \$1,000 or no assets at all. Men who are not married also make less money than do husbands, and women find great difficulty in the labor market after a divorce, especially those that had been stay-at-home moms (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Divorce also increases the risk of conflict and relational violence.

In many cases women and men may separate from their partner due to violence; however physical and legal separations also pose a significant risk for violent acts and murder to be committed by an ex-spouse (Sbarra & Mason, 2013). Divorced individuals are more likely to be victimized by their ex-partner more than married individuals (Sbarra & Mason, 2013, Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Divorce not only affects the couple's relationship at that time, but it also affects the relationships they may have with future significant others. Second marriages make up about half the marriages in the United States. They are likely to dissolve more quickly than first marriages and more likely to end in divorce than first marriages (Sbarra & Mason, 2013). Divorce affects everyone involved; however, the ones affected the most are the children.

### **Divorce & Children**

More than a million children experience the divorce of their parents each year (K. Zinsmeister, 1997). Children often face problems after divorce, which include: poor peer relationships, psychosomatic illness, lack of commitment in personal relationships, academic failure, suicide, drug dependence, and criminal activity (J. Lewis, & W. Sammons, 2001). Hetherington, a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, found up to 25 percent of children with divorced parents "have serious social, emotional or psychological problems" in the long term, compared to 10 percent of children from intact families (ABCNews, 2002). More than 80 percent of the adolescents in mental hospitals, and 60 percent of the children in psychiatric clinics, have been through a divorce. The average treatment takes place five years after their parents' marital breakup (Zinsmeister, 1997). Divorce puts parents against one another and puts the children in the

middle of it all (Aquilino, 1994). O'Connell Corcoran also found that 60% of people under poverty guidelines are divorced women and children (1997). Divorce increases the chances that their children will also get divorced (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Ultimately, divorce can create an inevitable cycle of problems.

### **Effects of divorce on adult children**

“Divorce is a phenomenon that is forced upon the adult children with an expectation to not only survive it without scarring but to heal the wounds of their parents, a task too great to be achieved” (Campbell, 1995, p. 200). Adult children go through a variety of life transitions of their own: from going off to college, getting a job, getting married, to having children of their own. Finding out their parents are divorcing at this time can make a stressful time even more stressful for the child. Cooney (1998) finds that when children are in the middle of achieving their independence and called to their parent’s side during the divorce, children may become overtly overwhelmed. Lang and Pett (1992) argued that because later life divorce is not a scheduled event, it “is considered all the more difficult and undesirable than most expected transitions as it requires more adapting with the least preparation” (p. 123).

In later life divorce, the adult children may feel responsible for the divorce more than young children, and also come to question their own beliefs of the sanctity of marriage (Cain, 1989). Adult children reported feelings of anger and confusion especially in the case of adultery and when parents were found to be lying extensively (Campbell, 1995). Cain (1989) also found that many adult children blamed themselves for making their parents stay together so long when they were not happy with one another. Divorce

can affect all aspects of the adult child's life, especially the relationship between the child and the parent.

### **Relationship Issues**

Adult children and both parents have a hard time dealing with divorce later in life (Campbell, 1995). Adult children with divorced parents are not affected by custody, visitation and child support; thus no legal issue will affect the relationships each child has with his/her parents; however, contact is now by choice. Having contact by choice can hinder the adult child-parent relationship in that the adult child may not want any contact with the parent or parents anymore.

Some parents find a confidante in their adult children while others have been cut off from their children (Campbell, 1995). Although contact with parents is by choice for adult children. It can also improve the relationships, through wanting and working to keep their relationship going even though the parents are not together anymore (Aquilino, 1994). Many adult children feel that they need to take a side when parents are divorcing. Some children may choose one parent over the other because one parent was responsible for the divorce, there was anger at one parent more than the other, or there were certain legal issues during the divorce with which the child did not agree. Choosing sides can affect relationships with both parents; however, research has found it to greatly affect the relationship with the child's father for the worse (Lang & Pett, 1992).

Divorce has a negative impact on parent-adult child relationships with the mother and the father (Shapiro, 2003). However, the father-child relationship especially tends to suffer (Aquilino, 1994), and if any parent will be blamed for the divorce, it will typically be the father (Jones & Jones, 1993). Children are more likely to side with the mother after

the divorce than the father. Many father child relationships have ended because of the divorce (Wright & Maxwell, 1991). Children from divorced families have less emotional support from their fathers and their fathers are seen as less nurturing than fathers who are not divorced (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Aquilino (1994) found relations with fathers were more likely to suffer after divorce than relations with mothers, especially with daughters, as daughters often feel angry toward their fathers.

Daughters whose parents divorced when they were adults are found to suffer adverse consequences. Mullis et al. (2007) found that women whose parents are divorced have a more fragile identity structure than women from intact families. Adult daughters are found to receive more support from their mothers than their fathers (Aquilino, 1994). However, it has also been reported that parental divorce may disrupt the individual's reliance on the family and may increase individuation or confusion. Adult daughters feel a need for love and attention but fear abandonment (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

Research has found that many parents lean on their adult children through the divorce, and some even tell the child "You're just like your mother/father!" causing harm to the relationship and the child overall (Ainsman-Reiner, 2007). Krantzler and Krantzler (2003) found that adult children said the worst thing about divorce was the: "ongoing desire for vengeance, to make one's ex-spouse 'pay' for all of the alleged harm that he or she inflicted was the most disturbing quality that they had hoped and prayed their parents would eliminate from their lives" (p.13). Adult children have reported it is emotionally difficult to see their parent's conflict throughout the divorce and after, especially when they are doing and saying horrible things (Campbell, 1995; Louks, 2009).

Divorce has been found to affect the ability for adult children to cope in their relationships. College students from divorced families are found to use violence more often in resolving conflicts and are more aggressive with their friends than those who are not from divorced families (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Similarly, the most damaging effect of divorce on children arises early in their adult life. Many children of divorce have trouble finding a mate and creating lasting relationships and marriages themselves (Anisman-Reiner, 2007). Campbell (1995) also found that in the adult children she interviewed, all of them questioned their own relationship as a result of their parent's later-life divorce. Children are affected by their observations of their parents' marriage, which can lead the adult child to experience anxiety, mistrust, and fear about the future success of their own marriage (Anisman-Reiner, 2007). Churchill & Fagan (2012) found later parental divorce to lower relationship commitment and confidence in women but not in men. King (2002) also added that adult children of divorce are less likely to trust their partners and are more cautious to get married. One study by Joseph Rowntree Foundation found men and women who were over 20 when their parents separated were more likely to have their own first partnership or marriage break up by the age of 33 (Hilpern, K. 2009). Negative attitudes about marriage can reduce the amount of time and effort that is put into maintaining the marriage, therefore increasing the chance of divorce, and thus continuing the cycle (Up-hold-Carrier &Utz, 2012, p 250). Later-life divorce affects relationships; it can also affect the adult child's mental health.

### **Mental Health**

Later-life divorce affects adult children's mental health negatively through depression, stress, and other psychological issues. Wallerstein & Lewis (2000) found that

young adult children of divorce “are haunted by the ghosts of their parents’ divorce and are frightened that the same fate awaits them” (p. 363). Adult children of divorce report symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as a reduced belief in their ability to succeed (Wallerstein, & Lewis, 2000). Adult children of divorce reported higher levels of depression for the first 3 years of the divorce than adult children’s parents who remained married (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2011; Cooney & Kurtz, 1996). Adult women, whose mother and father had divorced, were three times likelier to have a psychological problem than counterparts from intact families (Zinsmeister, 1997). Cooney (1986) found that stress, as well as other emotional problems, were very prominent and high among the adult child’s life during the divorce and after. The finding was more apparent in the college population because of the life transitions they were going through. Some adult children in their early twenties also expressed abandonment during the parents’ later life divorce. Parents were moving on with their lives and the adult children were feeling uncared for and forgotten about (Campbell, 1995). This finding also sets the adult children experiences apart from the younger children experiences of divorce. Adult children whose parents divorced later in life reported feelings of anger, tiredness, and being torn between families. Some also felt they were pushed into their middle years early and no one appreciated the stress they experienced from the breakup (Campbell, 1995, p. 197).

### **Environmental Risk Factors**

Adult children have expressed concerns about interruptions to school and careers, due to the change of finances and living arrangements caused by their parent’s later-life divorce (Campbell, 1995). Amato (1988) found adult children of divorce to have lower

income and a greater likelihood of receiving government aid than those whose parents stayed together. Later life parental divorce can leave adult children without the financial support they once had. This can hinder children's educational opportunities due to the lack of financial support they are given through this transitional time in life (Lang & Pett, 1992). Some adult children see their family home taken over by their mother or father's significant other. Aquilino (1994) found: "Parental separation and divorce result in less instrumental and economic support exchange, lower parent-child contact, greater geographic distance between parent and child, and lower perceived relationship quality with adult children" (p. 909). Adult children also feel financially responsible for their parents and take care of those parents who will not take care of each other (Stern, L, 2011).

### **Summary**

"Divorce leads to disruptions in the parent-child relationship, continuing discord between former spouses, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the number of other negative life events" (Fagan & Churchill, 2012, p.2). Society has focused on the needs of the young children during the divorce and they are provided with many services ranging from therapy to groups. With divorce occurring later in life, more emphasis should be placed on the needs of the adult children affected by their parent's divorce. Therefore, as services for this population are uncertain the research question for this study is: What treatments, support groups and other services are available to adult children whose parents divorced later in life?

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Risk & Resilience**

The risk and resilience perspective discusses why some parents and children in divorced families manage well within this transition and others do not. “Risk factors increase the likelihood of negative outcomes, whereas resilience refers to processes by which an individual (or group) overcomes difficult circumstances, “bounces back” from adversity, and becomes stronger in the face of a crisis” (Fine, Ganong & Demo, 2005, p.212). How an adult child “bounces back” depends on the individual risks and processes in the family. The individual factors that have the greatest impact on adjusting to divorce are age, gender, race, and coping strategies. Children from families with conflict often benefit the most from the divorce of their parents as it presents a chance for a better life (Marie-Hopf, 2010). Men and women homosexual adult children of divorce have been a prime example of resilience; especially because of the discrimination they face daily. They have had to overcome their fear of coming out to their families and friends, accepting who they are and being proud of that and fighting back against the stigma associated with their sexual identity (Krantzler & Krantzler, 2003).

Adult women dealing with their parent’s divorce appear to experience a delay in finding their self-identity. They may benefit from academic advising, career exploration and/or therapeutic interventions (Mullis, et al., 2007). Family risks associated with adjustment include parental conflict and low levels of parental support (Rogers & Rose, 2002). These stressors are most overcome through friendships, and being able to confide in someone outside of the family realm (Emery & Forehand, 1994).

Adult children have the ability to overcome and even benefit from their new life situation; however, adult children are faced with a new transition which they have never been faced with before (Krantzler & Krantzler, 2003). With this transition occurring at the same time as other life transitions, i.e. going off to college, getting a job, getting married, etc., the risk for negative effects are high. It is important to research the services provided for adult children to find if these services are meeting their needs and if there is anything more that can be done to help them become more resilient and “bounce back”.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A systematic review was chosen as the method for this study. Systematic reviews are literature reviews that “follow a set of scientific methods that explicitly aim to limit systematic error, by attempting to identify, appraise and synthesize all relevant studies in order to answer a particular question” (Petticrew, 2006, p. 9). Systematic reviews provide crucial evidence-based information to support and advance practice, by helping to recognize different and evolving development and holes in knowledge (Petticrew, 2006, p.13).

### **Selection Methodology**

There were several criteria considered with this selection process. The first factor was that the article had to be a peer reviewed academic journal. The second requirement is the article must pertain to the effects later-life divorce has on adult children. For the purpose of this study an adult child was considered to be anyone 17 years and older. Additionally this study looked at first marriages that ended in divorce. The goal of this study was to look for articles that examined if professional services were used to help the

adult child through the divorce process, or if there were any implications for treatment. The Research committee chair, committee members and the Institutional Review Board approved the criteria before data was collected.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

In this study a systematic review was performed; this type of study did not use participants. Research that has been done previously was analyzed using the selected criteria. Authors were cited appropriately. The research proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

### **Search Strategy**

To obtain studies, databases were utilized. First, I searched five electronic databases (Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Family Studies Abstract, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts) using the terms “divorce” and “adult children”. The systematic review includes qualitative and quantitative studies.

### **Data Analysis**

To appraise the studies, the following checklist was adapted from Petticrew (2006) and was applied.

Are the study participants adequately described (i.e. descriptive data on age, and gender) If intervention applied, is it clearly described, and who used it? Were independent and dependent variables adequately measured? Are the outcome measures used in the study most relevant for answering the research question?

Are there implications for treatment? (p. 137).

With implementing the checklist data were extracted and entered into a database for further analysis (Petticrew, 2006). The data analysis process was broken down into three

steps: organizing the description of the studies into logical categories, analyzing the findings within each category and synthesizing the findings across all the included studies (Petticrew, 2006, p.170).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There are strengths and limitations to a systematic review. The review analyzes all available research particular to the research question. The review also limits bias, and is replicable (Armstrong & Waters, n.d.). The research can produce specific results from the selected criteria. The data can help determine what holes there may be in the research, and what the next steps are to addressing these holes.

One big limitation of a narrative systematic review of the literature is that it is prone to bias. Narrative systematic reviews may overlook non-significant results reported in single-studies, whereas in a meta-analysis the researcher would be able to identify those results. Systematic reviews with specific defined questions provide specific answers to specific questions, leaving out other findings that may be important to this study (Armstrong & Waters, n.d.).

## **Results**

### **Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007**

Bulduc, Caron & Logue (2007) analyzed the experiences of college students whose parents were divorced when they were in college. This study surveyed 17 college students: 12 female and 5 male from a public university. Eleven students were first-year college students, two were sophomores, three were juniors and one was a senior when their parents divorced. The survey focused on three questions: participant's initial reaction to their parent's divorce, the impact the divorce has had on their relationship

with their parents and family, and the impact the parent's divorce has had on the participant on a personal level.

The study found a number of significant outcomes that are worth examining. There were a variety of responses to the student's initial reaction to their parent's divorce. Overall, five students responded that they were shocked by their parent's divorce, and four students were happy and relieved when they learned their parents were divorcing. One student reported feeling hurt and guilty and responsible for the parent's split. Looking at if the students were surprised by their parent's divorce nine students reported not being surprised and eight responded that they were surprised.

The students' overall feeling on how the divorce affected their relationship with their parents was negative; with only one student reporting the divorce positively impacted the child-parent relationship. Students in the study discussed feelings of being hurt and neglected by their parents. Seven students reported further that the divorce had made the student closer to one parent than the other, and six of those students reported that the parent they were closer to was their mother. Six students reported that there were negative changes with their father while four students reported that there were no changes in the relationships they had with their parents.

The third question posed in this study asked how the students were impacted by the divorce on a personal level. Six students chose not to respond where four thought the divorce brought positive personal growth and five students were more anxious and worried. One male stated "It made me nervous to think about marriage" (p.95).

### **Consequences of Divorce on Adult Children**

When parents of adult children decide to separate, the adult children are not just dealing with their parent's divorce but they are also dealing with their own daily stressors. These things include college, finding employment, starting their own life and etc. Adult children of divorce are shown to have more stress, more arguments with parents, lower expectations of their own marriage, and a less successful career (Thomas, D.A., 2011). Male adult children of divorce are found to be more socially and economically disadvantaged than others whose parents are still together (Hilpern, 2009). Children of divorce are more likely to get divorced themselves creating an inevitable cycle of divorce for years to come.

### **No Studies on Services for Adult Children of Divorce**

There are few studies that look at how adult children are impacted by their parent's later life divorce. With the few studies that do exist, none of them discuss the services that are needed or are available to adult children to help them get through this process. Due to not finding articles on services available for adult children going through their parent's divorce, reasons why are presented. The popular and public separation of Al & Tipper Gore after 40 years of marriage is also further examined.

### **New Population**

Although divorce is decreasing overall, divorce among older adults is increasing. It has been found that about 4 percent of divorces per year include those who have been married for 40 years or more (Wingert, & Kantrowitz, 2010). With divorce occurring in later life, a new population is affected. Divorce looks at how younger children and the

couples themselves are affected by divorce. Now, with older adults divorcing, their adult children have become a new population that is affected.

### **Adults Can Deal With It**

Divorce after decades of marriage has an impact on everyone involved; however, many feel that adult child can deal with it (Ferber, 2012). Young children and their well-being are worried about during a divorce; if they are struggling they are sent to professionals. Adult children are just expected to “deal” (Foster, 2006).

If you're an adult when your parents split up, you're expected to take it in your stride, but I think it can be more damaging than when you're a child... You find your parents confiding in you and leaning on you in a way that they wouldn't have when you were a child” (Hilpern, 2009, pg 1).

Many people may feel that adult children of divorce are not affected by divorce because they are grown and should be able to handle it. Further, some parents feel that their children are grown and have their own life so they will be fine with them divorcing (Fintushel & Hillard, 1991). However, the little research that does exist suggests divorce affects all children, no matter how young or old the children are.

### **Child Bearing Separating from Marriage**

It is said that one of the main purposes of getting married is to raise a family. “Marriage’s main purpose is to make sure any children born has two responsible parents, a mother and father who are committed to the child and committed to each other” (Blackenhorn, 2007, p. 153). The marital-decline perspective assumes:

Institution of marriage is weaker now than in the past, the most important cause of this change is the growing and excessive individualism of

American culture. The declining perspective of marriage has negative consequences for adults, children and society in general. (Amato, Booth, Johnson, Rogers, 2007, p. 4).

As divorce increases, marriage and child-bearing are increasingly becoming separated from one another. “In a culture where everybody talks about doing what is best for kids, more and more people are separating marriage from childbearing and childrearing” (Crouse, 2007). Blackenhorn (2007) agrees and further discusses that “marriage is a close personal relationship over here and children’s well-being is a social priority over there” (p. 155), thus suggesting that these are distinct and separate, which, thus, reinforces the idea that adult children can “deal with it”.

### **Al & Tipper Gore**

This is a case study on the popular divorce of Al & Tipper Gore. Al and Tipper Gore appeared to have the perfect marriage, until two years ago when they chose to separate. They raised four children and had been married for forty years when they decided to announce their separation to friends through email. Upon the announcement the world became shocked and saddened. “Everyone feels as though their own marriages have split up” (Cavanagh, 2010, p.1). Many suspected extramarital affairs and wondered about other possibilities because they could not believe the “perfect couple” could just separate after forty years of marriage citing that they had just “grown apart” (Cavanagh, 2010).

For this case study, a Google search was performed using “Al & Tipper Gore Divorce”. The first five articles found were analyzed using three questions. 1. How many times did the article refer to Al Gore individually? How many times did the article refer

to Tipper Gore individually? 2. How many times did the article refer to the Gores as a couple? 3. How many times did the article refer to the Gore children?

The first five articles found came from a variety of news outlets: the New York Post and ABC News were the major news outlets reporting. ABC News produced two articles. In analyzing these articles it was found that the majority of the articles discussed Al and Tipper Gore as a couple and individually in regards to them dating other individuals. Al was mentioned individually nine times, and Tipper was mentioned individually seven times; they were mentioned together ten times. The children were referred to three times, one instance was the headline on of the article itself and the other instances focused on how one of the three children reacted. Kristin Gore stated “There wasn’t divorce in our family. It really rattled me,” she told People (Martin, 2012, p. 2). The children were in two articles from the Mail Online, and The Christian Post. Going further it was found that Al and Tipper’s significant others were mentioned eight times in the articles and were the headlines for two of the five articles found. This reiterates the findings that adult children are often not thought of when their parents’ are divorcing. They are expected to go on with their daily tasks and be okay with their parents’ separation.

A second Google search was performed using “Al & Tipper Gore children”. Again the first five articles were analyzed, this time using one question. How many times did the article refer to the Gore children? This search produced articles from major news outlets such as Newsweek, NY Times, and Fox News. In examining the headlines of the articles themselves only one article has the children in it with the headline being “Al & Tipper Gore’s Separation: What About the Children? All four other headlines were

entitled *The End of the Line*, *The Odd Couple Finally Splits Up*, Al and Tipper Gore's inconvenient divorce means their finances will be affected, and *Al & Tipper Gore Break up after 40 Years of Marriage*. Four out of the five articles discussed the Gore children one time in the articles referencing to their names, ages and life. The fifth article *The End of the Line*, discussed the children at great length. Each child was discussed individually listing the successes and hardships they faced throughout life, especially during the elections. Although the last article discussed the children in depth, it never discussed how they specifically were affected by their parent's divorce.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine what measures are being taken to help adult children (17 years old and older) through their parent's later-life divorce. The systematic literature review found that adult children of divorce are an unstudied population. In particular services directed at adult children of divorce were not discussed. In analyzing Al & Tipper Gore's case the children were discussed seven times throughout ten articles; however how they were affected by their parents' separation was never discussed. This is similar to the literature reviewed, as researchers found that much of the focus was on the parent.

The greatest limitation in this study was the amount of literature there is on services for adult children of divorce. Even though there was no literature on the research question itself there was some literature on adult children of divorce. The literature suggests that later-life divorce can and does negatively affect the adult children. As discussed in the literature review adult children can be affected mentally, physically, socially, and economically by their parents' divorce (Fagan & Churchill, 2012;

Wallerstein & Lewis, 2000). This finding shows that there is a need to offer services to this population.

There are several reasons why adult children dealing with their parent's divorce are neglected. One reason is that social work has been neglectful of marriage overall. As a consequence of neglecting marriage, social work then neglects the aftermath of later-life divorces. Social workers are failing to address the ethic of Service by failing to address the adult child in need who is dealing with this social problem (NASW, 2008).

There is some evidence that the social work profession may emphasize individual mental health over working with the family system. Neglecting marriage and divorce is especially apparent in graduate education (Richman, 1992; Kheshgi-Genovese, 1993). Social work graduate schools do not require students to take courses on couples and families, which has led to students feeling unprepared to provide clinical services for couples and families (Cicmil, 2012; Kheshgi-Genovese, 1993). Having graduates feeling unprepared to work with couples and families can hinder their abilities to work with this population and not meet the clients' needs. This lack of training further leads to neglecting the issue of divorce and the consequences divorce has on the couple and their children, which may explain why so little attention is given to providing services for adult children of divorce.

### **Implications for Further Research**

It is recommended that future research examine the effects that later-life divorce has on the adult children. By exploring the effects, we may find what services are needed to help individuals through this difficult time. Qualitative studies and survey studies that relate to the older adults' experience of their family divorce need to be put in place. By

researching this population further, we can understand better how they are affected emotionally, physically and mentally. Researching this population will also help identify what services are needed to help them cope better with their parents' divorce.

One way to meet the adult child's needs is to provide support groups. By providing support groups the adult children are being acknowledged and shown that it is okay to struggle with your parents' divorce as an adult. Providing support groups to this population can also help identify other areas of needs that are not being addressed.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice & Policy**

The findings of this study have implications for social work. Adult children are affected by their parents' divorce and there is a gap in the services available to them. There are services offered to the individuals divorcing and services directed towards the younger children going through their parents' divorce. However, no services are available to specifically deal with adults going through their parents' divorce.

Social workers should also put emphasis on systems-oriented practice instead of just individual practice. A sole emphasis on individual practice can hinder the social worker's ability to address the impact divorce has on adult children. Systems-oriented practice takes into consideration the importance of the other events and relationships that are impacting the individual. By focusing on systems-oriented practice, one is able to address the issues related to divorce more readily.

The findings of this study also have implications for policy. Social workers need to work towards strengthening divorce laws. Some states have policies in place to strengthen marriage with premarital counseling. Florida for instance will cut the cost of marriage license fees by 50% if they participate in premarital counseling. Other states

include marriage units in high school classes (Fagan, 2001). States with premarital counseling and other policies make it harder for couples to get married; however, when it comes to filing for divorce, it is pretty easy for couples to do. Some ways to strengthen divorce laws could include mandatory couples counseling before being able to file for divorce or requiring couples mediation for those that have children. If divorce is filed this will help the couple learn how to communicate with one another in a respectful manner for the children.

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