Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families: Possible Selves Relating to Future Family Life

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ABSTRACT

This study explores differences in possible selves relating to future family life reported by young adults from divorced and intact families. Twenty-four in depth interviews were carried out with university postgraduate students, aged 25–35. Individuals from divorced families reported more negative possible selves compared to their counterparts from intact families. Possible selves reported only by divorcees' offspring concerned themselves being divorced in the future, being cautious in relationships and being overprotective with their children. They also described an ideal but unrealistic possible self about future happy family life. Divorcees' female offspring reported more negative possible selves than their counterparts from intact families and males from divorced families. The findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical concept of possible selves.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, there has been considerable interest in the effects of parental divorce on young people's personality, self-esteem, self-satisfaction, intimate relationships and expectations, and

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attitudes towards marriage and career (Franklin et al., 1990; Gabardi and Rosen, 1992; Bolgar et al., 1995; Sprague and Kinney, 1997). Early research focused on the effects of divorce on subsequent relationships and suggested a 'sleeper effect' whereby female children from divorced families tended to enter into short-lived sexual relationships and were engaged in dating and sexual intercourse earlier (Hetherington, 1987), while young men were likely to avoid relationships, or throw themselves into short-lived relationships (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). There was also evidence of the intergenerational transmission of marital instability (Pope and Mueller, 1976; Mueller and Pope, 1977; Wallerstein, 1991; Glenn and Kramer, 1987); lower commitment to marriage and a tendency for females, especially, to get married at an early age (Glenn and Kramer, 1987). College students from divorced families tended to have more sexual partners (Gabardi and Rosen, 1992; Sprague and Kinney, 1997), were more 'tough minded', more distant in their family relationships (Weiss, 1988), reported lower levels of trust and tended to love their parents less altruistically (Sprague and Kinney, 1997). Studies examining psychological well-being suggested that divorce had negative effects (e.g. Palosaari and Aro, 1994). Glenn and colleagues (Glenn and Shelton, 1983; Glenn and Kramer, 1985, 1987) reported that on a scale measuring happiness, self-rated health and self-satisfaction in a range of life domains including families and friendships, men and women from divorced families were significantly more likely to have lower scores than their counterparts from intact families. There was no evidence that these negative effects diminished with age. The reported effects on self-esteem were mixed. Some studies demonstrated negative effects (Wallerstein and Blakslee, 1989; Wallerstein et al., 1988; Holdnack, 1992), others reported no differences (Kalter et al., 1985; Gabardi and Rosen, 1992; Nelson et al., 1992), while some identified only moderate effects concerning a small percentage of divorcees' offspring who had left home (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995).

While there is considerable evidence relating to the effects of divorce on young people the psychological processes which mediate these effects have been little explored. A possible mediating vehicle is the concept of the 'possible self'. Possible selves are conceptions of the self in a future state. The repertoire of possible selves contained within an individuals' self-system are the manifestations of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats which regulate our behaviour (Markus and Nurius, 1987). They provide specific cognitive form, organization, direction and self-relevant meaning to these dynamics. In representing selves in

the future they function as incentives for behaviour through their influence on an individual's 'working self-concept' (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Fundamental research on possible selves suggests (Oyserman and Markus, 1990a, 1990b) that a given possible self will have maximal motivational effectiveness when it is offset or balanced by the countervailing possible self in the same domain. Desire for the positive goal is an incentive as is the wish to avoid something unpleasant. Thus, the theory indicates the motivational power of negative possible selves. A range of studies (e.g. Kato and Markus, 1993) indicates that a future fear may function as signal which will presumably trigger self-adjustment to the world demands or changes. Also, a vivid representation of one's self in a relevant positive and desire manner can be used to counter the representation of the self in an undesired state and to prevent the inaction that occurs when a dreaded possible self dominates the working self-concept (Oyserman et al., 1995). Possible selves, therefore, may illuminate the processes mediating the effects of parental divorce (Carson et al., 1987). To explore this possibility the study reported here aimed to compare the possible selves reported by males and females from divorced and intact families.

METHODOLOGY

In depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty four individuals, twelve from divorced families and twelve from intact families. All the individuals were university postgraduate students aged 25–35. The age at which participants reported their parents being divorced varied from person to person. The interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and were conducted individually. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes. The questions explored the following issues:

- "hoped for" selves concerning family life;
- possible situations of which they were afraid;
- possible and important selves concerning future family life;
- strategies employed for the accomplishment of desired goals and the avoidance of feared selves.

The interviews were transcribed and the data analysed using an established phenomenological technique as described by Cooper and McIntyre (1993). This involves a seven stage form of recursive comparative analysis which ensures that the conclusions drawn are reflective of the participants thoughts as expressed in the

interviews. The process involves:

1. reading a random sample of transcripts;
2. identifying points of similarity and difference among these transcripts in relation to the research questions;
3. generating theories (on the basis of two) describing emergent answers to research questions;
4. testing theories against a new set of transcripts;
5. testing new theories against transcripts already dealt with;
6. carrying all existing theories forward to new transcripts;
7. repeating the above process until all data have been examined and all theories tested against all data.

FINDINGS

Thirteen categories emerged from the data: divorced possible self; self avoiding parental mistakes; self concerned with marital communication; ideal self regarding future family life; highly protective, authoritative parent; optimistic-pessimistic self with regard to relationships and future family life; enthusiastic about getting married; independent self within marriage; self in control of marital relationship; cautious self regarding future relations with partners; self satisfied with relations with current partners; capable self regarding 'succeeding' in future family life; self confident of 'attaining' the desired personal future family life. The following sections explain the nature of each category and provide example quotations.

Divorced possible self

The divorced possible self related to individual's representations of selves regarding being divorced in the future. Almost all the participants from divorced families, both male and female acknowledged that they might be divorced at some time in the future and that they needed to be prepared for divorce. Indicative statements are given below:

S9 (F) (Divorced family): "I always think of the possibility of divorce and that I have to be prepared for it … although I want to see things from a positive perspective it is important to be aware of that possibility … I shall cope with it … if it comes, yes, I shall cope with it … yes … I think so … I want to believe that I'll be able to

cope with it ... I know that there is a high possibility of this happening ... everything is possible in life ..."

S5 (M) (Divorced family) "I don't see divorce as taboo but as a normal thing that may happen in my life ... I can't say that I'll get divorced because of disagreements I may have with my wife but I know that divorce saves people, solves problems. It's a relief for people ... I could see me and my partner in the future becoming more different than now ... because we are different, so if I do end up getting divorced it could be related to this difference. I can't see things like me being betrayed for another man ... what I can see in the future is being unable to compromise over the differences that exist ..."

Two thirds of the males, and all the females from divorced families, reported that they were aware of the possibility that divorce might be a part of their future life. This was not the case for the participants from intact families. All the interviewees from divorced families reported themselves prepared to cope with divorce, should it arise, although all wished to avoid it.

Self avoiding parental mistakes

This category emerged from responses concerned with avoiding the problems that they perceived that their parents had experienced in their relationship. Responses made in this category came from males and females from intact and divorced families. Individuals from intact families also reported wishing to avoid the everyday hassles which created a strained family atmosphere.

S7 (F) (Intact family): "... my parents got on quite well but you know there was always something between them ... they were living in a misery. My father is always strict, he does not follow other's opinions or choices. He may argue with my mum for nothing like 'why is this here?' 'I told you to move it there today, etc'. It's too much, isn't it? I know that it is a problem. Sometimes I think that if I were my mother I would definitely get divorced from him. ... I am not going to live this kind of life with my husband. I will try not to let him be like that. You know it is the experiences I had at home ... I think as long as I think of myself married to someone, lack of misery and mutual respect are the main things I shall struggle for ..."

S9 (F) (Divorced family): "... I think the most important thing in the relationship I shall have with my husband is for both of us to be responsible for our behaviour and feelings etc. ... to be determined to keep our relationship and our family intact ... It is a lesson I learned from my parents. I want to keep in touch with my husband, you know ... my parents didn't manage to keep their family ... to resolve their problems ...".

Two males and three of the six females from intact families reported, with a sense of bitterness, an awareness of their parents' mistakes and the wish not to repeat these in their own family. All those from divorced families except for one male who had a very positive post divorce family life with his step-father and his mother, reported that they wanted to avoid the mistakes their parents made in the relationship they had together.

Self concerned with marital communication

Also emerging from the data and discriminating between those from divorced and intact families was the issue of communication. Inter-family communication was an important factor in family life, particularly between spouses. For example:

S4 (F) (Divorced family): "... what I am afraid of in my own family is lack of communication. If I had a husband and a child my biggest fear would be not to be communicating ... just to be having a relationship of convenience and going through the motions without really being intimate with each other ..."

S5 (M) (Divorced family): "... good communication is the most important thing I have to work towards in my family, especially with my wife. It is bad for things to be unspoken ... This is what happened with my parents ... I think that I need that and I have to struggle for that ..."

Half of the participants from intact families and all of those from divorced families reported this representation of self. Those from divorced families stressed the need for good communication with their partners since they had learned from their parents' divorce that this was the "key" to a happy marriage. They reported good communication with their partners as a positive possible self.

Ideal self regarding future personal family life

Two females from divorced families reported ideal selves in future family lives. They imagined themselves living in extremely well functioning and pleasant family atmospheres. However, these images were acknowledged as unrealistic and neither participant mentioned any strategies which they would adopt to attain this ideal.

S9 (F) (Divorced family): "... I imagine myself in a very happy family, perfectly happy, like Bill Cosby, you know ... me being a perfect mother having a brilliant relationship with both my husband and my children ... to have good jobs, and coming back home in the afternoon and everybody to be very happy, *I know that it is not possible for that to happen* but that's how I want to think of my future family".

Highly protective/authoritative parent

The negative aspect of this category emerged from only one male from a divorced family who reported himself as likely to be highly protective towards his children, since his parents did not protect, or care, about him, because they were concerned with their own problems.

S12 (M) (Divorced family): "... there may be times that I'll be overprotective, I see that from my sisters. I protect my sisters and they are aged now about twenty and twenty two years old, but my parents did not protect me. They did not protect them so I am the eldest brother and I have to do that. I am the father figure, I have to protect my children as well ... you know, it is because of what I experienced at home ...".

Others from divorced families were concerned about being protective and supportive parents. Their responses were similar to those given by individuals from intact families, who did not report themselves as being overprotective. A typical statement is given below.

S2 (M) (Intact family): "I hope I'll be a good father, a useful father ... I don't know how to describe it but I want to stand by them and always be available for them. I hope I'll not oppress them although you know ... you can never be sure. It's like trying to

protect them as much as possible ... but ... since you are aware of it you can avoid it ... I'll make sure that they will eventually take the decisions for themselves, their lives belong to them ... but I'll always be there for them ..."

All respondents but one wanted their children to be independent but not out of their control. They perceived themselves as points of reference and support for their children but they wanted them to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their lives.

Optimistic-pessimistic self with regard to relationships and future family life

The category, optimistic-pessimistic self related to participants' expectations of having a happy family life. Five out of six females and four out of six males in the divorced group reported negative selves in relation to relationships with the opposite sex and future family life.

S9 (F) (Divorced family): "... I never had a long relationship so I don't know how it is going to be ... but I've heard about it and I believe that it is difficult to find the balance, to find the breaking point ... From my perspective what is more likely to happen is not to get on with the person you are going to get married to ... let's say that the one likes the other and they are in love ... this will not be the case after 2 or 3 years because they will get bored. The situation is always like that: the ones you want are not available and they possibly do not like you and you are attractive to those people you don't like ... so you will never find the right man ... So, you get married because of getting quite old and one of these relationships ends in marriage not because of being the best one but because of the time."

Four out of the six males from divorced families reported it unlikely that they would have a family. They had a vague image of themselves in a future relationship with a partner but felt insecure about any future family situation. This phenomenon was also apparent in the female group.

S 1 (F) (Divorced family): "... I see myself being single in the future, me and my music, I don't want to have children ... there is no reason to bring them into trouble if you are not sure whether or not

you can give them a proper family to live in ... I'm not going to repeat my parents' mistakes ... I had enough ... I know how it is ... I have already experienced very sad moments of betrayal with my companion in the past ... I know that I am very vulnerable to such situations ... I always make the same mistakes with my boyfriends although I try to avoid them, I don't know what happens ... the same story ... it has been repeated many times ... that's why I say that I see myself single in the future ... just me, myself."

In contrast, two thirds of individuals from intact families reported a positive representation of self regarding future family life, especially with regard to relationships with their partners.

S2 (M) (Intact family): "... Regarding family ... I think it is very likely I will have a happy family ... this is one of my priorities: family and job ... I'm already engaged ... I am happy now ... I think I get on very well with my partner, we are happy, yes ... I think so ... both of us."

Only four out of the twelve participants from intact families reported a pessimistic self towards a future family situation.

Enthusiastic about getting married

This category concerned the individual's desire to get married, live alone or have a family. Some individuals were enthusiastic about getting married, others were uncertain, while others did not view it as an option. For some the option they selected was negative, for others it was positive. For example:

S5 (M) (Divorced family): "... I can see myself married in the future, there is nothing wrong with that. I'd like to have a family, children ... but I also wouldn't mind being single. It's OK ... you know ... overall yes ... I'd like to get married but it's not the first priority in my life."

S4 (F) (Divorced family): "If you ask me how I imagine myself in a family situation ... probably not, I don't imagine myself having kids or something. It's nice to have a companion, but family is not one of my priorities, not something I look for. I am not preoccupied with that. It's probably a silly fear but I think a lot of people

probably have it, of having to be dependent on somebody. I've always tried to be an independent person and I think I feared that I might not manage and that I might have to be dependent on a partner or something ..."

S2 (F) (Divorced family): "I would not want to get married but if that happened in one way or another I would never want children. Definitely I don't want children, I don't think it's fair to put them in that situation, in a divorce situation, or in a conflict environment."

Two of the females from intact families reported that they would like to get married but would be comfortable if they remained single. Four reported that they wanted to get married although they were aware of potential difficulties they might encounter. None rejected the idea of family. However, three of the females from divorced families reported that they could not see themselves in a family. Only one female from a divorced family reported herself enthusiastic about getting married in the future.

Independent self within marriage

The category 'independent self within marriage' emerged from responses concerning interviewees' eagerness to 'keep their own space', to maintain privacy in their lives and maintain their independence regardless of their relationship with a partner with whom they might share their lives.

S9 (M) (Intact family): "I want both of us to be independent in our relationship, in the family. I want to have a sort of personal life on my own and to be as independent as possible. I don't know how difficult it is for something like that to happen but I need that. I cannot imagine myself in a conventional family life, a miserable and a routine life, that's something I really hate ... I'm not keen on the idea of sharing everything and two different personalities to be forced to accept each other because of the marriage ...".

Half of the females from divorced families reported themselves fairly independent, the remainder very independent. The 'fairly independent' female offspring of divorcees reported that they would like being in a family although they were aware of the problems this might create in their lives in terms of their in-dependence and focus on themselves as individuals. They expressed a desire to have a family and saw themselves as trying to

be good partners and parents in order to sustain a happy family, something they missed in their own upbringing.

S9 (F) (Divorced family) : "... I know it is difficult to be with someone, I never managed to be in a long-term relationship but you know ... I am really keen on having a happy family life, I think I can manage that. Of course, I need my space, I cannot say that my partner will be the main person in my life but I want to be dedicated to my family and I think I can do that. You know I want to have privacy while at the same time I can say that my family will be a point of reference for me, especially my children ..."

Females who reported themselves as very independent were not willing to make compromises. They saw no reason to become involved with and committed to family life in the future. For them, independence was a positive aspect of their future life.

S2 (F) (Divorced family): "I know that family does not work, so I am not going to make compromises. I've decided to be on my own and that's how I'd like to see myself in the future ... I see a lot of marriages do not work, I can see very difficult ones with lots of compromises between two people and a lot of arguments and that's why I don't want to get involved in that. I won't be compromised or make compromises ... (p.1)".

Most of the females from intact families (five out of the six) reported that they were, and wanted to be independent but they also anticipated sharing their lives with a future husband and attempting to maintain a supportive relationship in the marriage.

S6 (F) (Intact family): "I imagine myself in a family ... in a happy family but I'd like to keep my own self, not to be consumed by the other ... (p.2) ... if I had to choose career or family I would not be perfectly sure about what I really want ... I want to be independent and to have an equal relationship with my husband, not being at home all the day doing housework ... not to become his servant ... but I want to be a good mother, a good spouse, a supportive one ..."

Only one individual from an intact family wanted complete independence fearing being dominated by her husband; her own well-being was her key priority. However, at the same time she wanted to be supportive and close to family members.

S3 (F) (Intact family): "I want to be allowed to be myself ... if that happens I shall be a good spouse, if not then obviously there'll be a lot of conflict ... I mean I shall try not to have conflicts, I am generally not a conflict person, I am generally a peacemaker but if things get tough and I am oppressed then you know ..., there's going to be trouble. I don't like people to tell me how to be, what to do. ... I'd like to have freedom to travel, to move out, to be myself, to do my own thing ..."

Self in control of the marital relationship

This category emerged from participants' representations of self regarding having control over future family situations and their relationship with a partner. Concerns about the role of the partner and whether s/he might end the relationship, and issues regarding partners being unfaithful or unreliable were the main focus. This was the case for both males and females. Not having control of future family life was the main perceived possibility for the majority of divorcees' offspring. This was less so for those from intact families.

S1 (F) (Divorced family): "I have this total insecurity and feeling that I can't trust him ... every girl that my boyfriend comes into contact with I feel this possessiveness. It's really jealousy, the feeling that I don't control the situation, the feeling that he is going to find someone more interesting than me, or more attractive than me. I'm always like that ... it was the same with previous boy-friends ... I know I can't get rid of that ... I think I'll never be confident of being able to control my relationship, my boyfriends, or my husband later on ..."

S5 (F) (Intact family): "At the moment I am very happy with my relationship, I don't know what's going to happen in the future ... I want to be in control of my personal life I am not the type of person who would let things happen ... nothing is a matter of fate for me ... I know that I always have to be alert and concerned about my partnership ..."

Three of the males from intact families reported that their relationship with their partner depended to a large extent on the partner, or on factors that they could not control or predict. They felt that they had no control over their relationships with partners. Four of the males from divorced families reported that they could

not control relationships with partners. The findings with regard to female participants were similar. Five out of the six females from divorced families reported themselves not able to control their future relationships with partners. This was not the case for two of the females from intact families. They seemed to be determined to control and be responsible for their future family life and were confident of doing so, especially their relationship with their husband. This did not apply to the males. In this category the differences between participants from divorced and intact families were small. The majority felt a lack of control regarding their relationships or future relationships with partners.

Cautious self regarding future relations with partners

Individuals from divorced families reported caution in choosing a partner particularly in terms of whether this partnership would lead to a happy family life.

S6 (M) "... I feel that I have to be cautious when the time comes to choose someone to be my partner in a relationship, to have a family. Some people say "that's a risky business" I don't know ..."

This representation of self was reported by all the participants from divorced families and none from intact families. Females attributed their caution about the choice of partner to their parents' divorce and the situation at home. Males stressed caution but did not make links with their previous experiences.

Self satisfied with relations with current partners

Almost all of the females from divorced families reported themselves unsatisfied with relationships with partners while this was the case for only two females from intact families.

S5 (F) (Intact family): "... I am quite satisfied with my personal life up to now ... I am satisfied with the relationship with my partner ... I've also enjoyed my life in general ... I mean as an adolescent I had quite a lot of nice and crazy experiences and I got involved in many relationships, so I think that I have decided to get married to my man because I am sure that this is the right person for me ... I'm sure about the choice I made ..."

S9 (F) (Divorced family): "... No, I am not satisfied at all ... I'm single and I feel lonely. I was always single as far as I remember except some small periods of time when I had a boyfriend but these relationships were short-term ones ... not more than two or three months. This is something I am concerned about ... I am not satisfied with my personal life but I try to be optimistic otherwise it will drive me crazy."

Males from both divorced and intact families indicated mixed satisfaction regarding particular aspects of relationships. A typical statement is given below.

S1 (M) (Intact family): "... I cannot answer such questions it's a matter of personal attitude towards happiness ... I have had good moments, I have had bad moments as well with my partners but I cannot understand what's wrong with that. That's relationships, that's life ... I can't say it was horrible, I cannot say it was excellent ... yes, OK, I can say it was OK, but nothing more ... I can't really answer such questions ..."

Two thirds of the females from intact families indicated that they were satisfied with their personal life, and their current and past relationships. Five of the females from divorced families described a non satisfied self with regard to their personal relationships and anticipated difficulties for future relationships.

Capable self regarding 'succeeding' in future family life

This category related to an individual's perceived self-efficacy relating to the future family life. All the males from both divorced and intact families reported themselves capable of having a happy future family life and did not see any reason for not being able to handle difficulties that may emerge in their family life. An indicative statement is given below.

S5 (M) (Divorced) : "I cannot see any reason for me not to be able to make my personal life as good as I want ... I am capable ... if there is any problem I'll cope with that ... I cannot say in advance how well I will cope with it but yes ... I think I can solve it ... life is full of problems ... anyway ..."

Almost all the females from intact families, five out of the six, reported themselves capable of having a happy family life and

maintaining a good relationship with their husband. Only two out of the six females from divorced families reported themselves capable of having a good family life. One indicated that she enjoyed family life but she perceived herself likely not to have one; the other suggested that she was only capable, conditionally, upon the present good relationship with her partner. Overall, four out of the six females from divorced families reported themselves as not capable, while only one participant from an intact family presented herself incapable of having a good relationship, and consequently a happy family.

S5 (F) (Intact): "... I feel very capable of having my own family and a good relationship with my husband ... at least at this moment I see things in a positive way. I know that he loves me and I love him as well ... one respects the other. We can build up our life together ... maybe I am capable because I believe that if you are happy in your relationship you are happy with everything and you can manage to do everything ..."

S9 (F) (Divorced): "... I am not very capable of succeeding in my personal life ... it's a matter of emotional stability ... and I am afraid that I am going to lose it because of my family history of divorce and things like that ... things do not depend on me, so I don't control the situation perfectly ... consequently it isn't very clear whether I am going to get on well in a family situation ..."

Self confident of 'attaining' the desired personal future family life

This category is similar to the 'capable/not capable' category. It relates to whether respondents believed that the qualities they had were sufficient to lead them to a desired future family situation. For divorcees' offspring, previous experiences, either personal or vicarious, led them to perceive themselves as capable but unconfident regarding future relationships because of the unpredictability of partners. For individuals from intact families, confidence was related to generally unpredictable situations e.g. health, financial problems, and other external influences which may change relationships.

S2 (M) (Intact family): 'The only anxieties I have are about finances ... and whether financial problems in the family create

arguments in the family ... worries about the start of our common life ... but overall yes, ... I think I am confident why not? I think I can manage to have what I want, God willing."

S6 (M) (Divorced family): "... in a family situation there is always the possibility of being put down and being hurt by the other person ... it's the other who is involved in the relationship ... I think I am capable of being a good father, a good supporting spouse but it's always the other who may change the situation against ... you ... you know how it is ... you can never be sure about anyone, she may destroy everything ... you can't do anything about that, can you? ..."

Almost all of the individuals from divorced families reported themselves lacking in confidence regarding their future family, and their relationship with their spouse in that family. Only two of the six males and one of the six females from intact families reported themselves not confident of succeeding in their future family life. All the females and four out of the six males from divorced families presented themselves as not confident about their future family life. For most of them the relationship with a partner was perceived as unpredictable. Their lack of control over relationships, their belief (in some cases) that families did not work and their failure to establish a good relationship together made them lack confidence.

Summary

Table 1 provides a summary of the findings described above. Possible selves are categorised as positive and negative within each domain. The positive and negative possible selves were not defined in terms of individuals' desires and fears respectively but whether they promoted and indicated individuals' involvement/ orientation to personal relationships and family life.

DISCUSSION

Overall, divorcees' offspring reported more negative possible selves than individuals from intact families regarding their future personal family life. Some of these possible selves were reported only by individuals from divorced families, those indicating the possibility of divorce in the future and caution in the choice of a

TABLE 1

Summary table indicating positive and negative possible selves regarding future personal family life.

	Divorced Families				Intact Families			
	Males		Females		Males		Females	
Divorced possible self	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Self avoiding parental mistakes	83% (5)	66% (4)	100% (6)	100% (6)				
Self concerned with marital communication	100% (6)		100% (6)		33% (2)		50% (3)	
Ideal self regarding future family life			100% (6)		50% (3)		50% (3)	
Highly protective authoritative parent			33% (2)					
Optimistic – pessimistic self with regard to relationships and future family life	83% (5)	17% (1)	100% (6)		100% (6)		100% (6)	
	33% (2)	66% (4)	17% (1)	83% (5)	66% (4)	33% (2)	66% (4)	33% (2)
Enthusiastic about getting married			50% (3)	17% (1)	100% (6)		100% (6)	
Independent self within marriage			50% (3)	50% (3)			83% (5)	17% (1)
Self in control of marital relationship	33% (2)	66% (4)	17% (1)	83% (5)	50% (3)	50% (3)	33% (2)	66% (4)
Cautious self regarding future relations with partners								
Self satisfied with relations with current partners		100% (6)		100% (6)				
Capable self regarding 'succeeding' in future family life	100% (6)		33% (2)	66% (4)	100% (6)		66% (4)	33% (2)
Self confident of 'attaining' the desired personal future family life	33% (2)	66% (4)		100% (6)	66% (4)	33% (2)	83% (5)	17% (1)

permanent partner. Representations of selves in relation to taking action to avoid parental mistakes and trying to develop good marital communication were accompanied by selves indicating that divorcees' offspring accepted the possibility that they would be involved in divorce despite their attempts to have a positive family life (Greenberg and Nay, 1982; Kalter et al., 1985; Franklin et al., 1990; Stone and Hutchinson, 1992). There were also gender differences. Divorcees' female offspring reported more negative possible selves than their counterparts from intact families and males from divorced families. These findings are consistent with the literature regarding the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Pope and Mueller, 1976; Mueller and Pope, 1977; Wallerstein, 1985, 1991) and the identification of females as more vulnerable than males to the effects of parental divorce on their lives (Glenn and Kramer, 1987). Some males and females reported a cluster of negative possible selves about relationships with the opposite sex suggesting a lack of self-efficacy with regard to relationships. Although females from divorced and intact families reported more possible selves than males; males and females from intact families reported less possible selves than those from divorced families. This was especially the case for males. Those from intact families reported only half of the possible selves described by their counterparts from divorced families. This suggests that parental divorce leads offspring to develop well elaborated and detailed schemata of family life in areas which may be taken for granted by those from intact families.

The motivational power of balanced possible selves may depend on the individual's perception of what is at stake if a negative possible self is fulfilled rather than a general fear of experiencing a particular situation (divorce) (Rogers, 1983). The experience of parental divorce seems to be linked with a more permissive attitude towards divorce and a view of marriage as a temporary commitment which can be readily terminated if unsatisfactory. Earlier findings suggest that negative experiences of parental divorce can lead individuals into entering marriage with a more profound fear of marital failure and a much greater commitment to make it successful (Greenberg and Nay, 1982). However, these two may not be in balance. Experience of divorce may lead to an acknowledgement that it can be survived accompanied by a lack of knowledge of positive strategies to help avoid it. This is supported by the limited information reported by divorcees' offspring com-pared to the detailed accounts reported by individuals from intact

families concerning avoiding parental mistakes and marital communication. Negative possible selves concerning being divorced, accompanied by other related negative possible selves about relationships may also make divorce the more 'personally relevant' option if a marriage is dysfunctional. In addition where the threat of divorce seems very great, it may activate wishful thinking as a type of defense (Rippetoe and Rogers, 1987) leading to the creation of ideal unrealistic selves. The combination of ideal unrealistic selves lacking elaborate strategies for attaining them with negative possible selves relating to relationships accompanied by a range of strategies for coping with marital breakdown may make divorce more likely.

The findings bring into question some of the theoretical underpinnings of possible selves. They indicate that positive possible selves alone may be the key motivators. This seemed to be the case for male and female participants. The negative selves reported by the offspring of divorcees indicate a sense of hopelessness, where divorce is viewed as inevitable, a situation that must be prepared for. The motivational power of a negative possible self in leading to the avoidance of future marital problems seems to be reduced where the individual is familiar with the divorce situation, it is seen as survivable and strategies have been developed to assist in coping. Some researchers have acknowledged the importance of having available coping strategies (Oyserman et al., 1995; Hooker, 1999) and have assessed not only possible selves but the extent to which participants have and use strategies for attaining positive possible selves and avoiding negative possible selves. Perceived self-efficacy in relation to the implementation of strategies is also important. Some studies have found what they describe as a boomerang interaction effect under conditions of low self-efficacy (e.g. Rogers, 1985). Rogers and Prentice-Dunn (1997) suggest that if people believe they can cope with a threat, the greater the danger, the greater the intentions to perform those coping responses. On the other hand, if people do not believe they will be able to cope with the danger, as that danger becomes greater, intentions to perform the coping response actually diminish (people actually plan to drink or smoke more!). Divorcees' offspring who lack self-efficacy with regard to relationships and have few and weak positive possible selves about future family life mediated by a permissive attitude towards divorce and a belief that divorce is inevitable may respond in this way.

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