

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO:
THE MEANING OF HOME TO PARENTS AND CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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Abstract:

This paper describes preliminary results from some research about how parents and children view their housing environment following a divorce. Thirty-seven families and a total of 58 individuals participated in this study. Twenty-one of these families had children who were clients at Kids in the Middle, an organization which provides counseling and support group services to children of divorce. The remaining 16 families were part of an organization called Single Life Ministries, a support group service for children and their parents who have recently undergone or are currently going through a divorce. Both organizations are located in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Face-to-face interviews with parents and children and a detailed survey of parents were the primary data gathering techniques. Preliminary results indicate that certain objective characteristics of the home decline immediately after a divorce, and that certain perceptions of the home, such as levels of residential satisfaction, take a similar dip. The home can take on very powerful meanings after a divorce, especially to parents. Those who lose their home as a result of a divorce often undergo severe psychological reactions, not unlike the grief experienced by the loss of a loved one.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning and use of home and neighborhood for children and parents who have recently experienced a divorce. Although in recent years, a number of researchers have examined the meaning of home (Hayward, 1977; Cooper Marcus, 1974; Anthony, 1981, 1984, 1987; Czikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981), to date none have empirically examined the meaning of the "broken home" to its occupants. The term itself has negative connotations as if once a divorce occurs the home itself is split in two, never to be whole again. Children whose parents have separated or divorced are often referred to as "children of broken homes", so that the status of their parents' relationship defines their own identity.

Much of the vast literature on divorce demonstrates that the experience of separation and divorce can be extremely stressful for all family members. Among the more methodologically sophisticated studies on divorce which elaborates on this phenomenon are those by Anderson-Khlief (1982); Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1978); Wallerstein and Kelly (1980); Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989); and Weitzman (1985). Weitzman's (1985) study comes closest by documenting the sharp decline in women's standard of living in contrast to that of men following a divorce. She cites that during the first year following the divorce, the standard of living for most men rises by an average of 42%, while that of women plummets a dramatic 73%.

Both bodies of literature raise some significant questions for those of us in the environment and behavior field, some of which have already been spelled out in previous work (Anthony, 1987). Here are but a few which this body of work seeks to address.

What are some of the objective characteristics of the housing environment--before, during, and after a divorce? How do parents and children perceive their homes--before, during, and after a divorce? How satisfied are residents with their homes? What factors, if any, in the marital housing environment may have caused problems between husband and wife? How do people view their home following a divorce, and how do these relationships vary if they move out or remain in the family home? Is the image of the home truly "broken", shattered, or severely disfigured in some way--or not? How broken up, if at all, are residents and former residents about their homes? How do these perceptions change over time, and how do they vary, if at all, for men and women, for parents and children, and for parents with and without custody of their children?

METHODS

Sample and Site Selection.

Thirty-seven families and a total of 58 persons participated in this study. Twenty-one of these families had children who were clients at Kids in the Middle, an organization which provides counseling and support group services to children of divorce. The remaining 16 families were part of an organization called Single Life Ministries, a non-denominational support group service for children and their parents who have recently undergone or are currently going through a divorce. Both organizations are located in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the sample.

TABLE 1. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

	Kids in the Middle	Single Life Ministries	Total
Total number of participants	42	16	58
Total number of families	21	16	37
Number of parents	23	16	39
Number of mothers	16	12	28
Number of fathers	7	2	9
Didn't report sex	0	2	2
Number of children	19	0	19
Number of sons	10	0	10
Number of daughters	9	0	9
Number of parent + child participants	14	0	14

Research Instruments.

Face-to-face interviews and surveys were the primary data gathering techniques. Table 2 shows the types of research instruments used in this research. A total of four research instruments was developed for this study: 1) a parents' interview form, 2) a parents' survey form, 3) a young children's interview form, and 4) a teenage survey form.

TABLE 2. RESEARCH METHODS USED

	Kids in the Middle	Single Life Ministries	Total
Parent interviews	18	5	23
Parent surveys	17	16	33
Young children interviews	16	0	16
Teenage surveys	3	0	3

Each instrument was carefully pretested on a small sample of single parents and their children before it was administered on site. The pretest was especially important for the children's research instruments, as the researchers lacked experience interviewing young pre-schoolers. The staff at the Child Development Lab Preschool at the University of Illinois reviewed the young children's research instrument and offered several suggestions based on their experience working day to day with pre-schoolers.

Parents' Interview Form. The parents' interview form contained a total of seven open-ended questions, some with a few components. It asked parents to speculate about their housing environment while married, as well as their current housing environment and that of their ex-spouse. Comments were addressed specifically to both the inside and the outside home environment. Questions asked about the role that the housing environment played in contributing to or alleviating marital or family conflict, the extent to which it has been a factor in their own or their children's adjustment to separation or divorce,

and the extent to which it has contributed to or reduced stress for the family. They were asked to describe any problems they may have had in finding housing since the separation. Respondents were also asked to identify any special features of either their own or their ex-spouse's housing environment which they believed to be especially helpful for single-parent families like themselves. Finally, they were asked to list their suggestions for environmental designers concerned with better meeting the needs of single-parent families.

At Kids in the Middle, this interview form was administered face-to-face. As the respondents spoke, the research staff took notes directly on the interview forms and also tape recorded each conversation. The interviews lasted anywhere from about 15 minutes to 45 minutes. At Single Life Ministries, a few parents volunteered to complete the interview form in writing on their own at home.

Parents' Survey Form. The parents' survey form was the most elaborate of all the research instruments. It involved an 18-page survey with primarily closed items, following up in detail along the themes outlined in the parent's interview form. Over 430 variables were included. Among the topics covered were the respondent's last home while married, their first post-separation home, their ex-spouse's current home, their current home, their satisfaction with their current home, perceptions of their current home, their housing preferences, feelings about their lives right now, settlement arrangements, and demographic questions about their household. Respondents were given a detailed inventory of several physical features and asked to compare their homes pre-, during, and post-divorce along these features.

Many questions on this form had been derived from previous research conducted at the University of Illinois' Housing Research and Development Program to measure residential satisfaction. These studies have measured residents' perceptions of their housing environment at low-income housing sites, housing environments for the elderly, and for the physically disabled (Francescato et al., 1979). Some other questionnaire items were based on previous surveys which had been conducted at the Center for the Family in Transition in San Rafael, California, one of the US's leading centers for research on divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). At both research sites, parents completed these surveys during the course of a week and returned them to staff members, who then mailed them back to the research team.

Young Children's Interview Form. The young children's interview form was a relatively short instrument, four pages in all. Before administering the interview, the researchers stressed to the children that the point was not to find out if they preferred their mother to their father, or vice versa, but to learn about how they felt about the homes in which their mother and father lived.

The interview form asked some simple questions about children's rooms and "special places" at their mother's house and their father's house, where they play at both locations; how much they like being at each parent's house, how much they like their room at both locations, how much they like playing outside at both homes. They were also asked which of the two houses they call "home" and why, which house makes them feel happier, which house they like better, which room they like better, and at which home they prefer to play outside. If they had moved since the separation, they were also asked if they miss their old house, their old room, or playing outside. They were also asked a few additional items about their experiences at school.

Answers were kept simple, generally "yes" or "no" to avoid confusion. When they were asked how they liked a particular spot, they were asked to select on a three-point scale. An adaptation of a five-point scale used for adults, the scale on this children's version consisted of three faces, a smiling face, a neutral face, and a frown. These signified "I like it", "It's just OK", and "I don't like it". These faces were drawn up in 8 1/2" by 11" format. Children were asked to point to the face that best explained how they felt.

The children's interview form was administered face-to-face to all children. It took anywhere from about five minutes to 15 minutes to conduct. All answers were recorded by the research team directly on the forms themselves. In addition, each interview was tape recorded.

Teen Survey Form. Finally, the teen survey form was a combination of both the young children's interview form and the parents' survey form. A total of six pages and 68 items, it addressed teenagers' levels of satisfaction with their homes before, during, and after the divorce, as well as a variety of questions about their perceptions of their current home and neighborhood. It asked about favorite places to hang out at Mom's house and Dad's house. In addition, it asked about specific features of their current home and the extent to which they contributed to stress.

The teen survey form was designed to be taken independently but in the presence of the researcher, who was on hand to answer questions. It took respondents about 10 minutes to complete.

RESULTS

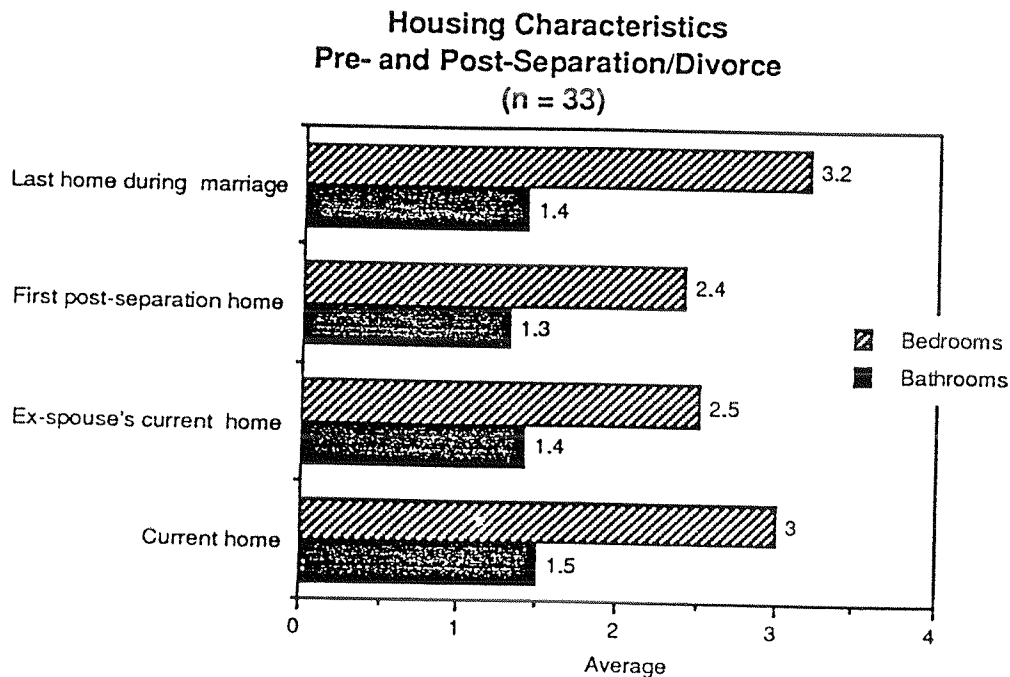
At the time of this writing, the quantitative analysis of the data is still underway. Nonetheless, some preliminary, partial results will be presented here. These findings cluster around a few key themes: the objective and perceived characteristics of the pre- and post-divorce home.

Objective Characteristics of the Pre- and Post-Divorce Home

A comparison of homes before and after the divorce can help us examine whether or not the standard of living has risen or declined, as the literature tends to indicate. Results show that for those who have moved since they were married, their marital home is most likely to be a single family house. Their first home after the separation or divorce is most likely to be an apartment. The ex-spouse's current home, and the respondent's current home, however, are most likely to be a single family house. (Note that measures of the current home include those who remained in the marital home following the divorce.)

The average number of bedrooms in the last home while married is only slightly greater than that in the current home (3.2 vs. 3), however, the average number of bedrooms in the first post-separation home and in the ex-spouse's current home is much lower. The number of bathrooms remains fairly stable throughout the pre- and post-divorce/separation period (Figure 1). By purely objective measures, then, for these respondents, the standard of living tends to decline immediately following a divorce.

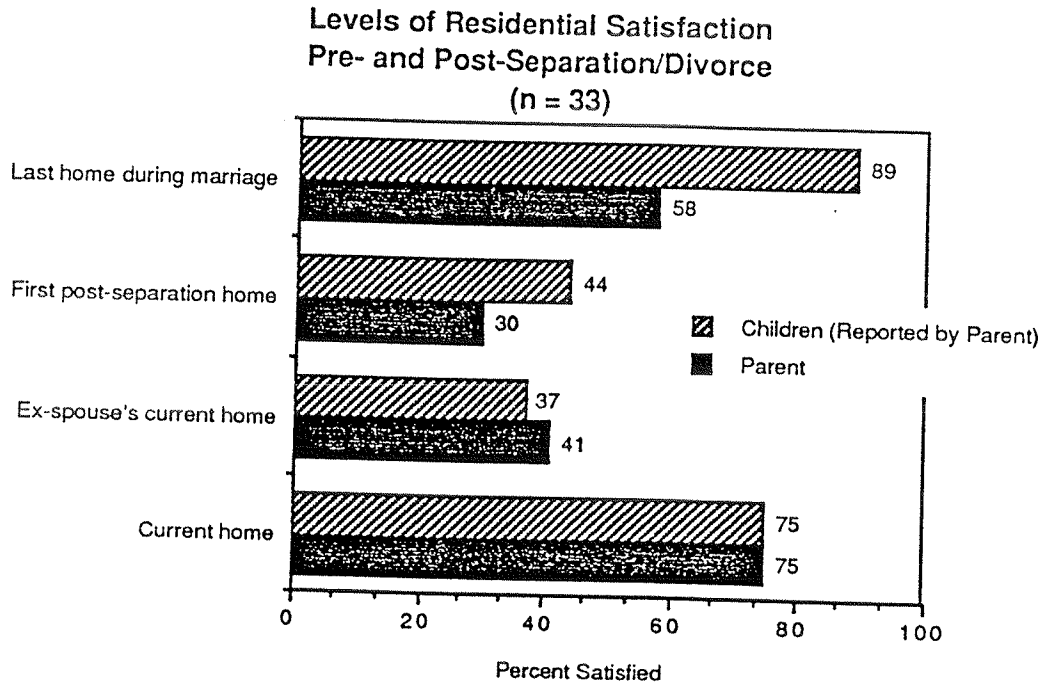
FIGURE 1.



Perceived Characteristics of the Pre- and Post-Divorce Home

Residential Satisfaction: Concerning the levels of parents' satisfaction with the pre- and post-divorce home, it appears that for both parents and their children, satisfaction with their housing environment takes a sharp dip following a divorce, a reduction by about half (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2.



Problems with the Pre-Divorce House. One of the more serious problems with the physical environment of the home which seems to precipitate family stress is the renovation of the home. This problem surfaces in a few accounts, and whenever it does, it is a major cause for concern. Here are a few of the respondents' comments about this issue:

"The house was torn up on (the) inside and trash and debris was all over the yard. Bugs (were) all over the inside of the house. My husband had no self worth."

"We bought a run-down house in a good neighborhood. The house had been empty for two years. This put a lot of pressure on my wife, an interior designer. We lived there together for a four-year period. We had a five year plan to remodel the house--but she left after four years. We lived in a messy, dirty environment for a long time! The house exacerbated my wife's depression, and it was a major factor in making her feel inadequate."

Another serious difficulty is the matter of housekeeping. When couples differ in the degree to which each wishes to maintain the house, the result is often fireworks. For example, "My wife wasn't doing a lot of housework--cooking and laundry. I never knew if she felt up to it. The result was chaos. Now it's easier knowing that I do it."

The Home After the Breakup. A total of 14 parents had remained in their marital home after the separation or divorce. When this group is singled out, the following responses are obtained:

All (100%) are pleased to be able to have stayed in their homes. Almost 3/4 (71%) believe that their home doesn't feel the same as it used to. Only about 1/4 (21%) feel like their ex-spouse still lives there.

About 3/4 (71%) believe that traces of their ex-spouse remain in the home. Almost 3/4 (71%) of the parents believe that their children love the home.

For many people, the mere thought of moving is overwhelming. As one woman put it, "We didn't have (the) trauma of adjusting to (a) new neighborhood with other adjustments." Another woman said, "I'm glad we were able to stay in our four-bedroom home for two reasons. I feel it makes disciplining the children easier and allows for fewer conflicts between the children. It also keeps them from having to be uprooted."

For some parents, however, staying in the same home is still a major source of stress. Problems with maintaining the home and being able to keep up with monthly expenses and occasional repairs can be extremely difficult.

"It's been tough on me. I often feel like 'you have no business owning a house by yourself'. I can't do repairs. I can't afford them."

By contrast, 16 parents had moved from the home they had lived in during the marriage. When this group is examined, the following results are obtained:

Almost half (47%) the parents miss their old home, and almost 3/4 (71%) of the parents state that their children miss it too. Over a third (38%) of the parents found it difficult to leave their old family home, 36% believe it was hard for their ex-spouse to leave, and slightly more (43%) state that moving was difficult for their children. Only 18% still have dreams about their old family home.

One father, who not only lost custody of his children but lost his "dream house" as a result of the divorce, had a severe psychological reaction not unlike the grief reaction following the loss of a loved one. His experience was not unusual. After he would bring his children back to their mother's house (his former "dream house") at the end of a weekend visit, he would just sit in his car in the driveway, staring at the house, struggling to come to grips with the fact that this house was no longer his, and start to cry. Other parents became visibly upset when asked about their former home.

Again, looking at this same sub-group, only about a third (38%) prefer their new family home to their old one, and slightly more (41%) believe that their children love their new family home. Only about a third (38%) were able to bring all their favorite possessions with them to their new family home, and exactly one third (33%) believe that their children were able to bring them with them.

Two-thirds (69%) prefer their new home to that of their ex-spouse. Children's interviews reveal that of the eight children who had moved after the divorce, six miss their old home and their old room, and five miss playing outside at their old home.

General Perceptions of the Inside and Outside of the Home. In general, it appears from the interviews that the outdoor environment around the home is mentioned more often, by both parents and their children, than is the interior home environment. Parents are more likely than their children to mention architectural as opposed to landscape features of the home which they believe to be important in either their own or their children's adjustment to life as a single-parent family. By contrast, children are more likely to cite outdoor areas and natural features. Similarly, comments about the neighborhood are more likely to be raised by parents rather than their children.

Most important issues raised by parents concern children's friends in the neighborhood, the presence or absence of a private yard, and the size of the yard or outdoor play space. Children's comments most frequently center around bikes, skateboards, and scooters, items that they played with in their yards, as well as the size of the yard and other friends in the neighborhood.

DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSIONS

This research is certainly not the final word on the topic, but it has yielded some interesting findings. Inevitably, further analysis will provoke even more questions. Before jumping to conclusions, however, one must bear in mind the relatively small size of the sample, and also the fact that most individuals sampled may have been pre-disposed towards some type of pathology, as they were actively seeking help for either themselves or for their children. Whether or not the views of this group of individuals differ significantly from those single-parent families who do not seek counseling or support groups, however, remains unknown.

What can be gleaned from this preliminary analysis, however, is that 1) using the bedroom as one indicator of standard of living, it appears that for those who move, at least, the standard drops sharply following a divorce, as Weitzman (1985) has also demonstrated; and that 2) perceptions of the housing environment, especially residential satisfaction, seem to drop accordingly. For some, the experience of losing a home takes on anthropomorphic qualities. When the home is lost, or the relationship with it is not what it once was, grief strikes, grief not unlike the loss of a human being or a member of the family itself. The image of the home perhaps is not truly "broken", but at best it remains tarnished by the experience of separation and divorce.

NOTES

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