

**A Typology of Attitudes Toward Proceeding with Divorce Among Parents in the  
Divorce Process**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper introduces a typology of attitudes towards proceeding with a divorce among parents of minor children. The backdrop is recent research showing that some parents are ambivalent about the divorce and are open to reconciliation services. Surveying a sample of 624 parents who had filed for divorce, the study found that about 2/3 of participants were certain they wanted the divorce, about 1/4 indicated ambivalence, and about 8% did not want the divorce. These attitudes were strongly linked to interest in reconciliation services. The paper discusses implications for lawyers and mediators in assessing divorce ambivalence and offering appropriate services.

Keywords: Divorce, marriage, reconciliation, mediation, divorce lawyer

## **A Typology of Attitudes Toward Proceeding with Divorce Among Parents in the Divorce Process**

This paper introduces a typology to better understand the attitudes of people in highly distressed marriages towards moving ahead with a divorce. The backdrop for the current study is the recent research on divorce ambivalence and reconciliation interests among individuals who have filed for divorce (Doherty, Peterson & Willoughby, 2011; Hawkins, Willoughby & Doherty, 2012; Knox & Corte, 2007). In addition to the scientific merits of better understanding divorce attitudes, there are potential applications for the practices of divorce professionals.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many progressive divorce professionals were interested in helping couples avoid divorce if that was feasible, and then assist them in having a constructive divorce if the marriage could not be preserved (Folberg, Milne, & Salem, 2004). This thinking was reflected in the history of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts ([www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp](http://www.afccnet.org/about/history.asp)) and in books such as Kohut's (1968) *Therapeutic Family Law: A Complete Guide to Marital Reconciliations*. The assumption in the field at the time was that many divorcing couples might be interested in reconciling through counseling services offered by a team of legal and mental health professionals.

By the 1980s and 1990s, however, divorce mediation and other forms of collaborative practice had begun to replace marriage counseling in cutting edge work with divorcing couples (Folberg et al., 2004; Tessler & Thompson, 2007). Marital reconciliation never really disappeared as a possible byproduct of a cooperative, non-adversarial divorce process, but it was no longer an intentional focus of divorce practice in the United States. The contemporary literature on divorce mediation and collaborative law is largely silent on assessing and engaging divorce ambivalence. In the same way, marriage counselors now mostly draw a line between

reconciliation efforts prior to the couple deciding to divorce, and then divorce counseling after the couple files and presumably has made an irrevocable decision to divorce (Everett & Lee, 2006; Sprenkle, 1989).

### **Related Literature**

The first direct study on attitudes towards reconciliation during the divorce process was conducted by Doherty et al. (2011), who surveyed a sample of 2,484 divorcing parents. They found that about 25% of parents indicated a belief that their marriage could still be saved, and about 30% indicated interest in reconciliation services. These beliefs and interests were largely independent of demographic factors and marital history factors, with two exceptions: males were more interested in reconciliation than females, and initiators of the divorce process were less interested in reconciliation services than their spouses. That study was replicated by Hawkins et al. (2012) who found similar levels of belief that the marriage could be saved (26%) as well as interest in reconciliation services (33%).

Other surveys of divorced people have found indicators of ambivalence about divorce. Several surveys from different states suggest that half of divorced individuals wished they had worked harder to overcome their marital differences and avoid their divorce (see Hawkins & Fackrell, 2009, for a summary). Hetherington and Kelley (2002) reported that in 75% of divorced couples at least one partner had regrets about the decision to divorce one year after the breakup. In a qualitative study, Knox and Corte (2007) found striking levels of rethinking among currently separated spouses. They report: “Clearly, one effect of involvement in the process of separation was a re-evaluation of the desirability of initiating a separation to the degree that they would alert others contemplating separation/divorce to rethink their situation and to attempt reconciliation” (p. 79).

The origin of the current study was a working group formed by the first author and a group of collaborative divorce lawyers to consider the implications of the new research on divorce ambivalence and reconciliation interest, and to develop a practical, time-efficient protocol for working with clients seeking initial consultations when ambivalence might be at its highest. The working group developed a typology of four attitudes towards divorce and began to use it with clients as a way to open conversations on divorce ambivalence and interest in alternatives to immediately proceeding with the divorce. The current study presents this typology to the field and offers data on its validity. The four attitudes in the typology are: 1) I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes; 2) I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure; 3) I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes; and 4) I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard to get us back together.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Although this study was not designed to formally test a theory, it is informed by adult attachment theory (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Rholes & Simpson, 2006), a framework that helps understand ambivalence and the presence of strong positive and negative emotions in divorcing couples. Weiss (1975, 1976) was one of the first to use Bowlby's (1969) original infant/caregiver attachment theory to understand the endurance of ambivalence and continued longing among divorcing couples: "There persists, after the end of most marriages, whether the marriages have been happy or unhappy, whether their disruption has been sought or not, a sense of bonding to the spouse.... Pining for the spouse may continue despite the availability of alternative relationships and despite absence of liking, admiration, or respect" (Weiss, 1976, p. 138). Subsequent studies and clinical reports supported Weiss's insight that attachment processes in

divorce are important and highly complex (Madden-Derdich & Arditti, 1999; Masheteer, 1997; Mazor, Batiste-Harel & Gampel, 1998).

Applied to attitudes towards divorce, attachment theory suggests that enduring emotional connections among people approaching divorce will lead some people to be reluctant to end their marriage and interested in restoring it. Attachment theory can also guide the choice of predictors of attitudes towards reconciliation. The person not initiating the divorce would presumably have less interest in ending the marriage because that person would be experiencing a greater attachment threat than the initiator who may have been planning the divorce privately for some time and emotionally adjusting to the idea (Vaughn, 1986). In part because women are more likely to initiate divorce (Amato & Prevati, 2003), we would expect that women would be more convinced that the divorce path is the best one. These factors were found by Doherty et al. (2011) to be associated with differing levels of interest in reconciliation.

### **Study Objectives**

If the attitude typology is valid for a sample of individuals already in the divorce process, it should show high levels of conviction that the marriage is over (the first attitude in the typology). Given prior research on divorce ambivalence, the typology should also show a substantial minority of individuals who are not convinced that divorce is inevitable or the best option (attitudes 2-4).

In addition, two factors consistently associated with divorce attitudes should be predictors of attitudes in this typology: gender and initiator status. We hypothesize that more women than men will be certain about divorcing, and that initiators of the divorce (regardless of gender) will be more certain than those not initiating. We predict that the presence of an outside romantic relationship at the time of the survey would be associated with more certainty about divorcing.

We also examine additional demographic factors (age, length of marriage, number of marriages, and number of children) that we anticipate will not be associated with divorce attitudes, based on a lack of any theoretical rationale for such an association.

Finally, we predict that the attitude typology will be associated with two other variables related to reconciliation: belief that the divorce can be avoided and interest in accessing reconciliation services, with individuals expressing less certainty about divorcing being more likely to believe their divorce could be prevented and more interested in reconciliation services.

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

Participants came from two sources: parents in court-mandated parent education courses who took a brief survey at the end of their class, and mailed surveys of newly filing individuals in an urban Midwestern county. The total sample consisted of 624 individual divorcing parents of minor children. There were no differences on the main variables of interest between participants coming from the two sources of data. Approximately 44% of the sample was male while 56% were female. The average age of the participants was 40.67 ( $SD = 8.32$ ) years old. The average marriage length was 11.78 ( $SD = 7.03$ ) years. About 23% of the sample had been married for 5 years or less, while 13% had been married for more than 20 years. The mean number of children was 2.00 ( $SD = 1.02$ ). In terms of education, 2.4% of the sample had less than a high school education, 11.2% had only a high school diploma or equivalent, and 59.6% had graduated from college. These educational levels closely reflected those of the married population in (the state from which the sample was drawn).

### **Measures**

*Attitudes towards divorce* were measured on the survey as follows: “People have different attitudes towards their divorce. Check which of these statements most closely fits your own attitude right now. Please read all of them and then pick just one statement:

- 1) I’m done with this marriage; it’s too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes
- 2) I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it’s a good idea and sometimes I’m not sure
- 3) I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes
- 4) I don’t want this divorce, and I would work hard to get us back together.”

*Initiator status* was measured by the question: “Who took the lead in starting the divorce process?” Response categories were “you,” “your spouse,” and “both of you together.”

*Outside Romantic Involvement* was measured by the question: “At the time couples file for divorce, one of them may be involved romantically with another person. Is this true in your situation? Response categories were “yes,” “no,” and “not sure.”

*Belief the divorce could be prevented* was measured by the question: “Even at this point, do you think your divorce could be prevented if one or both of you worked hard to save the marriage.” Response categories were “yes,” “maybe,” and “no.”

*Interest in Reconciliation Services* was measured by this item: “If a reconciliation service were made available by the court or some other responsible organization, I would seriously consider trying it.” Response categories were “yes,” “maybe” and “no.”

*Demographic measures.* Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their background including how long they had been married, their age, number of children, who initiated the divorce process, their educational background, and their gender. Education was

assessed by asking the participants for the highest grade they had completed. It was recoded into four categories to enable adequate cell size in each category; the categories were high school/GED/below high school, some college, college graduate, and post-graduate studies. Years married was recoded into five groups: 0-4 years, 5-9 years, 10-14 years, 12-19 years, and 20 or more years. Number of children was re-coded as follows: 1 child, 2 children, 3 children, and 4 or more children.

## Results

Findings are presented in three stages: first, descriptive statistics on the typology of attitudes towards divorce; second, the predictors of the attitude scores; and third, the relationship between the attitude typology scores and the two other variables related to reconciliation: belief that the divorce could be prevented and interest in reconciliation services. Table 1 presents the findings for the significant relationships found.

The breakdown of divorce attitudes was as follows: type 1 (done with this marriage), 66.2%; type 2 (mixed feelings), 16.5%; type 3 (reconcile if spouse made changes), 9.8%; and type 4 (don't want the divorce), 7.5%. Thus, about 2/3 of participants were certain they wanted the divorce, about 1/4 indicated ambivalence, and about 8% did not want the divorce.

As hypothesized, gender was significantly associated with the attitude typology ( $\chi^2(3, N = 624) = 13.207, p = .004$ ), with women (68.4%) being more likely to say that they were done with the marriage than men (63.4%). The five percentage point difference, however, was relatively small.

As hypothesized, initiator status was significantly associated with the attitude

typology ( $\chi^2(6, N = 619) = 91.046, p < .001$ ). Those who said they initiated the divorce more likely to be done with the marriage (88.4%) than those who said their spouse initiated (48.4%) or that both initiated (55.1%). This was a large difference of about 33 percentage points.

As hypothesized, the presence of another romantic relationship was significantly associated with the attitude typology ( $\chi^2(6, N = 616) = 17.029, p = .009$ ), with those who indicated a relationship more likely to be done with the marriage (69.2%) than those who said there was no relationship (66.3%) or were unsure (60.2%). However, as with gender, the magnitude of these differences was not great.

As hypothesized, the attitude typology was significantly and strongly associated with the belief that the divorce could still be prevented ( $\chi^2(6, N = 615) = 204.955, p < .001$ ). Those with attitudes other than “I’m done” were far more likely to believe their divorce could be prevented. For example, among those whose had “mixed feelings” (attitude #2), 24% checked “yes” that their divorce could be prevented, and 52% checked “maybe.” Of those with attitude #1 (I’m done), the corresponding figures were 8.6% and 17.6%.

As hypothesized, the attitude typology was significantly and strongly associated with interest in reconciliation services ( $\chi^2(6, N = 627) = 218.067, p < .001$ ). Those with attitudes other than “I’m done” were far more likely to be interested in reconciliation services. For example, those who checked attitude #3 (“If my spouse made changes”), 61% checked “yes” and 31% checked “maybe” on interest in reconciliation services. The corresponding figures for those who checked attitude #1 (“I’m done”) were 3% and 10%.

As expected, there was no association between the attitude typology and the demographic factors of age, education, length of marriage, number of children, and number of marriages.

## Discussion

This study introduced a new typology of attitudes towards divorce among parents in the divorce process. The findings suggest that the typology shows promise for understanding and working with individuals approaching divorce. The breakdown of attitudes among parents was consistent with prior research suggesting that about 30% of parents would have some degree of ambivalence or reluctance about the divorce, and that about 70% would feel more certain about the decision to divorce. The typology presented here goes beyond prior research by showing the complexity of the ambivalence, ranging from mixed feelings to wanting a major change to not wanting the divorce at all.

The study demonstrated expected associations between divorce attitudes and initiator status and gender; initiators and women were more likely to be certain about the divorce, and non-initiators and men more ambivalent or opposed to the divorce. We were interested in whether difference in initiator status (women initiating more) accounted for the gender difference in attitudes. An analysis using only initiators found no gender differences: men who initiated the divorce process were just as likely as women initiators to be certain that the marriage was over. (Analyses available from the authors.) Thus, it is likely that divorce attitudes are more determined by leader versus responder roles than by gender per se. Because women take the lead more often in divorce, they are more likely to be certain and less likely to be ambivalent. Having said this, the absolute differences in divorce attitudes between men and women in this study were small.

The typology also showed an expected association with the presence of a current romantic partner. In order to respect the privacy of study participants completing a questionnaire in a public setting, this question was deliberately phrased to not ask which spouse was in such a

relationship. Nevertheless, the findings were consistent with what would be expected by a valid measure of divorce attitudes: the presence of an outside relationship was associated with more certainty and less ambivalence or reluctance about the divorce. Similarly, the lack of association with demographic and marital history factors suggests that the attitudes are not a function of fixed characteristics of the spouses or their relationships such as age, length of marriage, and number of children.

Since this study built on earlier research on beliefs about reconciliation possibilities, it was important to examine how the typology related to two reconciliation-related measures: the belief that the divorce could still be prevented and interest in reconciliation services. As expected, divorce attitudes related strongly to these two variables, suggesting that the attitudes in the typology are good markers for interest in reconciliation.

### **Limitations**

This study has a number of limitations that deserve attention. The sample was not representative of all divorcing parents in the county, let alone the nation. It is possible that participant responses could have been affected by participation in a parent education class; however, sampling divorcing parents through the mail prior to taking classes did not reveal differences on key variables. The attitude typology focused on just four different attitudes. No doubt there are more potential attitudes than the ones examined in this study. Finally, because we measured attitudes and not behavior, we cannot say how participants might follow up in terms of action related to their marriage, for example, by seeking out reconciliation services.

### **Implications**

From its origins, this research aimed at practice implications. The attitude typology came out of conversations with a group of collaborative divorce lawyers and reflected their

professional experience with clients. The group developed and pilot tested a divorce ambivalence protocol using the typology as the core, and the protocol has been subsequently used by lawyers and mediators. In this protocol, the client fills out a simple intake form that contains the attitude typology. Early in the consultation interview, the lawyer or mediator refers to which attitude the client checked as a stimulus to a conversation about the client's attitude towards the divorce. The following is an example of the language a divorce professional might use:

“Thanks for filling out the intake form. I see that you checked [that you have mixed feelings about the divorce, etc.] Could you tell me more about why you checked that response?”

This is somewhat akin to a primary care physician glancing at a depression screening inventory the patient completed in the waiting room, and using that as a stimulus for a conversation if the patient has scored high on depression symptoms.

Using the stimulus of the attitude typology has advantages over more closed-ended question typically asked of clients, such as “Are you sure you want to move ahead with a divorce?” or “Have you tried marriage counseling.” The attitude typology opens up a conversation that the divorce professional can follow up on with additional questions to learn about the client's level of certainty versus their level of ambivalence about proceeding with the divorce. When the client expresses ambivalence or reluctance, then the protocol involves suggesting the option of a referral for appropriate counseling from a therapist to help the couple achieve more clarity and confidence in decision making about a direction for the future of their relationship.

## **Conclusion**

This study furthers a recent line of research and practice that takes into account the range of attitudes, from certainly to ambivalence to opposition, which people may have about getting divorced. More studies are needed on different populations and on other aspects of divorce attitudes. Meanwhile, this study has implications to help move current divorce practice into a more nuanced approach for assessing a couple's level of divorce ambivalence. It may also assist with engaging clients in conversations that can lead them to greater clarity and confidence in their divorce decision making process as well as increase the understanding of divorce professionals about how their clients are thinking about the divorce process. Finally, this typology may help re-introduce the possibility of reconciliation into the divorce conversation and help couples resolve their ambivalence by either working on their marriage or moving towards a constructive divorce.

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Table 1. Descriptive Findings for the Divorce Attitude Typology, N = 624  
(N's for particular analyses vary because of a small amount of missing data.)

	I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes.	I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure.	I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes.	I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard to get us back together.	Total
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	173 (63.4%)	38 (13.9%)	31 (11.4%)	31 (11.4%)	273 (43.8%)
Female	240 (68.4%)	65 (18.5%)	30 (8.5%)	16 (4.6%)	351 (56.3%)
Total	413 (66.2%)	103 (16.5%)	61 (9.8%)	47 (7.5%)	624
<b>Who initiated the divorce</b>					
You	260 (80.7%)	40 (12.4%)	20 (6.2%)	2 (0.6%)	322 (52.0%)
Your Spouse	106 (48.4%)	44 (20.1%)	30 (13.7%)	39 (17.8%)	219 (35.4%)
Both, together	43 (55.1%)	19 (24.4%)	11 (14.1%)	5 (6.4%)	78 (12.6%)
Total	409 (66.1%)	103 (16.6%)	61 (9.9%)	46 (7.4%)	619
<b>Infidelity</b>					
Yes	153 (69.2%)	34 (15.4%)	24 (10.9%)	10 (4.5%)	221 (35.9%)
No	177 (66.3%)	48 (18.0%)	26 (9.7%)	16 (6.0%)	267 (43.3%)
Unsure	77 (60.2%)	21 (16.4%)	10 (7.8%)	20 (15.6%)	128 (20.8%)
Total	407 (66.1%)	103 (16.7%)	60 (9.7%)	46 (7.5%)	616
<b>Do you think the divorce could be prevented?</b>					
Yes	35 (25.9%)	37 (27.4%)	32 (23.7%)	31 (23.0%)	135 (22.0%)
Maybe	72 (52.2%)	35 (25.4%)	21 (15.2%)	10 (7.2%)	138 (22.4%)
No	301 (88.0%)	30 (8.8%)	7 (2.0%)	4 (1.2%)	342 (55.7%)
Total	408 (66.3%)	102 (16.6%)	60 (9.8%)	45 (7.3%)	615
<b>Are you interested in reconciliation services?</b>					
Yes	12 (11.2%)	24 (22.4%)	36 (33.6%)	35 (32.7%)	107 (17.7%)
Maybe	40 (35.7%)	51 (45.5%)	18 (16.1%)	3 (2.7%)	112 (18.6%)
No	351 (91.4%)	24 (6.3%)	5 (1.3%)	4 (1.0%)	384 (63.7%)
Total	403 (66.8%)	99 (16.4%)	59 (9.8%)	42 (7.0%)	603