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Bad Families: The Navigation of Stigma and Marked Identities of Children of Divorce

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Bad Families: The Navigation of Stigma and Marked Identities of Children of Divorce

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Defended on April 4th, 2017

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ABSTRACT

The current research on children of divorce largely examines the behavioral issues associated with children one to two years after the divorce. Little research however, has been done into the impact divorce has on the identities of the children who experience divorce. My study set out to fill this gap in the literature by examining the nuanced ways that children of divorce carry that experience with them into young adulthood. Using interview data with 11 men, ten women, and one person who is agender, I examine the ways in which college students use storytelling about “bad families” to construct and manage their identities as children of divorce. Participants constructed their divorced families as bad by linking divorce to lower classes, using words like “weird,” “dirty,” and “nasty” to describe the divorce, talking about the perceived stigma they felt around their family’s inability to be “normal,” and highlighting their disdain for divorce in their own marital lives. I argue that they used stories about “bad families” counterintuitively to manage the perceived stigma and marked identity they felt as being part of a divorced family. This identification of their families as “bad families” impacted the way they talked about the divorce, their parents, and their family. The participants linked a sense of failure and blame to themselves as a result of the divorce. I argue participants constructed the narrative of “bad families,” in part, as a way to navigate unsettling feelings of responsibility and failure.

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INTRODUCTION

The effects of divorce on children have been extensively studied within sociology through a variety of contexts. Most of the current research surrounding children of divorce examines the behavioral issues they experience in the couple of years following the divorce (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). Findings in other studies slightly vary with regard to divorce's long-term effects on children. Most research supports that children carry the experience with them, yet it does not greatly inhibit their ability to function in society. Limited research however, has been conducted examining the effects divorce may have on children as they grow into adulthood. The effects it may have on adults' identity formation have also been largely overlooked in the literature. Additionally, the literature does not examine the ways the stigma may be perceived by children of divorce.

Through my study of college aged students who experienced parental divorce, I aimed to address the gap in the literature by examining the ways in which young adults use storytelling about "bad families" to construct and manage their identities as children of divorce. My research additionally looks into the way that young adults carry the experience of parental divorce into adulthood. I argue that my participants perceived immense stigma around their family's divorce. This perceived stigma then led the participants to construct the narrative of "bad families" around their families. This identity construction by the participants, enabled them to navigate unsettling feelings of responsibility and failure toward the divorce, along with providing an explanation for the perceived stigma.

For the current study, I interviewed 22 college-aged students who experienced parental divorce. They were attending a flagship university in a predominantly white upper class city. College aged students are an important group to study. As they are transitioning into adulthood,

they may begin to be able to consider their parents' divorce from a new perspective. Although young children's accounts of divorce are important, children often do not understand the nuanced details related to the divorce. Studying young adults enabled me to examine the effects of divorce from an unstudied vantage point.

I detail the ways in which experiencing divorce led the participants to feel as though their identity had been marked. The participants' sense of being marked stemmed from the impression that others perceived their family as abnormal and different from "most" families, or how families were "supposed to be." I argue that this feeling of a marked identity caused the participants to perceive stigma from society around their family's marital status as deviating from the "norm." The way they then made sense of that perceived stigma was by constructing their families as "bad families." A consequence of this construction was that a majority of participants also described their mothers as "bad moms."

Establishing and taking on this new familial identity provided the participants with tools, in this case the reasoning, to address why this stigma was being placed on them. Whether or not that stigma against divorced families exists in our society, the immense emotion work that the participants did to construct a new identity for their family as a "bad family" highlight the hugely negative and painful impact of that perceived stigma. Emotion work is defined as "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling" (Hochschild 1979:561). In my study I use "emotion work" in reference to the active work that must be done in order to navigate, deal with, or accept the experience of feeling certain emotions. Additionally, I use it to explain attempting to act with certain emotions or provide certain emotional support. If that perceived stigma was not detrimental, the participants would not have needed to go to such lengths to navigate it. My study establishes how the participants constructed this "bad family" in four

different ways. They fashioned their families as bad families by tying divorced families to lower classes, by noting how their families were “not normal,” by using extremely negative language to describe the divorce, and by severely denouncing divorce for their own marital futures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Divorce, both as an event and an institution, is no longer rare in the U.S. As a consequence there are now countless books and studies examining divorce in general. Many studies have focused on the affects on the partners who go through it, or on the behavioral consequences divorce has on the children who experience it. Few studies however, have examined the question of how the impacts of divorce are carried with those children into adulthood, or how the effects of divorce impacts children's identities over time. While children of divorce have been extensively studied, these studies mainly address issues the child experiences within the first couple of years. Many studies have found that children may exhibit academic problems, internalizing behaviors, social responsibility issues, low self esteem, psychological adjustment issues, or social competence problems after their parents' divorce (Forehand et al. 1994; Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994; Amato and Keith 1991; Beaty 1995). It is noted however that most times a homeostasis is normally achieved roughly 2-3 years after the divorce (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). So, while divorce has been proven to have adverse behavioral effects in the first few years after the divorce, what happens after that? Do the children simply move on and never look back? Or are there smaller, more subtle ways that the effects of divorce manifest in those children, their identities, and their lives that have not been looked at? That is the gap in the research that my study has helped to fill.

I use a sociological, inductive approach to examine the storytelling that children of divorce use to deal with their marked identities. The benefit of the study of sociology is that it enables us "to uncover the patterns and regularities from among many incidents and observations so that perhaps people may recognize their own isolated experience within the context of the experience of others" (Vaughan 1986:9). Listening to the narratives that my participants

constructed around their family identity enabled me to see the ways in which they constructed their perceived stigma, divorce as culturally abnormal, their view of their parents, and their family identity within the larger context of the experience of others. The way my participants reported experiencing stigma was through being marked. “Marked” identities are those that deviate from the norm by either being above or below it. “Marked” identities establish people as different by noting that they do not conform to the dominant unmarked categories of society (Brekhus 1998).

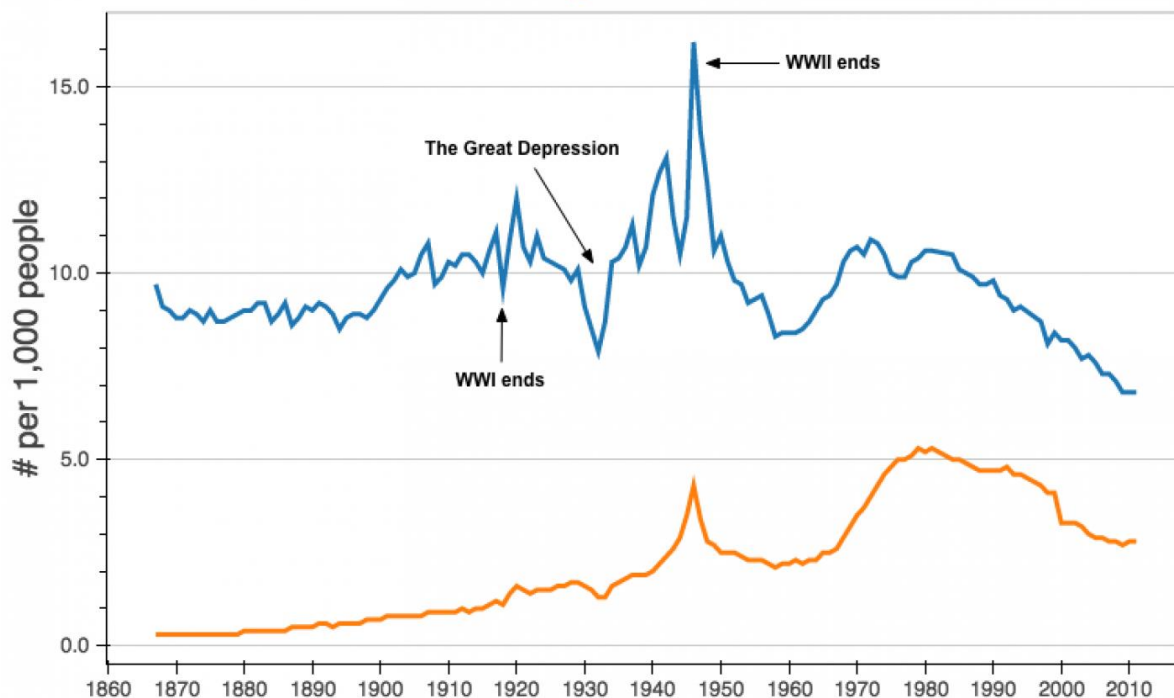
Yet, before people can learn to apply the category of markedness, they must first learn the ability to categorize society. Goffman (1963) speaks about the ways in which people learn to categorize social occurrences. One form of categorization is stigma. Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” or “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (Goffman 1963:3&5). For my participants, their marked identities were the cause of the perceived stigma that they felt from society. Goffman argues that people who are stigmatized are constantly treated as different or abnormal. They therefore learn to identify and manage their stigma (Goffman 1963). In my study I argue that the participants *perceive* stigma from others as a result of their marked identity. I do not argue whether or not society actually treats them with this stigma, simply that they perceive it that way.

Stigma is targeted toward those who diverge from the norm (Goffman 1963). The idea of “normal” can be categorized or approached in many different ways. The meanings of normal can include subjective, statistical, idealistic, cultural, and clinical (Teifer 1995). In my study I argue that divorce may fit into multiple categories of normalcy. Divorce may be statistically normal (by simply being most common), but may also be culturally normal (“socially okay, appropriate, customary, or ‘in the ball park’”) (Teifer 1995:14). These categories of normalcy result in

“normative discourses,” which are “discourses of prescription and deviance management, discourses of social control and repression” (Teifer 1995:183). The negative ways that my participants described divorce and their mothers are forms of these normative discourses.

In order to explore the effect that divorce has on children, we must first examine what constitutes divorce. Divorce is “the point in time at which a couple’s marriage is legally terminated and at which they are free to remarry” (Butler et al 2003:9). Divorce is not just something that happens to kids, rather it is something they make sense of and reproduce thoughts around. Walzer describes how with events such as divorce, children participate in William Corsaro’s concept of “interpretive reproduction.” Walzer quotes Corsaro regarding the way interpretive reproduction is seen in children “The idea that children are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change” (Walzer 2006:162). Interpretive reproduction is seen in children of divorce as divorce is not something that is simply done to them, but afterward children then “Make sense of and respond to it” (Walzer 2006:162).

144 years of marriage and divorce in the U.S.



Although divorce may be statistically normal in our society as its rates have leveled out and slightly and decreased since their peak in the 1980s (as seen in the graph above), I argue that children still perceive stigma around the event. The idea that divorce is now “normal” due to its statistical normalcy fails to recognize that although something is statistically common, it may not be culturally normal and therefore people may still perceive stigma around it.

The impact of divorce does not solely reside within the way a child views themselves. The way the child views their parents and family may also be altered through the experience. Many things impact the way that children view their parents. Children of divorce often experience anger toward their parents for a variety of reasons having to do with the divorce. Children may feel anger due to their needs not being met, to cover up other emotions such as sadness, for feeling as though they were put in the middle, or for either parent speaking negatively of the other (Smith 1999). Yet the way children of divorce historically view each parent is very different.

Mothers in general, and specifically divorced mothers, receive significantly more negative feelings from their children. More anger and blame is directed toward mothers (Smith 1999). The ideology of intensive mothering has given society specific expectations that mothers must live up to. This results in being seen as a “bad mom” for any mother who fails to accomplish those expectations (Coontz 1992). They are then blamed for not living up to society’s expectation of perfection (Caplan 1998). The participants in my study strongly echoed this idea of their mothers being “bad moms.” The idea of “good mothers” contains remnants from the Victorian ages. They are “Self-abnegating, domestic, preternaturally attuned to her children’s needs” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998:6). Bad mothers, then by contrast, are those who do not do those things (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998). Bad mothers can be grouped into

three different types: “Those who did not live in a “traditional” nuclear family; those who would not or could not protect their children from harm; and those whose children went wrong” (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998:3). The bad mothers seen in my study were initially viewed as such due to their group membership in the first group of failing to live in a “traditional” nuclear family. Divorced mothers immediately fit into this category by way of failing at marriage and being divorced. Subsequently many participants in my study placed their mother into the second group of “bad moms” who could not protect their children as well.

People’s ideas of their fathers vary greatly from those seen toward mothers. Fathers often do not receive the negative emotions that mothers do, and experience far less, to no, blame. Children of divorce often desire their father’s support and approval (Smith 1999). Mothers in our society are responsible for most of the childcare, which leaves fewer chances for fathers to fail (Coontz 1992). There also fails to be clear guidelines as to what constitutes a “good father” comparable to those about mothers. This lack of rules is expounded further with fathers who are divorced (Seltzer 1991). The lack of a constant yardstick to compare them to makes it difficult to see their failures, or categorize them as bad fathers. “Good fathers” are simply viewed as those fathers that hold an active role in their children’s lives (Marsiglio et al. 2000). This definition is very wide ranging, thus allowing for a vast continuum of what “active” and therefore “good” actually entails.

Even without all of the issues that accompany divorce and parenting noted above, divorce has heavy impacts on children. Divorce itself turns children’s basic concept of family upside down (Harvey and Fine 2004). The divorce “violates the children’s expectation of family” as families were something that was supposed to be reliable and intact (Harvey and Fine 2004:14; Walzer 2006). Additionally, since the late 19th century people viewed their families as their main

source of personal satisfaction. Consequently, families were also the main way in which outsiders viewed personal decency. This resulted in immense pressure being placed on a person's family and its need to be perfect in order to pass outside judgment (Coontz 1992). This pressure to be perfect only compounds the angst felt by my participants. First the participants judge their own family for not aligning with their idea of family, by being divorced. Then, they feel outsiders also judge their family for not being perfect, by being divorced. As their idea of family as well as being viewed as perfect by outsiders is fractured, this causes them to feel their family is now abnormal, or not how families are "supposed" to be (Harvey and Fine 2004; Walzer 2006). When their family concepts no longer meet the ideal, some children try too hard to force a fit, which can cause even more unrest for the child (Walzer 2006). As the young adults in my study continued to experience the divorce as well as its clear deviation from "normal" and how families were "supposed" to be, the explanation they established for their "abnormality" was that their family was a "bad family."

METHODS

Participants

All of the participants were current students at the University of Colorado- Boulder, between the ages of 18-23, and their parents were already divorced at the time of the interview. While I conducted 24 interviews, I chose to exclude two after consulting with my advisor because they seemed to exhibit signs of mental instability that distracted from my study concerns. For this reason, throughout my data I will refer to the remaining 22 participants. The University of Colorado is located in an upper middle class area of Colorado. Many of the students mirror that socioeconomic status and only 17% of the students identify as low-income students (Office of Accountability). The university is also majority (71%) white (Office of Accountability). My participants represented a large age range at time of the divorce, anywhere from before they were born to 18 years of age. Their current ages ranged from 18-23 with the median age being 21. They represented 16 different majors and four different colleges within the university. I attempted to get an equal number of men and women in order to compare the gender differences seen in my study. I ended up with 11 men, 10 women, and 1 agender person. While I attempted to get as much of a mix of races as I could, this proved difficult at a university that is predominately white. Six participants identified as Asian, Asian American, Asian/Mexican, Hispanic, or Middle Eastern/Hispanic, while the other 16 all identified as white.

Participant Data

| Participant | Age | Age at Time of Divorce | Race | Gender | SES | Major |
|-------------|-----|------------------------|---------------------------|---------|-----|--|
| Adam | 18 | 14 | White | Male | UM | Psychology |
| Alex | 21 | 18 | White | Female | UM | Advertising and Media Design |
| Anita | 21 | 12 | Asian | Female | U | Sociology |
| Audrey | 21 | 1 | White | Female | M | International Affairs |
| Bradly | 23 | 13 | White | Male | UM | Communications |
| Brandon | 20 | 16 | White | Male | U | Data Science |
| Charlie | 21 | 18 | White | Female | M | International Affairs |
| Edward | 20 | 11 | White | Male | UM | Aerospace Engineering |
| Gustav | 21 | 6 | Asian & Mexican | Male | LM | Electrical Engineering |
| Jeffery | 21 | Before Memories | Asian American | Male | M | Integrated Physiology |
| Justin | 21 | 17 | White | Male | M | Sociology |
| Katarina | 18 | 8 | Hispanic | Female | LM | Communications and Education |
| Kenzi | 21 | 1 | White | Female | UP | Communications |
| Melissa | 22 | 6 | Hispanic | Female | M | Psychology, Spanish, Political Science |
| Mohammad | 21 | 7 | Middle Eastern & Hispanic | Male | UM | Business Finance |
| Morgan | 21 | 3 | White | Agender | WC | Sociology and Psychology |
| Paige | 22 | 13-14 | White | Female | UM | Sociology |
| Robert | 20 | 18 | White | Male | UM | Environmental Studies |
| Sarah | 21 | 3 | White | Female | WC | International Affairs |
| Sergio | 21 | 17 | White | Male | UM | International Affairs |
| Tori | 18 | 10 | White | Female | UM | Open Option |
| Travis | 21 | 1 | White | Male | P | Electrical and Computer Engineering |

Data Collection

I recruited participants using a variety of techniques. I initially used snowball samples starting with people I indirectly knew. Once this method seemed to not be identifying enough participants, I chose to recruit in classrooms as well as online through a Facebook post on my wall or on a group page. In both of the forums I explained my research and gave my information for any volunteers to contact me. Anyone who responded to either of these recruitment methods approached me first and wanted to participate in my research. The only requirements that I listed for participants were that they be current CU students, between the ages of 18-23, and had divorced parents. In an attempt to broaden the spectrum of the type of student that would respond

to my Facebook post (both age and major), I joined Facebook pages of groups with different ages and majors than mine (primarily business and engineering groups). This was done in order to try not to end up with all 22-year-old liberal arts majors.

All of the data collected and used in this study came from the 24 interviews that I personally conducted from September-December 2016. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours. I let participants choose the location for the interview in attempt to make them as comfortable as possible. Most people chose an outside location on campus or a coffee shop, both of which provided an element of privacy. Each participant signed a consent form before starting the interview and was told they could terminate the interview at any point if they wished. No participant chose to do this. I recorded all of the interviews onto my phone, which the participants were notified of, and agreed to beforehand. I also took notes by hand during the interview. I would note body language or hesitation that would not be picked up in the recording. I also noted contradictions or things I found especially telling, unique, or that they repeated multiple times. I asked the students in-depth questions about their experience with their parents' divorce. I used a semi structured interview schedule that allowed the participants to speak about what they felt was most important. While there were specific questions I wanted answered, the choices participants made to bring up some things over others were extremely telling. This was an important choice I wanted to see each person make individually. If the participants did not have much to say on certain topics, the interview schedule allowed me to probe into other important areas of their life. The main areas I was interested in were the way they described and thought of themselves and their parents, the way they described the divorce, and the emotion work they had to do within the context of the divorce. I asked questions like: "Tell me the story of your divorce." "How do you feel the divorce has impacted who you are?" "How would you

describe yourself?” “How would you describe your parents?” “What was your relationship with your parents at the time of the divorce?” “How have those relationships changed over time?” As I began the interviews, a huge theme surfaced regarding the way people were describing their parents, especially their mothers. I delved into that for the rest of the interviews as well. An important thing to note is that instances of abuse were reported in the interviews. I did not ask any participant if they experienced abuse. The participants willingly and without prompting volunteered any information I received on that subject. This may have affected the reporting rate due to the fact I did not ask anyone a question about it. There were perhaps people who experienced abuse that I do not know of because they did not volunteer that information. For this reason, I did not draw on any patterns of abuse found in my data.

Data Analysis

I chose to use analytic induction techniques in my data analysis (Lofland 1995). While I had a set area of interest, it was my intention to let the participants communicate with me, through their use of storytelling, what the important aspects of their divorce were. This allowed me to pay attention, within the interviews to how, why, and what the participants were describing about divorce. Through the interviews I was able to see the stories that the participants were constructing around their experiences with divorce. I paid close attention to the adjectives participants used to describe the divorce, themselves, and their parents. The voluntary language the participants used to describe divorce was also very important. I emphasize ‘voluntary’ because I purposefully framed my questions to be neutral in order for their description to be what set the tone surrounding divorce. I also noted contradictions as they played a key role in how clearly and extensively the participant had crafted their story. After seeing the various story telling techniques, I searched for patterns of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and age within

those stories. I conducted all analysis and coding of the data myself. I did not use qualitative software.

In analysis of the results I found specific patterns and ways that the participants navigated the space of having divorced families. In this paper I will examine those navigations in detail.

First, I will examine the four main ways that the participants negatively linked families of divorce to being “bad families.” I will show that these ties to negativity allowed them to view their own family as a bad family. I will then establish how through the use of impossible parental expectations and mother blame, the participants established their mothers as bad moms.

After I discuss the ways that a majority of the participants established their families as “bad families,” I will examine the three participants who did not fit this pattern. I will argue that each exception had a unique set of circumstances surrounding their identity or their divorce that enabled them to escape the predominant narrative of families of divorce.

Finally, I will discuss how the participants’ narratives around divorce suggest that there are institutional “right” and “wrong” ways to divorce in our society. I will argue that these expectations of doing divorce right largely impact children of divorce. I will note that the biggest impact of divorce on children who experience it, is the stigma they feel that surrounds it.

Additionally I will touch on the issue of gender disparity within divorce and the ways in which divorce disproportionately affects the women and children in divorced families.

RESULTS

Section 1: Bad Family

Throughout my study, participants overwhelmingly spoke about divorce in a negative light. Yet it was not the divorce itself that they framed as bad, but rather their families. Unexpectedly, many of the participants recognized the positive aspects of the divorce itself. Many described how they ultimately knew that the divorce was better for their family than their parents staying together would have been. The participants were not wrong. Studies bear out their impression that conflict is indeed worse for children than experiencing a divorce (Gyarfas 1971; Coontz 1992; Raschke and Raschke 1979). Although many participants saw the positive aspects of the separation, a majority of their descriptions around the divorce experience continued to be negative. At first this negative framing appeared to be contradictory to their recognition of those positive aspects of divorce. However, I began to realize that the participants' negative talk was reserved for stories about their post-divorce families and not for their discussions of the fact of the divorce itself. While many may anticipate that children who have experienced familial turmoil would speak about the causal event (in this case divorce) in negative terms, that is not what happened in my study. Instead the participants largely recognized the necessity for the divorce but then linked their experience of divorce to becoming a "bad family." It was not that divorce itself was a bad thing; it was the fact that by getting divorced their family became a "bad family." While you may think these children would focus on the impact that divorce had on their lives, they instead spoke about the impact divorce had on the labeling of their family as "marked," and its ability to force upon them a marked identity.

Children want to be treated as "normal," and recognize that divorce fits outside of that category, thus marking them as different (Butler et al. 2003; Smith 1999). Teifer explains that

not only children, but everyone, strives to be normal. She writes: “The current use of normal is code for socially okay, appropriate, customary, and ‘in the ball park . . . how people feel about themselves depends to an enormous degree on the comparisons they make between themselves and others” (Teifer 1995:14-15). Brekhus discusses the concept of abnormality, yet used the term marked. “I use the concept of “social markedness” to refer to the ways social actors actively perceive one side of a contrast while ignoring the other side as epistemologically unproblematic” (Brekhus 1998:34). I chose to use the term “marked” as it best seemed to describe the experiences of divorce being voiced by my participants. Through interviewing all the participants, it became clear that they wanted to be unmarked, yet felt the divorce clearly marked them and their family. Establishing their families as bad families enabled the participants to attempt to make sense of this feeling of being marked. This served as the overall narrative and the story they created for themselves as a way to navigate the transition from an “unmarked” to a “marked” world.

Section 2: Why we’re bad

After examining the data, there became clear ways in which the participants used language that established divorced families as “bad families.” These included: linking lower classes to divorce, talking about the stigma or lack of normality around divorce, using negative language to describe the divorce, and recreating the cycle of stigma by announcing their own rejection of divorce as a legitimate form of family. The participants’ framing of their family as “bad” did not transfer to their views of themselves. Instead, the participants attempted to escape any self-blame in this process by assigning blame to their mothers.

In our society, mothers hold the primary responsibility of family-keeping (Hays 1996). Therefore, it is not surprising that when the participants looked for someone to blame their

family woes on; their mothers were whom they chose. When examining the data it became clear that one manifestation of viewing their families as “bad families,” was consequently viewing their mothers as not only bad, but weak moms. The data offered numerous and surprising examples of the ways in which the participants felt that their mothers had failed to adequately perform mothering, and therefore the participants viewed their mothers as weak. After examining this blaming of the mothers, I will unpack the structures at work which allow fathers to escape this blame.

Most participants took part in the creation of the bad family narrative, but there were exceptions. Three out of the 24 interviewed told stories in which they experienced the divorce and their families as relatively unproblematic. This is similar to the negative cases discussed by Schwalbe et al. in which some cases did not fit the categories they had devised (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Class

A third of the participants linked divorce to class status. The linking of lower class-status to divorce became a primary way the participants expressed their views of divorce. In doing this, the participants drew on broader cultural discourses linking “bad” and “wrong” family values to lower class-status (Coontz 1992). Coontz highlights nuclear families as “the sole repository for standards of decency, duty, and altruism,” thus linking nuclear family’s way of doing family as “right” and establishing them as “good” families. Linking doing family “right” to “good” families consequently positions people who do family differently as “wrong” or as “bad” families (Coontz 1992:107). While data trends tend to show the opposite, most participants expressed their belief that high rates of divorce are overwhelmingly linked to lower classes. When looking at the most recent census from 2010, however, this is incorrect. In 2010 a majority

of divorced men and women were employed, were homeowners, and had an education level of at least some college. Out of all divorced men that year, the majority of them had an income of \$75,000 or more. Out of divorced women, the majority had an income between \$25,000-\$49,000 that year (Marital Events of Americans 2009). (These income numbers also clearly highlight the disproportionate financial impacts for women after experiencing divorce.) Given that socioeconomic status is mainly divided into income, education, and occupation, when you look holistically at the data above it is clear that a majority of the people who get divorced are not in the lower class. This extreme and incorrect idea of the demographic of people who divorce illuminates the “exaggerated reverence for middle-class family ideals with a contemptuous, punitive attitude toward the real-life families of immigrants and the poor” (Coontz 1992:132). Participants created incorrect stereotypes surrounding people who divorce by connecting their ideas that lower-class status is bad and divorce is bad. Therefore the participants eluded that people who get divorced must be in the lower class. Through tying divorce to lower class, the participants framed divorced families as “bad families,” and married families as “good families.”

Participants elucidated this tie between divorce and the lower class in various ways. Morgan¹ spoke about their idea that divorce was seen more in lower class areas by saying, “Mainly it’s because I’ve always been around more working class families and now at CU is like wealthier families, so maybe there’s a different dynamic between class groups, socioeconomic groups.” Melissa depicted a slightly different link to married families as good families by tying in entire communities. “I would say probably not [many people at CU having divorced families] because a lot of people that are going to CU come from good communities. More higher socioeconomic classes.” Here Melissa explicitly links both bad communities and low

¹ Morgan identifies as agender. Therefore when referring to them, pronouns such as they, them, and their will always be used.

socioeconomic statuses to divorce. By including entire communities she established the ability of divorce's dirtiness to extend far beyond one family. Here divorce becomes such a negative event that it tarnishes whole communities, not just families. Additionally, by saying people at CU come from good upper class communities and therefore do not have divorced parents, she is also saying that people who do have divorced parents must come from bad, lower class communities. When I then asked her about how coming from a lower class area impacted her experience at CU she said, "I think I always knew that I came from a different background." Here she takes on the stigmatized role as the other. Othering is a process "Aimed at creating and/or reproducing inequality" (Schwalbe et al. 2000:422). Schwalbe references Michelle Fine when explaining othering as "A dominant group defines into existence an inferior group" (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 422). It "Entails the invention of categories and of ideas about what marks people as belonging to these categories" (Schwalbe et al. 2000:422). As she accepts the fact that she comes from something other than an upper class good area, she also positions herself as the inferior other that she framed as being in "bad communities." She accepts being the "other" which consequently submits her as inferior to people from married families. Positioning herself as a descendant of a bad community enables her to frame her family as a "bad family."

Interestingly, she continued to put to use the stereotype which stigmatized her, to stigmatize others of the same group of the bad community. She chose to represent divorced families as coming from bad communities and lower class backgrounds, even though she was one of those people. By choosing to use that negative description, she is furthering that undesirable label to other people in the same situation as her. Even though she is marked for having divorced parents, she labels her fellow divorce children as having bad families as well. This only perpetuates and legitimizes the marking that children of divorce experience toward

their family makeup. Her actions alone feed the cycle of perceived stigma that then cause children of divorce, like herself, to dub their families as “bad families.”

Mohammad also draws this link between divorce and being “not so good” when he said, “In San Antonio it's pretty high population of people, but we lived at first in a very not so great neighborhood on the south side of San Antonio. That's where a lot of divorces were, but towards middle school and high school I lived in the north side which is the ritzy part, not as much [divorces].”

Mohammad does however add something new by using “ritzy” to talk about the upper class area. While he could have chosen multiple words to describe rich or upper class, he chose one that carries with it a trace of being condescending as ritzy is often used to describe people who are snobbish (Merriam-Webster 2017). By using a word that connotes being snobby, he is simultaneously recognizing their position of power and also condemning them for it by framing them in a negative way. The connotation of snobby carries with it the idea that the person acting as such thinks they are better than others unlike them. So here as Mohammad’s description of married people connotes snobby, he is implying the idea that married people think they are better than divorced people. So while he is recognizing his position in the out-group, he is simultaneously voicing his dissent of that current position. This dissent becomes clear through his choice of a derogatory word to describe the people who hold the position of power. His discontent for being stripped of power due to a marker he had no control of is voiced through his negative description of the people he feels have marked him.

Morgan echoed similar sentiments of discontent with upper class people who they felt judge divorced families. Morgan did this by saying, “I think that, in my mind, higher class families are always going to be more judgmental than working class families and Boulder is a

pretty swanky place.” Morgan’s use of the word “swanky” here directly ties to the connotations seen by Mohammad. The word swanky, while suggesting upper class, also carries with it an idea of self-centeredness. Additionally, it is often used to suggest upper class people are rude in their belief of being better than others. Paige additionally held similar thoughts regarding Boulder as upper class, thus tying it to low divorce rates. She said, “I guess in Boulder you kind of expect a lot of parents to be together just because there’s a whole money thing. I see a lot of people have money so you kind of think more parents are together, I feel like.”

Travis also expanded and complicated these ideas by adding race to the mix. He said, “I think it's more of the opposite [people being married] in Boulder just because the Boulder population students are going to be richer white families and usually for the most part, I would think, the image that I have is that they would have parents that are together.” Like others, Travis viewed divorce as class-linked but he also tied it to race, portraying whiteness as a protection against divorce. This, however, is also incorrect when looking at the census data, which shows that out of all the people who were divorced in 2009, 77.4% of men and 76.1% of women were white (Marital Events of Americans 2009). What is interesting here to note is Travis’ choice to include race. Neither Melissa nor Mohammad made that connection. Although Travis reported as being raised in poverty, he is still a white male who will have a promising occupation in engineering. This places him in a dominant position in our society as being a successful white male. Therefore, he is able to be more critical of the discussion around divorce by tying in race. In contrast, both Melissa and Mohammad are people of color (Melissa is Hispanic and Mohammad is half Hispanic and half Middle Eastern). This may position both of them as slightly hesitant to criticize the system further, as they both sit in disenfranchised positions. Although Travis is disenfranchised in our society due to his socioeconomic background, he likely has more

opportunities than either Melissa or Mohammad due to his race. This slight position of power therefore allows Travis to tie in this link to race, which the other two were unable to do, due to being lower in the power structure. Statistically it may not be accurate that a white male coming from poverty holds societal power. Nonetheless, he does possess male and race privilege in the context of our society. Yet it is his imagined comfort about his successful future that is important, and is what enabled him to be brave enough to critique the system.

Most of the participants who made this link of divorced families to lower classes were not in the lower class themselves. My data did not suggest that the participants were trying to “other” themselves out of the stigma or say they were different from most divorced families because they were not lower class. Instead, what the data showed was that the participants were explaining one of the ways that divorce marks families as bad families. Their explanation of this was that divorce is bad because lower class people get divorced. Therefore, the dirtiness of lower classes taints divorce. The literature supports this connection of lower class families being regarded as bad families. Consequently, because divorce is tainted, and the participants’ families experienced divorce, their family was now tainted and was a “bad family.”

Not Normal

Once the participants had it in their minds that they were marked and society held a stigma against their families, they found it easy to perceive that stigma in everyday interactions with others. It is hard to determine whether the stigma was overtly present as they reported. It may have been that being labeled as an outsider put the participants on high alert to detect stigma toward them, which caused them to find stigma in places it did not actually exist. Horton Cooley’s concept of *The Looking Glass Self* applies here. The looking glass self details how people develop their self-concepts based on how they think that others view them (Sandstrom,

Martin, and Fine 2010). This applies here the participants *perceiving* stigma toward them from outsiders even if it may not have existed. This constant stigma aimed at them from society was seen in a multitude of ways in the data. Through various interactions and conversations with people whose parents were married, the participants experienced clear signals that told them they were *not normal*.

Heather Smith describes this fear of being different, and thus a target of unkindness, in her book *Children, Feelings and Divorce* (1999:20&38). Having divorced parents causes an array of emotional responses. Many feel the fear of being different and its associated consequences. Butler et al. discussed children being teased or rejected by their friends and peers, which thus caused them to feel different and weird (Butler et al. 2003:65). Children also fear they are the only ones with divorced parents or that they will get bullied because of having divorced parents. The other visible impacts of divorce such as one parent being gone, parents attending events separately, or having a harder time with finances than before are also feared by children as they serve as markers of their difference to society (Smith 1999). This fear of different treatment highlights the possible stigma participants feared facing. However, children must first be taught to see that they are different. Many do this by evaluating themselves, their lives and their satisfaction in contrast to what others do rather than by their own internal standard (Teifer 1995:15; Goffman 1963:32). As a result some children attempt to “normalize” their experience (Butler et al. 2003:71). Yet many find this very difficult as the stigma associated with divorce fractures the child’s idea of family, and the ability to view their family as normal or intact (Harvey and Fine 2004).

The participants in my study felt “different” than other people within various settings and aspects of their lives. Sixteen out of the 22 participants described how their families, their

childhoods, their family events, and their views of themselves were all “not normal” or “different” due to their divorce. Jeffery did this when speaking about his childhood and said, “I kind of realized that I like missed out on a lot of things just cause um you know I never had like a typical childhood.” Katarina discussed the ways her possible future marriages would be different from “normal” people by saying, “It’s going to take a lot, when I do find someone that I decide, it’s going to take a lot more than I feel like it does for normal people getting married.” Robert felt this idea of being different in many aspects of his life. While talking about the different roles children of divorce hold in their families he said, “All those sorts of responsibilities that are normally dealt with like as a family, are just kind of put onto [the kids] instead.” In regards to the unique struggles of divorced families he noted, “[There are] those like struggles and those um different challenges you need to overcome through [experiencing] divorce.” And in context of the specific uncomfortable situations only families of divorce encounter he said, “That [the new organization of his family] made me pretty uncomfortable initially just because it’s weird to see like your entire family that you know once was a family and now is something different.” With this last quote Robert actually asserts that due to divorce his family is not just a bad family, they simply do not even meet the qualifications of a family anymore.

Bradley described the abnormality of his family being divorced by detailing the idealistic families to which his was constantly compared. He explained, “Growing up in Boulder, its pretty uncommon, everyone’s like the picture perfect family in Boulder.” He built on that by describing the views of divorce saying, “It’s kind of taboo, I feel like a lot of parents in Boulder have this pseudo image they have to look up to, the perfect American Family, kind of thing.” Through these statements Bradley describes the impossible expectations of all families in the area he grew

up in. He then expands on that by noting how his family's divorce immediately established them as taboo. This disqualified them from accomplishing the ideal of family held by people in the area, consequently framing his family as a bad family for their failure to accomplish this.

The participants perceived stigma from others as a result of being "different." The feeling of stigma from outsiders was reported generally by discussing overt instances of feeling stigma or judgment. There were also two subtle ways that the participants felt the stigma of divorce. The participants felt pity from others. This pity from outsiders came in two forms by either expressing how sad it was that their parents divorced, or expressing the assumption that the participants would struggle in life as a result of the divorce. Participants additionally noted stigma through their explanations of how people who had not experienced divorce did not "get it." This then laid out vast emotion work to be done by the participants to attempt to explain and validate their type of family to others.

Stigma

The general stigma that the participants perceived was not hard to see and flooded most aspects of the data. The stigma was evident in what participants reported that others said to them. The participants themselves also held the stigma. The way the participants spoke about their divorce in demeaning ways implied that they too had adopted the stigma toward divorce.

The ways in which people identified the stigma held against them by society varied. Brandon explicitly identified it when he said, "I also think that there is definitely a negative stigma attached to it [divorce] regardless of the situation." Charlie similarly recognized the stigma by saying, "I know there's been some judgment from the outside." Paige also recognized stigma toward her mother for the divorce saying, "I know my mom was concerned about it [the divorce] with her family because she would be the only one in the family to go through a

divorce, and especially twice.” By noting how worried her mother was about getting divorced, and “especially twice” it becomes very clear that even people who have been divorced, such as Paige’s mother, also view divorce as a bad thing. Although her mother had been divorced once, this had clearly not established divorce as acceptable in her mind because she held even greater fear for experiencing it a second time. This lends itself to the idea that divorce is bad enough once, not to mention twice.

While Brandon, Charlie and Paige spoke about it more overtly, Morgan brought it up when I asked them if they were comfortable telling people at CU that their parents were divorced to which they replied, “Yeah, I mean why not?... I don’t really care that much about what other people think about me.” Their response here proved this perceived stigma. The only way Morgan could justify telling people about their experience was by preemptively establishing that they did not care what they thought. By doing this they both implicitly recognized that people would judge them for having divorced parents, and then, possibly subconsciously, dealt with that anticipated stigma by establishing from the beginning that they would not care what others thought. By doing this they both recognize the stigma and participate in emotion work on themselves. I argue they do this in order to curb their expectations to not be let down by people’s reactions when they pass judgment toward their divorced family.

While this could simply be a result of perceptions, Morgan followed this statement up with an example of the judgmental encounters they had faced before in order to put their emotion work into context. When they were speaking about situations that exposed this outside stigma they said, “Parent-teacher conferences were weird cause one of my parents would go or- it wouldn’t be like they both went. That happened... in elementary school and it was awkward.” Here they contextualize their earlier statement about “What other people would think about

them” by noting a specific instance when they felt judged by their teacher for only having one parent present at a parent teacher conference. By describing the situation as awkward, they are speculating about how they thought the teacher felt and consequently establishing the perceived stigma.

Tori probably voiced the intense stigma felt against her, as well as other children of divorce, through her description of being “that kid.” When I asked her how she felt when she found out her parents were getting divorced she explained it this way, “I was like, ‘I’m not telling people, I don’t want to be that kid’” After which she followed with, “I don’t want to be a divorced kid. You know what I mean? I think there were two or three people in my grade at that time that had divorced parents. They were the ones who had divorced parents since we knew each other. You know what I mean? ... ‘Oh, you know about them,’ I don’t want anyone to know this. I didn’t want to tell anyone. I was kind of ashamed. I didn’t want to be one of those kids.” These statements were some of the most overt statements of shame I encountered in the study. With her description here Tori did a multitude of things. Initially she expressed the clear out-grouping or “othering” that children of divorce experience as she recalls her feelings toward children of divorce before she became one. The fact that she had previously grouped divorced kids into a stigmatized group of “those kids,” armed her with the preexisting knowledge of how “those kids” are treated. From there when she said she did not want anyone to know and was kind of ashamed, she adopted the immense feeling of shame. This is seen in Butler et al.’s research also, where shame is accompanied in children knowing they would get placed into a stigmatized group (Butler et al. 2003). This elucidates that the perception of stigma toward families of divorce is not only felt from the adult portion of society, but its also sensed from their childhood peers who learn these in and out groups and follow suit by stigmatizing accordingly.

Pity-Sadness

Unfortunately the perceived stigma did not stop at others simply judging kids whose parents were divorced. Instead, the stigma progressed into feelings of pity being projected onto the participants. Many people I spoke to relayed how it was not just that people judged their family, but they took it a step further to condescendingly pity them. One way participants described the pity was through feelings of sadness surrounding their "alternative" family makeup.

Tori, Kenzi, and Justin all relayed instances of condescending sadness being projected at them for having to deal with such "turmoil." Citing descriptions such as "It was almost like a sympathy card like 'Oh my god, I'm so sorry,'" or "I feel like people felt bad for me as a kid." This was noted by Justin as well when he said, "I think that their judgment comes in the form of pity... even saying like oh, how sad..." Through all of these statements the participants recognized their position as "different" or "marked." This was then painted as a disadvantaged position through others treatment toward them as such. These participants recognized that pity is not a reaction that married families receive from others. It instead is a marker of their differentness since "normal" families do not get treated that way. Additionally, pity around divorce connotes the idea that it is something bad and that people feel sorry for you if you have to endure it. It is further demeaning through its suggestion of superiority. The person who pities another considers themselves better off than the people receiving their pity. As participants were continuously confronted with how "sad" their family makeup was, their categorization of their family as "not normal," and therefore a "bad family" was both progressed and solidified.

Pity- You'll fail

Yet, it was not only was it the fact that people were feeling sorry for them. This notion of their family not being “normal” was solidified further as the participants described multiple events where it seemed as though society pitied them by expecting them to fail due to being children of divorce. Mohammad clearly established that he thought others expected him to fail due to the divorce. Mohammad detailed the ways in which others react to finding out his parents are divorced after witnessing his academic success by saying, “‘Oh wow I didn’t know that,’ which now looking back kind of implied that they would think I would be a failure.” Here he speaks not only about people being surprised that he has done well in university, but also about his suspicions of the origins of those expectations. His explanation of people’s surprise at his success would be enough to knock most adults off their path simply due to the fact that people do not believe in them enough to expect they will do well. But additionally, he suspects this lack of belief in his ability to succeed stems from people’s judgments about what kinds of people children of divorce are. Expecting to fail would be crippling for anyone and may link in their mind to them being a bad person. So for Mohammad, that expectation of failure and being bad was easily linked to his family. This enabled him to solidify his family as a “bad family” and one that is surely “not normal.”

Melissa reiterated similar perceptions of societal expectations of her success, yet took them and promised to prove them wrong. “It [the divorce] does have a factor in my success I think. Yeah. It’s not so much to prove myself but I think it’s just to kind of prove to myself that I didn’t have to suffer or anything like that.” Here Melissa recognizes the exact same expectations of failure of her by society that Mohammad clearly elucidated. Yet Melissa has taken these negative expectations of herself one step further by adopting them. As she says she wants to

prove to herself that she did not suffer, she recognizes the negative expectations and legitimizes them. Even if she says these expectations are wrong, she acknowledges them, which aids in her perception of stigma from society against her family, and thus her diagnosis of her family as a “bad” and “abnormal” family. As she vows to be successful to prove those expectations wrong, she is legitimizing their existence and altering her actions in order to refute them. And although the members of marked groups are the ones that that suffer and are stigmatized due to societal norms, they are also the ones that have to go through the emotional work of disproving them. This however may not help their cause as much as they had hoped. This is because in order to try to disprove them, one must firstly acknowledge they exist, which legitimates and perpetuates them. This is a vicious cycle people who are marked must endure if they have any hope of changing the status quo.

Others don't get it

Some of the most telling data around stigma was the participants expressing that other people “just don’t get it.” Mohammad touched on this point when speaking about situations where both his parents are present by saying, “Its really weird for other people.” Audrey also noted how other kids constantly questioned her about the divorce, showing their lack of understanding. She explained, “I would just get questioned by a lot of other kids my age... ‘Why aren’t your parents together?’” Butler et al. pinpoints these difficulties in their study as well when they talked about how “One of the difficulties [for their participants] of telling others was having to deal with questions...” (Butler et al. 2003:70). Participants repeatedly reported not telling others about their divorced families because it was just easier that way, or as some described it, “for practical reasons.” Much of the literature talks about this “secret keeping” aspect of divorce as well. Butler et al. specifically reviews a large amount of secret keeping seen

in their study (2003). Yet as I had not encountered this feeling in my own experience of having divorced parents, I could not bring myself to understand why participants kept saying everyone just did not understand divorce. Especially when looking at the statistical normalcy of divorce in the U.S. today, I found it hard to believe that that many people did not understand divorce. As I dug through the data however, it became clear to me: children of divorce are already doing so much extra emotional work within their family, that any more emotion work of explaining their situation to outsiders seems gruesome and unwanted. Due to this, they utilize the fact that people do not understand divorce in order to preemptively remove the necessity to tell anyone.

When I asked Audrey how she told her friends that her parents were divorced, her answer described the ways in which she avoided that extra emotional labor. She explained to me how for a long time she never told her friends and when they came over to her house “They assumed he [her step-dad] was my dad. I didn’t necessarily correct them because then you have to go through, ‘This is my stepdad, not my real dad.’ . . . People think I have a normal family so I’ll just leave it at that.” Here Audrey framed the explaining of her family makeup as very laborious and unnecessary. She also identified the fact that it would be viewed as abnormal if she chose to explain it, since her family currently passed as “normal,” which she did not want to disrupt. By choosing to hide her parents’ divorce status Audrey was participating in what Goffman calls “covering.” This is where “The stigmatized employ an adaptive technique” (Goffman 1963:102). Not only did she anticipate the stigma that would be held against her family for being divorced, she also believed that that possible stigma would label them as abnormal. By not wanting to tell her friends about her “abnormal family” she was preserving her family’s identity as “normal.” Additionally, she was avoiding all the additional emotion work of explaining the differences that seem “abnormal” to those who “just don’t get it.” With her choice to preserve her family

identity, Audrey was attempting to cover and maintain her presentation of family. Coontz discusses the importance family holds and how they reflect our morals of standard decency (Coontz 1992:97). In her choice Audrey was preserving her family's decency by protecting them from the marked identity for the moment.

Sarah exercised very similar “covering” and “false presentations” of family to those used by Audrey. Sarah's embarrassment of her family as divorced was much more explicit than Audrey's, to the extent where she refuses to tell most people about her parents. When I was asking her why she did not tell people she said, “Just because I don't want to complicate things. I don't want to tell people. Not because it's personal... But also just for practical reasons. Its really confusing to people that don't have divorced families, and don't have step-siblings and half-siblings... So the main reason really is practical.” Through this description Sarah highlights this knowledge and lingo that people who do not have divorced families fail to possess. Whether or not this language is truly not known or understood by others was not relevant here. What mattered was the immense extra labor Sarah felt like she needed to participate in for others to understand her “different” family and life. This highlights just how different she views herself from “most” people. While greater knowledge is usually viewed as a good thing in society, here Sarah is ashamed of her specialty knowledge and chooses to hide it due to its stigma. Schwalbe refers to this specialty knowledge as “identity codes,” which are rules of performances, such as words or dress, which a stigmatized group shares (Schwalbe et al. 2000:424). With her choice to not educate them on the definitions of half and step siblings, she avoids even more emotion work on her part for having to explain the lingo used by children of divorce. She is also able to avoid another communication that would further mark her as different. Additionally, she avoids the extra work that the people she was speaking to would have to put in to gain an understanding of

that vocabulary. With this she establishes herself as less important than the non-divorced people around her. Her choice frames the others as superior due to her saving them from any extra work of having to understand her family. With them being framed as superior, it becomes Sarah's job to protect them from this tainted lifestyle she lives or even any knowledge of it. Goffman notes this phenomenon when he says, "The line inspired by normal, then, obliges the stigmatized individual to protect normal in various ways" (Goffman 1963:119). Establishing them as superior also automatically places Sarah beneath them and again seats her in a position of having a bad family that is "not normal."

Kenzi also talked about this idea of it being the job of children of divorce to protect the outside society from their tainted family. When I asked her to describe herself one thing she noted was that, "Feeling like it was our [her and her siblings] duty to make things not awkward... That's a thing that I find myself doing is when its clearly an awkward situation I do everything in my power to try to make it normal and comfortable for people... I think that is because we were always in such awkward situations [growing up]." Goffman speaks about this exact situation by noting, "When the stigmatized person finds that normal have difficulty in ignoring his failing, he should try to help them and the social situation by conscious efforts to reduce tension. In these circumstances the stigmatized individual may, for example, attempt to 'break the ice'" (Goffman 1963:116). Here Kenzi labels the daily situations of her divorced family as awkward. Noting it as awkward both separates it from the norm and consequently establishes a stigma around it. This stigma is established through outsider's views of her daily family interactions as awkward, which she then accepts and adopts. Their view of those interactions as awkward, rather than constructive, establishes a negative perception around them. While most children of divorce probably recognize daily occurrences like those as normal, the

discomfort that it brings to non-marked people takes precedence due to their dominant/unmarked position and brings with it a negative perception of awkwardness. It also is accompanied by the expectation that the marked person repair the tainted situation their family caused. But besides Kenzi viewing her family as “abnormal” and a “bad family,” she also takes on this immense labor load as voiced before by Sarah. The fact that she always tries to do everything in her power to make situations appear normal and comfortable is quite telling as it shows that she has accepted society’s expectation of her to perform that labor.

The times Kenzi described having to do such mediation work were very interesting. She described mainly having to do this when she would have to answer for her father’s frowned upon actions as a father. These difficulties children face when attempting to deal with various “bad behavior” by their parents is discussed by Gubrium and Holstein (2006:170). These included dating a significantly younger woman after the divorce and bringing the woman to family events with both sides of the family. These were both events that Kenzi felt were inappropriate for a father to engage in which therefore created awkward situations. This called for her to use her role as mediator in order to try to resolve the tension felt by the family and community members in regards to her father’s actions. These actions were linked to divorce through the idea that if her parents were married, there would not be these awkward situations of her father’s girlfriend for her to deal with. Because being a child of divorce had instilled her with the “duty” of protecting the outside world from her “tainted” familial interactions. Actions by her father such of these were simply more occasions where Kenzi’s role as protector had to be put to use.

Feeling the duty to protect others from her tainted family issues highlighted the opinions Kenzi had adopted as well as much of the work she felt was a necessity to do. First, it shows an inherent desire within her for things to be normal and her not to have to deal with the

awkwardness of a divorced family. Her having this desire shows the extent to which stigma against divorced families is perceived by the children of those families; so much so that they try to make all of their situations like other, “normal,” families. Also, by Kenzi taking this labor upon herself, she establishes that it is her job to protect others from the awkwardness that her family creates. With this she is taking the responsibility for her family dynamic, which a child should not need to do. Further than that she is apologizing to society for it by trying to make her awkward situations less tension educing. As she takes on this job of protecting others (the ones that stigmatize her family and define them as abnormal) she places her needs below theirs and positions herself in subservience to them. While it may have initially been her goal to avoid the extra labor associated with dealing with the awkwardness, her responsibility taking for it has created even more labor for her as she navigates the stigmatized space and attempts to mend any areas that her tainted family has fractured. Here she sends a clear message to the married population that it is the job of the divorced family to repent for their sins, and not the job of married families to broaden their horizons in terms of acceptable family make up. This message serves only to perpetuate the stigma and remove any responsibility that married families may have had. It again places the workload on divorced families while simultaneously stigmatizing them for doing it.

Weird, Messy, Dirty, Nasty

Participants routinely described divorce as “weird,” “messy,” “dirty,” and “nasty.” Before I even began going through the data, this specific word choice that people used when talking about the divorce was extremely evident. Seventeen out of 22 participants used words like these. Their use of those words was so repetitive, that in many cases I began tracking how many times participants used words such as weird, dirty, and nasty. I had expected the use of the word

because my personal experiences could certainly be described by the word “weird” quite often. However, the harsh and negative words caught me off guard. The reason these descriptions were so telling was due to the fact that I did not ask participants about these words. Instead, these were the ways people off-handedly described the idea of divorce or their parents’ divorce.

The participants described a majority of post divorce situations that included both parents as awkward or uncomfortable. Tori described how “Anything where they both have to be there or are there, its definitely awkward.” Robert corroborated this when explaining his brother’s graduation. “This was like the first time that my whole family was really together again since the divorce happened so...that made me pretty uncomfortable.” Anita echoed these feelings by saying, “It was just uncomfortable for a little while there...I don’t know. It was just very uncomfortable.”

Many participants also used the word “weird” not only to describe the divorce, but also to describe their families. Brandon did this as he spoke about his parents’ post divorce interactions and said, “My dad would still come to the house, but it was just a horrible vibe, really weird atmosphere.” Adam experienced similar shifts post divorce. While speaking about his mother’s new demeanor he explained, “It makes sense but its just kind of weird for me I guess.”

Jeffery was one of the many participants who repeatedly put to use the word “weird” when describing anything about his parents’ divorce. The word “weird” signaled his perception that he experienced the divorce as unsettling and outside of the “norm.” Throughout my interview with Jeffery he used the word “weird” 26 times. Yet it was not just that he used the word so often, but how he used it. For example, at one point when talking generally about the divorce he said, “There’s sometimes when you know the social norms do, for some reason, make it feel weird all the sudden.” With this he clearly establishes that his family does not fit into the

social norms due to their marital status. He established their inability to fit the social norms through comparison to other families with married parents with whom he had interacted with. “That’s just when it becomes weird...I have seen what its like for other families with parents who are together, and I’m like oh this is weird for us.” Jeffery’s comments underscore the importance of these moments of social comparison to non-marked families in making him feel like his own divorced family is weird. These moments of comparison were the specific times he felt his family was weird, which in turn made him evaluate his family differently. The times where he saw other families interact in different ways than his own established a marked difference that he then saw as wrong. He then redirected that judgment of it being wrong back at his own family, which caused him to feel weird about both his family and himself.

While it was the volume and context of the use of specific words by Jeffery that was telling, for others, it was the specific words they were using. Various participants used words such as “nasty,” “dirty,” and “messy” to described their parents’ divorces. Almost every time I asked Charlie a specific question about the divorce she would bring up that it was nasty saying, “It was a really nasty divorce” “Just nasty, you know?” “They had such a nasty divorce and there was not really a reason to have a nasty divorce.” While it was clear Charlie was attempting to describe the difficulties of her parents’ divorce, she could have described them as difficult or using various other neutral descriptors. Yet the fact that she chose to use such an intensely negative word reflects her own emotions and views that she holds toward the divorce. This is especially true since she was the one describing the divorce as nasty rather than saying other people described it that way. Kenzi similarly put to use negative descriptions of the divorce. She did so through her use of the word “messy”, which she used multiple times. When speaking about the divorce she noted how, “There’s just messy situations with all of that” and “People

know my family as being one of the gnarliest divorces they've ever seen." Here, similarly to Charlie, Kenzi's word choice is very telling. By highlighting the way outsiders viewed her parents' divorce as the "gnarliest they've ever seen," Kenzi established that her community caused her to perceive that there was a right and wrong way to get divorced, and her family did it the wrong way. Through the community's comparison of her parents' divorce as the worst compared to others, this makes it clear that within divorces there is a hierarchy and her family's divorce was at the bottom. This establishes her family as extraordinarily marked because they not only got divorced, but they did not even get divorced *right*. The idea that the community is the force of judgment around how to do divorce disempowers divorced families even further because it is the outsiders, who are not divorced, who get to decide who does divorce right, thus granting them more power. Additionally, Kenzi brings in the views of others in her community to corroborate her view of her parents' divorce in negative terms. While this may help support her claims about how difficult the divorce was, it works against her as she validates and internalizes the outside stigma of which she bears the brunt.

Yet it was Sarah who probably had the most intense description of her parents' divorce. Throughout the interview Sarah made it abundantly clear that she felt the divorce reflected negatively on her through her descriptions of it as "embarrassing." Her feelings became most clear in this comment after I asked her if the divorce was a source of embarrassment for her, "Oh yeah, definitely, embarrassment...It just almost seems like dirty to me...Definitely embarrassment." While many participants in the study hinted at feeling like the divorce reflected negatively on them, or wanting to avoid that, Sarah dug right in. Through her framing of the divorce as embarrassing, not only does she edify its direct reflection on her, but also the immense negativity associated with such an action in our society. For someone to find an experience

“definitely embarrassing” it is normally something society would view as abnormal, bad, or even tainted. Sarah touches on that sense of the divorce as being tainted with her description of it as “dirty.” The choice of the word dirty causes the divorce to be directly compared to the idea of cleanliness. Mary Douglas discusses the idea of dirt as “Matter out of place.” Dirt is the by-product of a systematic categorization of matter, in so far as ordering involves discarding unfit components (Douglas 2003). When viewed this way, the fact that divorce is seen as dirty suggests that it is an inappropriate element that is being rejected. The classification of marital status in our society has arranged being married above being divorced. Therefore, divorce’s subordinate position defines it as dirty and results in rejection.

Embarrassment was also noted by Adam when he said, “Even when I say it now, I’m kind of like, ‘they’re divorced’ [said under his breath]. It’s a little embarrassing in a way.” Shame was also frequently associated with having divorced parents. Bradley brought this up in his answer of whether divorce is common in Boulder. “People just for some reason feel shame.” Shame or embarrassment are extreme feelings felt primarily when you do something wrong. Adam and Bradley’s use of these words highlights their view of divorce as something “wrong” that they participated in, which then caused them to be marked. A clear connection can be drawn between a family doing something “wrong” and that leading them to be a “bad family.” This idea that doing divorce was doing something wrong was the way both Adam and Bradley constructed the idea of their families as bad families.

Divorce is not ok for me

Once the participants had fully framed and reinforced the idea of divorce as bad and constituting bad families, there was only one step left. The participants’ last step in their complete disavowal of divorce was to say divorce was not ok for other people, and definitely not

ok for them. Hackstaff examined why it is that children of divorce voice such disdain for it. She theorized that “It may be that the childhood injury has fortified her resistance to divorce; she has felt the damage of divorce and refuses to inflict this on her children” (Hackstaff 1999:84). Goffman expounded on that by describing the ways stigmatized individuals respond to the stigma. He found that “In some cases it will be possible for him to make a direct attempt to correct what he sees as the objective basis of his failing” (Goffman 1963:9). For my participants who felt they had been marked due to their parents’ divorce, expressing their severe disdain for divorce in their lives was the way they attempted to correct their failing. Audrey did this through descriptions of her worries. “What if I had children and I got a divorce? Then it would be a repeat of what I went through and that’s something that I want to completely avoid.” Travis utilized his stubbornness in hope to avoid divorce in his life. “I’m not worried about divorce because I’m stubborn enough that I would try to make it work.” Anita called upon intense planning to avoid divorce in her life. “I definitely don’t want to get divorced. I will make sure that the person that I marry will be...I’ll be extra sure that we’re going to be together and not get a divorce.”

Melissa and Kenzi also provided good examples of participants distancing themselves from experiencing any further stigma. After being asked how she felt about divorce, Melissa responded, “I guess [it would be] embarrassing for me if I got a divorce because its like, oh you had an example of what looks like a bad marriage, and you still did that. I just think that it wouldn’t be a good thing.” Kenzi had similar thoughts as she said, “Its something I really don’t want in my life. I really hope I never have to cross that kind of bridge.” Here both women express how intent they are on never getting divorced. Melissa described how it would be embarrassing for her since she had an example of what not to do was quite telling. This

establishes how even after experiencing a divorce and being judged for it, she would judge herself and feel judgment from the outside if she ended up getting divorced.

Since these children of divorce perceived that they had been marked, they gleaned any chance they had at empowerment and the opportunity to wash the stigma from them. I argue that the participants distancing themselves from the stigma was in hope of removing, or at least minimizing, their “marked” status. The final and most defining way many of the participants sought to distance themselves from the stigma was by attempting to jump on the bandwagon, and proclaim that they were now a nay-sayer of divorce as well. The system had robbed them of most of their agency and power by admonishing them with a label they had no control over. I argue that their only chance to navigate the space in which divorce is stigmatized was to embrace and perpetuate the ideology that had originally stigmatized them.

Section 3: If I’m Bad, so is Mom

As these children continued to be labeled due to decisions made by their parents, it did not take long for them to transition to a form of thinking that said that labeling was not fair. As established earlier, it is natural in children whose parents get divorced to have some kind of feelings of resentment toward the situation. After speaking to my participants, it appeared this discontent was not only directed toward the situation itself, but especially at their mothers. During the interviews, over half of the participants described their mothers in negative ways ranging from being a bad mom, all the way to a generally bad person. When looking at the institution of divorce and the stigma it places on the children, it makes sense that the children described their parents negatively. However, in my study this was only seen toward mothers. In a society that they feel has marked their family as not normal and a bad family, their only hope at not appearing as the only stigmatized person was to bring the family down with them. Here the

children learn that at least if they establish various members of their family as “bad” as well, they will at least not be alone.

Due to the extreme and impossible set of expectations for mothers in our society, mothers were an easy target for this stigma sharing. Today western cultures idealize mothers and expect mothers to parent in a way Hays defines as “intensive mothering.” In her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays speaks about three main aspects of intensive mothering: the mother needs to be the central caregiver for the child, the mother needs to “Lavish copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child” (1996:8), and mothers must participate in appropriate child rearing (1996:8). Hays define appropriate child rearing as “Child centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive” (1996:8). This ideal type of mothering has been infused in our society and consequently sets very firm rules for the ways in which mothers can be mothers. This is because “Intensive mothering ideology remains...the normative standard, culturally and politically, by which mothering practices and arrangements are evaluated” (Arendell 2000:1195). This results in the ability of children, or others, to very easily claim that mothers are not mothering “right” and are breaking the rules of mothering. Accomplishing these set of ideals of intensive mothering establishes mothers as the “good mother” (Ribbens 1994 and Thurer 1993). Due to unhappiness of their new marked identity, children in my study identified their mothers’ deviance from these rules as mothering “incorrectly.” Arendell speaks about situations where mothers mother the wrong way in terms of deviancy discourse. “The discourses are targeted...at mothers who do not conform to the script of full-time motherhood in the context of marriage” (Arendell 2000:1195).

I saw this idea of mothering incorrectly manifest in the data in various ways. One of the most common criticisms I saw the participants voice was that their moms did not do what good moms should. They did this by establishing various aspects of what constituted good moms, and then contrasted that with their moms failing to do those things. This is how the participants established their mothers as bad moms. The expectation for parents, especially mothers in our society, is simple: be perfect. Hays' concept of intensive mothering establishes that mothers are supposed to be perfect for their children. Mothers must provide anything children need from love, to attention, to protection. They must be strong and nurturing yet not too emotional or crazy. Mothers in our society are held to an expectation that includes an impossible amount of emotion work to guarantee that their children become "perfect snowflakes" (Hays 1996). As children interact with friends, teachers, or peers, they are constantly shown, either implicitly or explicitly, the expectations for mothers. Part of those expectations that exist in our society where marriage is still the norm, is that their mother will remain happily married to their father.

As the divorce is put in motion, mothers have already failed one of the tasks they were presented with: staying married. This failure however is not just that of a parent, but as an adult. Vaughan highlights how divorce signifies the partners "Failed a major test of adulthood: the ability to succeed in a relationship" (Vaughan 1986:160). Failing on both counts of being an adult and being married, enables the framing of mothers as "bad moms" to begin. Smith found data that mirrored this. In Smith's study she noted how negative feelings of the child "Can be displaced on to Mum who, in your eyes, should have behaved differently or done something to keep Dad at home" (Smith 1999:41). The data in my interviews displayed this displacement of feelings as well. The mothers in my data had already begun to fail by getting divorced. From there the participants found it easy to point out the others ways that their mother had failed to

accomplish the idealistic view of mothering, and therefore failed them too. While there were countless examples in the data, the biggest failures of the mothers presented in my interviews were: moms being too emotional, moms not providing financially when they were the sole provider, moms not protecting their kids from harm, moms being unable to help their kids due to a lack of knowledge, and moms being weak which led to them being taken advantage of.

While mothers are expected to be emotional in order to be nurturing and have incomparable bonds with their children, the expectation has a clear caveat that they cannot become too emotional. This expectation of mothers not being too emotional was expressed in a variety of ways in my data. After I asked Sarah to describe her mother she said, “She isn’t rational, at all. I sort of don’t trust her opinion.” Here Sarah described her mother being overly emotional by saying she is so emotional that she is unable to be rational. Parents are always expected to be rational and act as a clear voice of reason. Sarah feeling that her mother was unable to perform those duties established her as not fitting the form of a “good mom.” Sarah additionally framed her mother as a “bad mom” through her lack of trust in her mother’s opinions due to her mother’s irrationality. So not only did her mother fail because she could not meet the expectation of being rational, but that compounded so much that Sarah did not trust her mother’s opinions. While children may not always agree with their parents’ opinions, it is an expectation that parents are normally correct whether children like to hear that or not. Yet Sarah’s mother had failed to meet society’s, as well as Sarah’s, expectations of a good mother so much that her mother’s opinions and advice were demoted to not useful and valid.

Numerous participants held these same, over-emotional, ideas of their mothers. Adam elucidated this when he said, “She’s just a bit crazier. She’s more neurotic and needy.” His mother being needy immediately resulted in Adam’s inability to view his mother as a parent due

to her supposed reversal of the caregiver position. Audrey echoed similarly saying, “My mom is more of an emotional person.” Kenzi spoke to this as well when she said, “...Plus as a woman, she cries a lot.” Brandon noted, “[My] Mom needed the emotional support more than Dad did.”

One of the primary expectations of parents is to provide in general and financially for their children. Good parents are supposed to enable their children to succeed through any means (Garey 1999). And “Good parents are those who have happy, healthy, safe, and successful children” (Warner 2006:65). In the cases in my study where participants’ mothers were their primary caretakers or their fathers were out of the picture, the mothers failing to provide for their children painted them in the realm of immediate failure and unsuited to be a parent. Audrey definitely experienced that with her mother. She explained the difficulties that her mother’s financial troubles produced at times when saying, “Especially moving around with my mom, we definitely had to scrape a few times.” Here Audrey resented her mother’s financial issues as they affected her quality of life. By saying they had to “scrape by” a few times she highlighted how there was not enough money to provide the things Audrey found necessary for a comfortable life. She added that “My mom’s inability to provide support in that area [paying for school] has made the burden fall on me, so I’m putting myself through school.” Here Audrey directly points out her expectations of her mother and her mother’s inability to meet those. By Audrey saying the burden has fallen on her, she points out that she feels paying for school is not something she should have to do, and notes how her mother’s inability to meet her expectations adversely affects her life. As it is the job of parents to ensure their children have everything they need, Audrey describing how she did not have all those things at times led to the categorization of her mother as a bad parent and a bad mom.

The inability of parents to provide for their kids also caused children to view their parents as unsuccessful in the context of the U.S. where success is based on monetary gain. Yet in addition to this, the detrimental impacts of divorce are severely gendered. Women are disproportionately affected in all aspects, and especially financially through divorce (Lamb 1986; Seltzer 1991; Coontz 1992). Nonetheless, the participants in my study criticized their mothers for experiencing financial turmoil. This created a very unproductive situation where the participants blamed their mothers for the gendered consequences of divorce. Hays explains that the ideals of a successful person in the U.S. contradict those of a successful mother in the U.S. “The cultural model of a rationalized market society coexists in tension with the cultural model of intensive motherhood” (Hays 1996:97). This explains that as members of society, mothers are supposed to compete with others in the workforce and prevail financially. Yet as mothers, they are supposed to devote all of their time, energy, and resources to their children. This idea that professional monetary gain is what people are supposed to achieve was seen in the way Sarah described her mother’s source of income. When I asked her what her mother does she replied, “She sells paintings every once and awhile. She doesn’t do a lot.” Here Sarah’s choice to frame selling handmade artwork as “not a lot” is very telling about Sarah’s expectations for occupations. Here the fact that her mother was not making a substantial income established her mother as a bad person in the context of the U.S.’ definition of success. To add to her mother’s failures, Sarah chose to frame her mother’s line of work as “once in a while” and “not a lot.” Mothers who are held to the idea of intensive mothering in the U.S. are also held to the expectation to work very hard. Intensive mothering is not easy to accomplish and requires mass amounts of physical and emotional work by those mothers. Sara’s mother’s inability to accomplish a large amount of work like mothers are “supposed” to, led her to become a “bad mother” in Sarah’s eyes. So

unfortunately for these mothers, their professional and financial struggles established them as both a bad person and a bad mother.

While many times fathers are thought to be the protective agents within a family, in situations where the father posed as a threat to the mother or children (such as in cases where abuse was present), the protective role then fell on the mother. There were multiple participants in my study who experienced abuse (either emotional or physical), and all were from their fathers. For many who experienced this situation, they looked to their mother as a source of guidance and protection. The children then viewed the lack of action, or inability to leave on the mother's part, as failing to ensure safety. The most powerful of these situations was Kenzi's. Most of her life her father physically abused her mother, her siblings, and herself. When I asked her to describe her mother she said, "I see her as this little, incompetent little baby, that its like our duty to take care of her...It doesn't help that she's like five feet tall and 90 pounds. So little and baby like. Plus, as a woman, she cries a lot." Kenzi powerfully portrays her mother as weak and incompetent. Kenzi's strong feelings about her mother were very clearly tied to her inability to protect Kenzi and her siblings from their father. This is seen through the fact that right before describing her mother, she was discussing her mother's legal action toward the abuse. Within both of Kenzi's mother's roles as a parent and a mother, she was supposed to protect her children from any threats, including their father. One of the most integral parts of intensive mothering is that mothers are supposed to protect their children. Without that fundamental aspect, the rest of intensive mothering would not apply. So while her mother not leaving her father sooner could have been out of necessity, all Kenzi saw was that she was in constant danger and her mother failed to protect her from it. Her mother's failed protection then resulted in Kenzi's blame toward her. With Kenzi's description of her mother as a baby and incompetent, she removed any

features of her mother being associated with motherhood, and essentially framed her mother as the converse. Not only was her mother a bad mom, but she was lower than that, she was not even a mom. She was merely a baby who needed to be taken care of. This role reversal would render it impossible for Kenzi to view her mother as a mother. This was due to Kenzi viewing herself as more of a parent/ protective agent than her mother was. This solidified Kenzi's mother as the ultimate bad mom as is reflected in Kenzi's description of her mother.

The most dominant pattern with regards to descriptions of mothers in my data (so much so I almost named this section after it), was them being described as "weak." Multiple participants used the word "weak" or words like it to describe their mothers' personalities which then reflected on their mothering habits. As many people framed their mothers as weak, they positioned her contrary to the ideal of "intensive mothers." Mothers are not only expected to be nurturing, but also strong. Therefore, their failure to be "strong" established them as bad mothers. Melissa spoke about this explicitly when she spoke about her mother in the context of the divorce and said, "She was just a weaker person... she just wasn't strong enough to leave the relationship... she was just in a really weak place in her life." With this description, Melissa frames her mother as weak and unable to leave a bad situation (as Melissa's father was abusive as well). Yet not only does she establish that her mother was weak in the context of the relationship with her father, but also generally in her mother's life. As a mother however, Melissa's mother was expected to model good mothering as well as being a strong independent woman, as is now expected in the U.S. This failure to meet both expectations painted Melissa's mother not only as a weak woman but also as a weak mother. Both furthered Melissa's categorization of her as a bad mom.

In some cases in the study, not only were mothers viewed as weak by insiders such as their children, but also by outsiders. Walzer speaks about how when parents participate in “bad behavior” this can then undermine the amount of authority they are viewed with (Walzer 2006). Katarina spoke of multiple instances where people in and outside her family took advantage of her mother due to her weakness as Katarina described it. She elucidated situations like this when she said, “I’m very independent... Where my mom has never really been like that... People take advantage a lot of kind people... She does good things even if they don’t benefit her and a lot of the time it kind of screws her... She’s very not cut throat.” With these comments Katarina paints her mother as failing mothering in a few ways. As established earlier, mothers are not supposed to be weak people, which Katarina clearly endorses with these comments. Yet additionally, in order to achieve intensive mothering mothers are not supposed to waver or let other people cause them to do so. Good mothers stand their ground firm no matter what anyone says. Katarina’s mother’s inability to participate in “good behavior” undermined the authority that not only her children saw in her, but also the authority that outsiders saw. Once outsiders sensed a lack of authority, they took advantage of Katarina’s mother, thereby punishing her mother for her bad behavior. One of the most iconic things about good mothers is that no one can question them. Yet as Katarina described, other people would “take advantage of her mother.” This distances her mother from the category of good mothers. Due to the fact that she could not stand up to people, her ability to protect herself and her children was threatened. Being a weak person is one thing when you just cannot stand up for yourself. Yet, the additive effect when that is combined with a mother is that that mother then becomes a bad mom, which happened in Katarina’s eyes.

The various expectations of mothers pinpointed by participants in this study can be seen everywhere. Yet the participants here utilized these common issues experienced within family

and motherhood as justification and reinforcement of their mothers being bad moms. Through the participants' resistance to be marked as failing families, they sought explanations of who could be at fault beside themselves. As they refused to be the only people brought down with their ship, they grasped for situations that alleviated them from holding the entire marked identity. Feeling as though their mothers failed the expectations of mothering in our society seemed to provide them with some relief from feeling that sole blame. The instances they found to explain their mothers' failures were most easily discovered where mothers diverged from intensive mothering. In these instances the mothers had therefore not provided their children with everything they needed that "good mothers" should provide. The world of mothering is set up with numerous and impossible contradicting expectations, as Hays explains. This led to no option but failure for mothers and easy blame within the world of families for everyone else. While mother blame is nothing new to the academic world, blame being placed on the parent that primarily cares for and supports the child was disheartening. This only serves to highlight how disproportionately divorce affects women. Even when mothers are the parent that stays and raises the child, blame is placed on them because they are there to be blamed.

While divorce is something that takes two people, blame definitely was not. The blame seen toward mothers in my study was not seen toward fathers. This is not to say fathers were without fault. Many participants did recognize things their fathers did which the participants did not agree with or that played a part in the choice to divorce. What was different however, was that the fault applied toward mothers carried through in the participants' descriptions and explanations of their mothers. This was not seen in the same regard with their fathers. When asked to describe their fathers, many participants brushed over the details and gave a general answer regarding his personality or occupation. The negative aspects of their fathers were not

brought up here or interwoven throughout the interview as descriptions of bad mothers were. The inkling of their fathers' wrongdoings seemed to be forgotten when not explicitly discussing them. Failures on the mothers' parts however, were repeatedly brought up and woven into the description of the mothers as people by a majority of the participants. The ability of failures to reflect on the person as a whole was something the participants only practiced toward their mothers, and something the fathers continuously escaped.

In her book, Heather Smith notes how her participants' descriptions of their father were overwhelmingly positive. In many of her cases, the father was the one who moved out after the divorce, leaving the mother as the resident parent. My cases also paralleled that finding. For nonresident fathers "Divorce is often followed by a decline in the quality and quantity of contact between fathers and children" (Marsiglio et al. 2000:1184). Seventeen out of my 22 participants experienced their mother as their resident parent. This is also representative of national trends as well (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Smith notes that due to this, the main emotion children experience toward their fathers is missing them. Smith also noted while her participants would blame themselves, or their mothers for the divorce, fathers were very rarely blamed or even spoken of negatively (Smith 1999). Smith goes onto explain that after the divorce "Mums were there, doing what they always do" (Smith 1999:80). Conversely, nonresident fathers "Provide less help with homework, are less likely to set and enforce rules, and provide less monitoring and supervision of their children" (Marsiglio et al. 2000:1184). This let nonresident fathers be seen as the fun parent who did not make rules. Mothers being there triggered two consequences: the children did not experience getting to miss or long for their mothers as they did their fathers, and mothers were there to receive the blame. Although it may seem as though fathers not being there could be blame worthy, it actually acted as a protective factor against this blame.

Although mother blame is studied within the literature and may be the primary actor here, there is something further to be examined. Essentially, mother blame only accounts for part of this process, but fails to explain the lack of blame being transmitted to fathers. In my study, most participants (19/22) lived with only one parent a majority of the time. Out of those 19, 17 participants lived mainly with their mother meaning their mother was their resident parent. Given this fact, one of the reasons my participants did not actively practice father blame was because he was not there. Although he may have still been in their lives, not living with someone consistently has a large impact. If one of the parents were not present often in their lives, it became easier for children to idealize them. In conjunction with that, it was easier to place blame or negativity on the parent that was there for the children for just that reason. Additionally, if the father was around the child less, the child would not see as many of the faults or failures of their father due to lack of exposure. Smith notes how children experienced very unique relationships with their fathers, especially if he is not living with them. A “Majority of children want to continue to have a relationship with their dad. They want his support and approval, his love and care; in other words to be special for him” (Smith 1999:103). This extreme desire for their father’s approval and inability to see his shortcomings would significantly aid in children’s positive overall view of their fathers and a negative view of their mothers by comparison.

Another reason that the participants may not have practiced father blame is that the rules are different, or less clear, for nonresident fathers especially. “Wide variation in patterns of fathers’ involvement after separation suggests an absence of clear rules about fathers’ responsibilities” (Seltzer 1991:79). It is hard to blame someone for deviating from their job, if you are not sure what their job is in the first place. “The father role after separation is also undefined, judging from widely varying custody and child support laws... Many studies fail to

conceptualize fully the components of the nonresident parent's role" (Seltzer 1991:81). Mothers have a clear yardstick they can be measured against: intensive mothering. But how does our society decide what constitutes a "good father" and even further what constitutes a "good" nonresident father. There is not a strict ideology, such as intensive mothering, that all fathers can constantly be compared to and measured against. Being breadwinners used to be the qualification of a good father from the colonial period through the mid 20th century (Marsiglio et al. 2000). After that the "new fatherhood" emerged where being active and involved in the child's life was being a good father (Lamb 1986). This "being involved" however, was nowhere near to the immense work that mothers have to put in as primary caretakers.

The literature on families discusses how mothers are the nurturing parent. Being revered as the nurturing parent is also associated with the assumption that mothers are very accepting. Being undoubtedly accepting is not something fathers are generally credited with and instead children learn to desire the support and approval of their father (Smith 1999).

Section 4: Exceptions

As I went through the data there were three people who resisted the "bad family" trope. These participants never described their families as bad families in any of the ways I examined, and in fact pushed back against that idea. Each case of these exceptions was unique and none of these participants achieved exception status in the same way as the others. They all experienced specific circumstances that led them to not view their family as a bad family. While they all navigated that space in different ways, the overwhelming similarity I found between these three participants was that they all stated how "bad" things would have been if their parents had stayed together. Consequently, they discussed how "good" or "better" things are now that their parents are divorced. This echoes the idea of hope that Harvey and Fine speak about with regard to their

participants who experience “good divorces” (Harvey and Fine 2004). As the participants saw things get better through their parents not being married, they put to use the idea of hope for the future. Justin said, “It was good, glad it happened.” And added that, “If they had been together up until this point, it would've been much more sad than the divorce.” Morgan explained that, “If we were all three living in the same household, it'd be fucking miserable.” And Paige added, “I just think its better how it is now.”

Many studies support these three participants' idea that conflict of parents staying married is worse for kids than divorce. Raschke and Raschke examined the effect that marital dissolution had on children's self esteem, or as the study referred to it, children's “self-concepts.” Their study found that it was not the marital status of children's parents that affected their self-concept, but instead it was the presence of conflict. Raschke and Raschke's statistical analysis showed how “Children who have greater conflict in their families will have significantly lower self-concepts,” and that self-concept was not significantly affected by family structure (Raschke and Raschke 1979:372). Their overall conclusion was that “Children are not adversely affected by living in a single-parent family, but that family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental” (1979:373). Their findings that conflict is worse for kids are supported by many other studies including Gyarfas (1971).

The language used by all three exceptions positions them as completely opposite to “bad families” by framing the entire divorce as good or saying that without the divorce things would be worse. As all of these participants were aware of the negative stigma associated with divorced families, they fought against it by creating a new narrative of their own around their families that was contrary to the already existing one. Here the exceptions empowered themselves as the definers of their families and thus attempted to disempower the structure that attempted to

stigmatize them and label them as marked. This is precisely what makes these three people exceptions. While most the other participants internalized the stigma and produced the bad family narrative to attempt to do reconstructing work, the exceptions rejected the society built narrative from the beginning. They instead shaped their own.

As each exception escaped the bad family narrative, they used their specific circumstances to write their alternative narrative. For Morgan, they utilized very specific ideas and expectations about love and marriage (ones they termed “realistic”), in order to reinforce their narrative that divorce was ok. They did this by expressing multiple times how they do not view love as “forever.” Like here when they said, “You should acknowledge when you get into a marriage that it might not be forever, and that’s okay.” Or when talking about divorce in general they said, “Its not out of the question for you guys not to love each other anymore. I think it’s totally okay to get divorced.” In both of these statements Morgan highlights the link of love not lasting forever being tied to divorce being ok. They followed these up with, “I think you should put your happiness above anything else.” By framing love as temporary, they make the idea of divorce seem ok and even normal. Because if love is not permanent, then divorce would be ok for everyone. This would then position their family as a normal family rather than a bad family. So while they avoid partaking in the bad family narrative from the beginning, their goal is still to make their family seem normal and not stigmatized. This narrative around love not lasting forever enables them to say what all families should do. This consequently would align everyone else with what happened in their family, thus enabling them to achieve a label that was not stigmatized.

Further, with their statement about happiness Morgan employs a very neoliberal outlook on love and uses that framing to justify why not loving someone forever is ok. With their

implementation of neoliberalism- an ideology of the self that emphasizes the importance of the individual over the group (Vaughan 1986:47)- they justify what is sometimes seen as selfish in the world of relationships where a person's main job is to make their partner happy. The fact that Morgan relies on this ideology that is very much tied to U.S. society and culture, speaks largely to just how pervasive U.S. cultural ideologies are. This is because Morgan is justifying the institution (U.S. society) that is attempting to stigmatize and disempower them due to their family dynamics. The ideologies are so consuming that the only option Morgan has to attempt to fight this stigmatizing system, is drawing on other ideologies that that same system produces.

Different situations and circumstances led Paige to become an exception in a distinct way. For her, her parents have gotten along unusually well since their divorce which then enabled her to view divorce as something that is ok and not surrounded with feelings of angst or weirdness. Harvey and Fine describe this as a "good divorce" (Harvey and Fine 2004). Paige highlighted this civility when she said, "It wasn't weird." "It wasn't bad. They get along really well now." Here Paige really diverges from the rest of the participants who had huge descriptions and feelings of the divorce being bad or weird. Paige added that, "It hasn't been a huge thing. I think mainly because my parents get along so well now and they still do so much together... It doesn't feel like much of a change, really." With this statement Paige highlights that it was the demeanor of her parents after the divorce that enabled her to view the divorce in a more neutral fashion. So instead of having to construct her view of divorce as "not bad" by herself, she was aided in that endeavor by her parents- the two most influential people in her life. Therefore, although society had attempted to construct divorce in a certain fashion for her (as bad), the views that mattered the most (those of her parents) were able to combat that of society. These actions of Paige's parents provide her with a different narrative around the divorce. This enabled

her to construct her own narrative that divorce is ok because that is how it had been immediately modeled for her.

This feeling that her divorce was done “right” for Paige alludes back to Kenzi’s sentiments regarding the community feeling as though her parents did divorce “wrong.” With Paige’s parents’ ability to protect Paige from feeling any change through the divorce process, her parents became the “good divorced parents” and avoided being like “other bad divorced parents.” Through this unique framing of her situation and her parents, Paige was able to effectively “other” herself out of the bad family stigma by establishing a clear difference between her parents’ divorce and other peoples’ divorces. The fact that even the literature uses terms such as “good” or “bad” divorces clearly shows there are institutional expectations about *how* to divorce. This idea that there are institutionalized right and wrong ways of doing divorce is a concept that I address more in depth later in this paper.

Justin provided the most telling examples of how he had navigated the societal stigma and produced his own narrative. Justin held extreme resentment toward the idea that divorces are bad or that his family was a bad family. He brought up his fight against those ideals at various times during the interview and regarding many topics. Generally Justin viewed his parents’ divorce as a good thing, which was evident when he said, “I actually consider it a really positive thing that happened, especially for my parents.” The fact that he was able to construct his view of divorce contrary to that of society’s is impressive. Yet his ability went further than that. Justin went onto say, “I’m also under the idea that they’re [married people] not perfect either, but I’m also not asking them about all the dumb decisions you’ve made or the failures you’ve had in life.” His statement here reflects ideas also addressed in the literature. Stephanie Coontz addresses people being judged for their failures by saying we need to “Build the institutions and social

support networks that allow people to act on their best values rather than on their worst ones” (Coontz 1992:22). Here Coontz too acknowledges that families are often judged on their failures rather than their successes. Justin questions this institutional judgment by bringing up multiple aspects. The first was how no one credits his family with a success by choosing to end a hostile relationship. The second being the idea that society does not delve into the failures of married couples’ lives due to the idea that they are successful because they are married. Marital status should not be what defines whether or not a family is successful. This is true especially because there may be many troubles going on within their family. But it is their status as married that acts as a protective factor to the interrogation from others about it, as well as their family being defined by it.

Justin constantly challenged the entire systematic view of divorce as sad. While he did this multiple times, the most powerful way he did this was when he said, “I think that's something that gets spun into a connotation of oh, it's a failure then, like this marriage failed...The divorce and the decision to separate was such a hugely positive decision for all of us involved, but people see it as a failure, and so they become sad about it. No one's sad about the preceding five, six years. They're only sad about that event and then people moving forward with life. That's something that I've never understood.” Here Justin used a critical examination of the unstable preceding marriage in order to justify that divorce is ok. As he expresses his confusion by people finding the divorce sad but not the preceding marriage, he establishes a formula and clarified which part is the most important to him. In an equation saying hostile marriages + divorce = bad families, society has identified the second half as the crucial part. Yet here Justin diverges from that and marks the first half as what is critical. With this reversed marking of importance, Justin not only diverges from what is important, but with that everything society

associates with divorce. He no longer has to listen to the tropes or stigmas about divorce but he disagrees on one of its most basic elements. With this simple task he enables himself to disregard the entire narrative of bad families and produce his own of divorce being a good healthy relationship.

While all three of the exceptions used different strategies to place themselves in the category of exceptions, they similarly used their own experiences and definitions to form a reversed view of divorce. Each of the three exceptions found some part of our institutionalized formula for the way divorces are commonly regarded as bad, and pushed back against that. For Justin it was the expectation to be sad about divorce, for Morgan it was the expectation that people are supposed to love one another forever, and for Paige it was the expectation that divorces are messy and the parents fail to act amicably. The exceptions had to pinpoint one small part of the formula to combat in order to distance themselves from the bad family narrative. Having to do that highlights the immense power of the expectations that the formula carries with it. The exceptions were unable to fight against the *whole* idea of divorce being bad and resulting in bad families due to its societal hold. The history of divorce in our society has clearly carried with it rigid expectations about how people are supposed to do divorce. These expectations continue today and frame the formula around divorce. While it is too difficult to fight against the entire formula due to its footing in societal norms and values (i.e. people being sad about divorce, people love each other forever, and divorce is a hostile event), people like the exceptions found in my study are beginning to find small gaps where this reframing of how to do divorce can begin.

DISCUSSION

With this study I initially set out to examine the ways in which college students made sense of the experience of their parents' divorce and how those experiences had manifested and affected various aspects of their identity. Negotiations around their identity were definitely evident yet surfaced in ways I had not expected. When I began I expected to see participants' identity-work in the ways they talked about and described themselves. What ended up actually being more telling were the ways in which the students described their families, their family identity, and themselves in relationship to that family identity.

Overwhelmingly the participants described divorce as "bad" and consequently, their divorced families as "bad families." Although they never used this language overtly, they described their families as bad families implicitly, by linking divorce to other kinds of bad families. Linking divorce to various types of bad families was seen by tying divorced families to lower classes, talking about their families as "weird" or "dirty," establishing the stigma felt against them for not being "normal," and by announcing their distain for divorce in their future marital lives. This then caused most of the participants to cast their mothers as bad moms as a consequence of being a bad family. Participants had heightened notions of society perceiving divorced families as bad families. Despite the statistics of divorce being more common in U.S. society today, divorce has not yet been accepted as the norm in our society. In order for an event to not be stigmatized in society, it must become the norm. As long as anything is not the accepted norm in society, it is framed as the other, thus carrying with it various forms of stigmatization, which is what the participants in my case were perceiving and anticipating (Goffman 1963).

However, whether or not those societal opinions really exist does not matter. Instead, it is the *perception* and *anticipation* of that possible stigma by the participant that is important. As Kenneth Allan addresses Cooley's *looking glass self* he emphasizes that this view of ones' self is only what they *perceive* other people see them as, not the actual way in which others see them (Allan 2013). This is the experience children of divorce encounter in a society that *seems* like it disavows divorce. There may no longer be overt stigma target toward divorced families in our society. The participants in my study however still received implicit messages of a lack of acceptance around divorced families. They perceive this negative view around divorce and their family, which leads them to create a narrative around how they are a bad family. Since their family has been framed as a bad family, or they have framed themselves this way, this led them to develop an explanation. Participants formed their explanation around the fact that the experience of divorce in general is bad and corresponding this makes their family a bad family.

Much of the literature today about the effects of divorce on children notes minor behavioral difficulties in the couple of years after the divorce, and then fewer issues as the child matures (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994). My study however, highlighted that although children of divorce go on to be fine functioning members of society, there are internal effects from the divorce that they carry with them as they transition into adulthood. Even acknowledging the handful of people that have asked about the emotional effects of divorce on children, there were still shortcomings. No one had questioned what result those effects have on the way children view themselves and their family. This is the gap in the literature that my study has filled. While there has been extensive research done on both divorce and identity navigation, merging the two is something new to both fields. Through this identity formation utilized by the participants in

the study, we can see that divorce is far from being treated as normal in society, and the stigma associated with it has had some serious repercussions.

My study supports the idea that there is clearly a “right” and a “wrong” way of doing divorce in our society. Through statements by the participants it became clear that they felt society had marked them for having divorced parents. They additionally felt a second opportunity for failure if their family then did divorce the “wrong” way. If people are going to get divorced in our society it seems as though they are supposed to do it quietly and not draw attention to themselves. Divorced families are supposed to deal with their “abnormal” problems alone and not taint the rest of society by forcing them to experience any awkwardness associated with the divorce. Additionally, parents are not supposed to let anything in the child’s life change. Parents are supposed to interact like nothing had happened afterward, and act like they were completely comfortable being around the person they had divorced. They are not supposed to parade around new love interests, nor new identities for themselves.

When families of participants in my study failed to do divorce the right way, they received clear repercussion from outsiders admonishing their lack of abiding by the divorce rules such as in Kenzi’s case. Paige was the only person in my study whose parents successfully achieved the ideal divorce. Their achievement then enabled Paige to reach exception status, as she felt no changes in her life after the divorce. Her parents were impressively able to transition to very close friends and seemed not to experience any animosity. Paige being the only person in my study who experienced the “right” divorce shows just how uncommon and unrealistic those “right” situations are. Due to the scarcity of “right” divorces it is clear we must do away with preconceived notions of how to do divorce as they negatively impact the children of divorce.

Yet it was not both of the parents that bore the brunt equally for achieving divorce the “right” way. The mothers in my study were overwhelmingly punished for the divorce through negative or weak descriptions of them by their children. The expectation of intensive mothering has become so deeply engrained in today’s youth that the children in my study held their mothers to these impossible standards. Standards which became ever more impossible given the fact they were going through a divorce which would impact their time, energy, and financial and emotional resources. These are only compounded by the fact that women already bear the brunt of the divorce itself (Lamb 1986; Seltzer 1991; Coontz 1992). This yields the question of what is the point of mothers achieving intensive mothering if all that work will be ignored and devalued through the institution of divorce?

Yet these very unfortunate consequences would not be occurring in the first place if the people who experienced divorces did not feel such stigma around divorce. While it is impossible to say whether others actively stigmatize divorce, the problem is that my participants heavily perceive that stigma. The problems participants experienced in my study were not a result of the actual divorce. The aspect the participants struggled with most was the stigma they experienced because of the divorce, not the divorce itself. Here it becomes clear that in order to transition the institution of divorce into a less crippling experience, the perceived stigma around it must be removed. Its treatment as the “other” in our society must stop in order for the people who experience it to not always feel different or abnormal.

Limitations

As this research and writing of the paper had to be completed in one school year, time acted as the primary limitation in this study. The limitation of time manifested in various ways. Recruiting was done efficiently. With the time constraint I had to find as many people as I could

in a very short amount of time. While I would have preferred to use a constant snowball strategy throughout the entire study, or specifically pick people in order to get a more diverse group of participants, I had to use Facebook recruiting. Posting something on Facebook would reach more people much quicker. This however led to some response bias. Rather than picking people, or me finding the people I used, all volunteered and contacted me to participate in the study. This could have affected a few things in my findings. First, almost all 24 people I spoke with self-reported as very good students. This does not surprise me as the type of student who would likely respond to such a Facebook post would likely be a good student. This is because they were being asked to take time out of their schedules to help someone else with academic research that would not immediately, personally benefit them. Also, this could have led to two main types of stories I received. Due to people volunteering to participate, I could have wound up with one group whose parents had awful divorces and wanted to describe to someone how bad it was. And conversely, another group who had very mild and civil divorces so much so that they did not mind talking about it all because it went so well. The voluntary aspect of my recruitment could have provided me with these two extreme experiences of divorce.

Another way the time limit affected the study was that I only had enough time to interview one large group of students who experienced divorce. To really find out how these identity navigations differ from students whose parents were not divorced, or to develop a more causal relationship, a “control group” of participants who had not experienced divorce also would need to be studied. In seven months I alone simply did not have enough time to interview, transcribe, code, and analyze findings about close to 50 people within two very different groups.

Future Research

Future research on this topic should include the accounts of students with married parents. Questioning and analysis should be done equally into both groups identity formation having to do with their parents' marital status. This may be difficult to do, simply because married families are established as the dominant group. As a result they are not required to constantly recognize or answer for their marked identity as they do not have one. Including participants with married parents could act as a control group in order to see how much of the identity formation we see is just adolescents transitioning to adulthood, and how much is actually due to their parents' marital status.

Isolating age at the time of divorce would also be very worthwhile for future research. There was such a broad range of ages at the time of divorce in my study that it was difficult to see how much that played into participants' navigation of their stigmatized identities. The age children are at the time of their parents' divorce could play greatly into their reaction to it. My participants whose parents were divorced before they had memories had mixed experiences. For some, being that young acted as a protective agent that enabled them not to remember times of intense conflict or happy times with married parents they no longer had. This let them see divorce as the only thing they ever knew and therefore their experienced norm. On the other hand some of these people reported wishing they had some of those good memories as proof that their parents' marriage was not always bad or proof that the divorce was totally necessary. I saw conflicting views such as these with all ages of participants at the time of divorce. Controlling for age at various ages would enable use to see if there really was an age at which children were better able to deal with divorce.

Additionally, research should be done into if, and how deeply, children of divorce internalize the stigma around divorce. A couple of times in my data participants reproduced the stigma toward divorced families of fellow divorced people. This was an event that was impossible to explain without more research. Research should look into whether children of divorce simply feel the stigma, or whether they believe that divorce is something worth stigmatizing. If children of divorce actually subscribe to this narrative it could explain their ability to stigmatize other divorced families like them.

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