

The impact of discernment counseling on individuals who decide to divorce: experiences of post-divorce communication and coparenting

Angela J. Emerson PhD¹ | Steven M. Harris PhD²  | Fathiya A. Ahmed BS²

¹Texas Wesleyan University, Fort Worth, TX, USA

²University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Correspondence

Steven M. Harris, Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA.
Email: smharris@umn.edu

Abstract

Discernment counseling is designed to help couples considering divorce arrive at a greater sense of clarity and confidence in their decision making about the future of their marriage. Possible outcomes include making no change to the marriage, divorcing, or attempting reconciliation through couples therapy. To date, no research has been done on whether or not discernment counseling helps couples who decide to divorce with their post-divorce family life (i.e., coparenting). We surveyed 11 people (from male–female couples) and conducted in-depth interviews with eight who had undergone discernment counseling and subsequently divorced to see what impact discernment counseling had on their post-divorce coparenting relationship. We analyzed the data from a phenomenological perspective. Respondents described their discernment counseling experience as helpful for achieving clarity and honesty in the divorce decision-making process, they shared their appreciation for the structure of the intervention, and indicated that it led to a greater coparental cooperation post-divorce.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2020 The Authors. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

KEYWORDS

coparenting, discernment counseling, divorce, divorce outcomes

INTRODUCTION

There is a general agreement that about half of all first marriages in the United States will end in divorce and approximately 67% of second and subsequent marriages will as well (Amato, 2000, 2010; Copen et al., 2012; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Divorce is a common occurrence in American families and its causes and impacts have been thoroughly researched (Amato, 2000, 2010). Divorce decision making, or divorce ideation, is a less researched topic but has garnered more attention lately (Hawkins et al., 2017). Couples who decide to divorce are often unable to make a divorce decision with clarity and confidence (Harris et al., 2017). The discernment counseling protocol was developed to help these couples in their divorce decision-making process (Doherty & Harris, 2017; Doherty et al., 2016). The current study investigates the perceived impact that discernment counseling has on the process of divorce and the coparenting relationships of individuals who divorce.

Coparenting and divorce

Research suggests that at least 1 000 000 children are affected by divorce every year in the United States (Fagan & Churchill, 2012; McBroom, 2011). Additionally, there is an ample literature suggesting that divorce can negatively impact adults and children in numerous ways (Amato, 2000, 2005; Cui et al., 2011; Konstam, 2009; Thomas & Woodside, 2011; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004), including weakened parent–child and extended family relationships due to less frequent contact, exposure to parental conflict, and loss of emotional support and financial resources (Amato, 2000, 2010; Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

But divorce itself does not necessarily lead to all these negative outcomes in every divorce scenario (Strohschein, 2007); rather, when parents exhibit ongoing conflict, that is when divorce and the associated transitions it can introduce, become even more detrimental to the children involved. Therefore, whether coparents stay married or not may not always be as important as the quality of their coparenting relationship for their child's continued cognitive, emotional, and physical development (Strohschein, 2007). Understanding the dynamics of divorce and coparenting is imperative because any changes in these processes may influence the outcomes associated with divorce adjustment for children (Ahrns, 1994; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Research about divorce outcomes not only shows its possible negative effects but also highlights the importance of maintaining quality, cooperative post-divorce coparent relationships to benefit children's adjustment, and ongoing development during and after the divorce transition (Ahrns, 1994, 2006; Bonach, 2005; Sigal et al., 2011). While there are variations in how these relationships function between different parents and within families, the most cooperative coparenting relationships are characterized by a high level of mutual support between coparents for one another's household rules, disciplinary practices, and daily routines (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Feinberg, 2002). Researchers consistently show that high-quality, cooperative coparent relationships are an important mediator of some of the potentially negative outcomes of divorce (Ahrns, 1994, 2006; Amato, 2000, 2010). However, developing a quality, cooperative coparent relationship after divorce

can be difficult for some former marriage partners due to the hostile and acrimonious nature of the divorce process.

Discernment counseling

Discernment counseling is a relationship-focused treatment protocol for couples on the brink of divorce. It is specifically targeted toward engaging “mixed-agenda” couples (Doherty & Harris, 2017) where one partner is leaning-in to the relationship and the other is either leaning-out or ambivalent about whether or not to stay in the marriage. The goal of discernment counseling is to help mixed-agenda couples arrive at greater clarity and confidence in making a decision about the future direction of their relationship, based on a deeper understanding of the marital dynamics and each person's contributions to the problems (Doherty & Harris, 2017). In discernment counseling, clients are presented with three paths to aid them in their decision making. Path 1 is called the status quo path, meaning continuing in the relationship as things have been. Path 2 is called the divorce path. Path 3 is referred to as the reconciliation path where partners agree to take divorce off the table and commit to couples therapy for at least 6 months to see if they can, together, increase the health of the marriage (Doherty & Harris, 2017; Doherty et al., 2016).

When the couple, or one member of the couple, arrives at clarity around a decision to divorce (path 2), discernment counseling is over and the couple is guided on how to proceed with separation/divorce with the least amount of conflict or contention. Here, couples explore the decision to divorce more thoroughly and determine mutually agreed upon principles that will guide the couple during the divorce process (i.e., to treat each other with civility, to not talk poorly of a parent to the children, etc.). By helping both partners cope with the reality of this decision, and map out how they desire to see the process unfold, the discernment counselor helps them proceed on a more cooperative and constructive divorce trajectory (Doherty & Harris, 2017). Obviously, a decision to divorce can be challenging for all people involved, but it is possible that the discernment counseling process might help divorcing couples have a better divorce and perhaps a higher quality of coparenting relationship afterwards. Doherty and Harris (2017) suggest that future research should investigate whether divorcing partners who undergo discernment counseling have healthier divorce outcomes than couples that do not receive discernment counseling:

Discernment counseling can lead to better healing after divorce for all parties involved... [and] can lead to better choices about both ending the marriage and moving ahead as parents...[and] can diminish the kind of anxious attachment that keeps ex-spouses pre-occupied with one another. (p. 122–123).

Exploring the experiences of people who participate in discernment counseling and ultimately decide to divorce may contribute to the emerging research on discernment counseling and to a better understanding of how to positively influence or enhance the quality of post-divorce coparent relationships. We wanted to pursue answers to the following general questions:

1. How do divorcing partners describe their experience of discernment counseling generally?
2. How do divorcing partners describe any impact that discernment counseling had on their experience of the divorce process?
3. How do divorcing partners describe any impact that discernment counseling had on their post-divorce coparent relationship?

METHODS

We approached these research questions with a phenomenological lens. This analytic approach is designed to cast light on individuals' subjective views of their world experiences and it emphasizes the meaning-making processes that affect an individual's perceptions of future events and interactions in their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Through analysis of textual and interview data gathered from both open-ended questions in an initial screening survey and in-depth interviews, the researchers explored themes that emerged from participants' descriptions of their experiences of discernment counseling, divorce, and coparenting. Phenomenological research presumes that meaning is shaped through individuals' experiences in the world and knowledge is gained through a systematic reflection on one's conceptual consciousness (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A phenomenological lens allows researchers to explore complex constructs through individuals' concrete experiences and the meaning they create for each of them. Specifically, the present research is based on the work of van Manen (1990, 2007) in the hermeneutic school of phenomenology.

Researcher reflexivity

Before describing the study and results, it is important that we provide some background on why this topic is meaningful to us and how our own experiences have shaped this work to reduce bias in our interactions with the data and other stages of this project. Each one of us has experience with divorce, either at a personal or a professional level, as well as with families that are managing the challenges associated with divorce transitions. The lead author works with children of divorce clinically and has seen the impact of healthy versus dysfunctional coparenting in the lives of her clients. The second author has clinical experience with discernment counseling, is among the first clinicians trained in this model, and is developing a research agenda around this approach's effectiveness in a variety of settings. The third author is beginning a master's program in marriage and family therapy and has attended an initial training in the discernment counseling model. Each researcher is interested in helping families through the transitions associated with divorce. We understand that our clinical interests have shaped this study and we have tried to let the data speak for those we interviewed as opposed to us interpreting the data through lenses informed by the value we see in this clinical approach. We did this through a thorough review of the results with one another and member checking activities with the people we interviewed.

Sample

We (the lead researcher and members of the research team) invited 77 individuals who had undergone discernment counseling through the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project and had decided to pursue divorce, to complete an online screening survey (see supplemental file S1). All participants had received discernment counseling services from the creators of the model. At the time services were initially provided to this sample, these clinicians were meeting every other week to discuss cases, coordinate service delivery, and make minor changes to the discernment counseling protocol. Because of this, we are confident that couples in our sample received a representative sampling of discernment counseling. Participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria to be interviewed: (a) they had to be pursuing or have completed the legal divorce process; (b) they had to be parents of children; and (c) they had to be willing to complete a 1-hour in-depth interview. From this initial invitation, we

received 11 completed survey responses with eight respondents indicating a willingness to participate in further in-depth interviews. As the initial survey included places for respondents to briefly share something about their experiences of discernment counseling and with coparenting after divorce, this information was included in the final thematic analysis of all the textual data collected for the study (initial survey responses plus interview transcripts from the eight in-depth interviews).

Each individual's participation in this study was voluntary and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from any portion of the research at any time without penalty. Participants who completed the in-depth interview were compensated with a \$20 gift card. The lead researcher contacted participants at four different points in the research process as follows: (a) participants received an email with the research invitation to divorced partners with an accompanying survey link; (b) participants who agreed to being selected for the in-depth interview were contacted via their preferred method of communication to schedule the interview; (c) participants completed the telephone, video, or face-to-face interview; and (d) participants were contacted for follow-up member checking procedures according to the phenomenological approach.

We followed an interview script (supplemental file S2) to ensure standard procedures and to facilitate detailed responses from each participant about their experience of the discernment counseling intervention, the legal divorce process, and their coparent relationship. The interviews were conducted by the lead researcher via telephone and each lasted about 1 hour. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and audited to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis

Following the hermeneutic phenomenological methods proposed by van Manen (1990, 2007), we conducted a thematic content analysis of the textual data obtained from participants about their discernment counseling and coparenting experiences. There are six research activities central to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, including (a) looking at a phenomenon which is interesting and commits the researcher to the world; (b) investigating experience as it is lived (rather than conceptualized); (c) reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon; (d) describing the phenomenon by writing and re-writing; (e) maintaining a pedagogical relationship with the phenomenon; and (f) balancing the research context by considering it related to the parts and the whole (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

To increase the trustworthiness of the present study, we conducted member-checking procedures, triangulated the data, and utilized two additional coders for interrater reliability in the data analysis phase (Creswell, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For member-checking, we provided all interview participants a copy of their transcript to review the content for accuracy and offered them the opportunity to revise or amend any portions of their responses. All participants confirmed the accuracy of their interview transcripts prior to analyses. Additionally, the confirmability of the present research is enhanced by the triangulation of multiple sources of information. This included comparing participants' responses from the initial survey, the interview, and from the follow-up member-checking and interrater reliability procedures. Furthermore, we recruited two additional doctoral students to review the interview transcripts and conduct independent coding procedures. The lead researcher made field notes throughout each interview, analyzing and assigning codes and themes to each in-depth interview at three separate stages: (a) immediately following the interview, (b) after transcription with the coding team, and (c) final review with the coding team.

We allowed themes to emerge from the data based on the specific language used by participants as well as from the textual meanings that are ascribed to certain statements and phrases. Each question

TABLE 1 Participant demographic information with pseudonyms

Participant	Age	Gender	Length of marriage	Kids' ages	Household income (per year)	Religious affiliation	Race/Ethnicity	Education level	# of DC sessions
1 (Jan)	56	F	30 years	27, 23	\$100 k+	Catholic	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	4
2 (Tom)	59	M	22 years	1 deceased, 17	\$20 k-\$40 k	Buddhist	White/Non-Hispanic	College Graduate	3
3 (Cara)	43	F	4 years	5	\$100 k+	Protestant	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	2
4 (Mary)	30	F	1 year	None	\$40 k-\$70 k	None	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	3
5 (Andy)	39	M	12 years	8, 5	\$40 k-\$70 k	Other	White/Non-Hispanic	College Graduate	2
6 (Lauren)	36	F	13 years	None	\$100 k+	None	White/Non-Hispanic	College Graduate	2
7 (Misty)	45	F	17 years	16, 12	\$100 k+	None	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	5
8 (Holly)	37	F	10 years	10, 8, 6	\$40 k-\$70 k	Other	White/Non-Hispanic	College Graduate	1
9 (Sam)	38	F	15 years	10, 7	\$100 k+	Catholic	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	5
10 (Camy)	42	F	14 years	10, 8	\$40 k-\$70 k	Unitarian-Christian	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	4
11 (Damon)	47	M	15 years	20, 19, 13	\$100 k+	Catholic	White/Non-Hispanic	Advanced Degree	4

was designed to help participants consider their real-life experience of the intervention as well as how it impacted their divorce process and coparenting interactions with their former spouse. Immediately following each in-depth interview, we attached initial codes to describe the overall essence and meaning participants drew from their discernment counseling experiences. In the next phase of data analysis, we had all interviews transcribed. All text files were reviewed and compared to the audio files for accuracy. The textual data allowed us to utilize the iterative cycle of writing and re-writing to describe the phenomenon being studied.

The lead researcher conducted deliberate independent coding procedures for each interview transcript in addition to requesting the same of each member of the coding team. Codes were assigned based on the content of participants' responses, their descriptive language, and the overall meaning they drew from their discernment counseling, divorce, and coparenting experiences. Reliability procedures began with the lead researcher and the coding team reading and re-reading each transcript to generate a complete list of codes for participants' interviews. Next, the lead researcher compiled a complete list of all possible codes generated independently by the lead researcher and the coding team for group comparison and discussion. We then discussed each possible code or theme, reflecting on how it was supported in the textual data, how common it was among the sample, and how each related to the current research questions. Then, the lead researcher conducted a final selection of three themes and three subthemes to represent how divorcing partners describe their experience of the discernment counseling intervention. After a full and final review, we determined that the data obtained in this research offered appropriate data saturation to support the final themes that were selected.

RESULTS

Demographic information on all participants is contained in Table 1. On average, participants attended 3.5 discernment counseling sessions. The majority of the research participants (9/11; 82%) reported that their former spouse was the initiator of the decision for divorce. Only two (18%) reported they were the partner who chose divorce. Overall, the sample was mostly White/Non-Hispanic women who were mothers, with a relatively high level of education with moderate to high annual household incomes. Lastly, most participants (7/11; 64%) characterized their post-divorce relationships with their former spouses as cooperative in some aspects. Although not specifically assessed, we are confident that the individuals in this sample were divorced from male–female marriages as that configuration was the most often seen by the discernment counselors. Only six couples out of the approximately 200 served by the clinicians during this time period identified as same sex couples and none of them indicated a willingness to divorce after completing discernment counseling.

Three major themes emerged from the data regarding participants' experiences. Participants described (a) achieving clarity and honesty, (b) appreciation for the structure of the intervention, and (c) coparent cooperation post-divorce. The first major theme, achieving clarity and honesty, was the most common to emerge from the data. The second and third major themes were slightly less common but both were still strongly represented.

Achieving clarity and honesty

The most common theme to emerge from participants' responses was that discernment counseling provided these individuals with a sense of clarity and honesty. For example, Cara¹, a 43-year-old female participant who was married for 4 years, indicated that “*discernment counseling helped provide*

clarity to me in a time where I was in a state of shock and everything felt murky.” Holly, a 37-year-old woman with three children, stated that “it was helpful to get clearer about what each one of us wanted...which was helpful for having some support in this process of figuring out what to do next.” Jan, a 56-year-old mother of two emphasized the idea that before attending discernment counseling, she was not clear about the future direction of the relationship. She reported feeling ambivalent about the idea of divorce but that the discernment counseling sessions were helpful. Furthermore, she indicated that she and her ex-husband were “finally able to have the opportunity to be truthful about their intentions and desires” for the future direction of their relationship.

This theme was apparent in all participants' responses and three related subthemes were found: (a) the intervention helped partners with acceptance and resolution about the decision to divorce, (b) it provided partners a forum to express things that needed to be said, but which they were unable to articulate before discernment counseling, and (c) it helped them see their own contributions to their marital problems and gave them something to consider changing about themselves.

Discernment counseling provided participants a sense of acceptance and resolution

This subtheme was the most common. All participants indicated that discernment counseling helped them accept the fact that divorce was a possibility and that it had helped them arrive at resolution about that decision. Jan mentioned because she “was able to give him a forum to say what he needed to say [that he] had not been saying at home...she was able to accept the finality of his decision in a better way.” Further supporting this theme, Tom, a 59-year-old father of one said, “I realized we had drifted irreparably apart. And I just realized that...and started to accept what our new function would be as coparents.” Another participant, Cara, said she began to “accept that he wasn't really willing to address his issues.” She described how this realization led her to a place of understanding that “divorce was inevitable in [their] situation.”

Andy, a 39-year-old man married for 12 years, indicated that his partner was the initiator of the decision to divorce, and described his discernment counseling experience as “a painful process” but also mentioned that he came to a place of acceptance and resolution about the fact that his former spouse was not willing to work on the marriage at all. He said this experience helped him to move forward in the divorce process and that he “eventually learned to accept and even agreed with her decision to end the marriage.” Another participant, Lauren, a 36-year-old woman, divorced after 13 years of marriage, echoed a similar idea about finding resolution as she described a “natural progression” between herself and her former spouse saying that even though it was his decision, she “eventually accepted and agreed with his decision to get a divorce.” Regardless of how participants remembered their discernment counseling experience and however much pain or confusion they may have felt at the time, they all mentioned that it brought them acceptance and resolution throughout their divorce process.

Discernment counseling was a forum to say what needed to be said

Almost all participants said discernment counseling was a forum to express their thoughts and feelings about the marital problems and their divorce decision-making process. Also, participants mentioned being able to say things to their spouse in joint portions of sessions that they were unable to say at home or prior to participating in this intervention. Several participants described how discernment

counseling provided them a “safe place” to speak and that partners were finally able to say things they were not able, or willing, to say before attending discernment counseling.

One participant, Jan, a 56-year-old mother of two adult daughters who had been married for nearly 30 years explained that her decision to try discernment counseling was because she had been trying, unsuccessfully, to talk to her husband about his marital concerns for 2 years. *“I would ask him ‘is there someone else?’ and he’d say ‘no.’ I would ask ‘what he wanted to be better between us?’ and he could not tell me. He would always say ‘I don’t know.’ I had to give him a safe place where he could finally say what he wasn’t able to say to me at home...and where he could finally be truthful with me about his intentions.”* Tom, married for over 22 years, stated that discernment counseling *“was an essential step that we had to go through because we had to communicate better. It was hard because I was afraid of her anger and our communication was not functional at that point...so it actually brought us to a place where we could finally talk honestly about what was going on.”* A similar sentiment was repeated by Mary, who decided to divorce after discovering her ex-husband had had an affair during their first year of marriage, saying *“discernment counseling gave us the space to say all the things that we’ve never said before.”*

Several participants’ responses were coded within this subtheme of finding a forum to say what had not been said before. However, their description of their experience in discernment counseling was slightly different. For Andy, this theme of having a forum to say what had not been said before took on a more negative and painful tone. He said discernment counseling gave his former wife *“a place where she could say she wanted to leave me and she could feel better about her decision to get divorced.”* Regardless of how positively or negatively each participant described it, most said discernment counseling provided a forum to say what needed to be said that was not being discussed otherwise.

Discernment counseling helped partners see their own contributions

We discovered the final subtheme of clarity and honesty present in most of the participants’ responses. These participants reflected that the discernment counseling process helped them see their own individual contributions to the problems that led to the breakdown of their marriage. Several participants described arriving at a better understanding about their individual tendencies in relationships, the way they acted toward their partners, and some accountability around their contributions to the end of their marriages.

Mary described the decision for divorce as a mutual one between herself and her former spouse. However, he was the partner who ultimately initiated the decision for divorce and was the person who filed the papers. Additionally, Mary said *“I am doing individual therapy now and it has been helpful for continued understanding about my tendencies in relationships and for gaining more insight as to how that played out in my marriage.”* She added that she continues to work on this aspect of her relationships with her *“family...at work...in new dating relationships and she has gained awareness of [her] own needs and feelings.”* Another participant, Tom, emphasized repeatedly that he was *“finally seeing [himself] more clearly now, and the experience of discernment counseling helped create a catalyst for change in [himself] and in future relationships.”* Finally, another participant, Cara, whose marriage ended due to her ex-husband’s drug addiction, revealed that she *“realized how important it is to remain engaged with [her] partner in her next relationship because [she] sees now how [she] missed some clues about his struggles with addiction.”* Overall, most participants reported an increased level of understanding for their part in the breakdown of the marital relationship.

Appreciation for the Structure of the Intervention

All of the participants commented in one way or another about the benefits of and their appreciation for discernment counseling's structured approach. Three specific subthemes emerged in this area; the discernment counseling intervention: (a) helped participants reduce divorce ambivalence, (b) created an opportunity to feel heard and acknowledged (by both their discernment counselor and their former partner), and (c) offered psychoeducation about the divorce process.

Discernment counseling's structure helped participants reduce divorce ambivalence

About half of the participants in this study mentioned that the structure of discernment counseling helped reduce their feelings of ambivalence about the decision to pursue divorce within their discernment counseling experiences. Holly (37) talked about the types of conversations she and her partner had before discernment counseling, "*Before discernment counseling, we were floating around and didn't have the structure that [discernment counseling] provided.*" She mentioned that through discernment counseling, they eventually were able to "*open up and share what was going on for each one of [them].*" Holly concluded that discernment counseling "*helped us to move forward in a more intentional, more structured, and more supportive manner.*" Additionally, these participants referred to discernment counseling as "*a helpful tool...because of the specific focus of each individual session and the questions directed toward the future direction of the relationship/marriage.*" It seems that the structure of discernment counseling—including separate individual and focused conjoint times with the counselor—helped these participants reduce feelings of confusion and ambivalence.

Discernment counseling helped participants feel heard and acknowledged

The next subtheme was that participants felt heard and acknowledged, not only by the counselor but also by their former spouse. While this subtheme of being heard and acknowledged manifested itself in different ways with each participant, it was a clear theme in about half of the participants' responses. For example, Jan, who was the leaning-in partner initially, said discernment counseling gave her "*the chance and tools to express what she wanted to be different [in the marriage] if they opted to work on the marital issues.*" Jan also said that it was only during these discernment counseling sessions that her former husband finally admitted he was not willing to work on the marriage. For Cara, the feeling of being heard and acknowledged by the discernment counselor seemed to really help her come to a final decision about the future direction of the marriage as she began to see she was not solely to blame for their problems. Similarly, Misty, whose former spouse was having an affair, described seeing that "*he was blaming [her] for much of the problems in the marriage*" and through her experiences within this intervention, she felt like her perspective was finally heard and acknowledged which helped her see that "*it was not all [her] fault.*"

Not all participants felt they benefited equally from the structure of the approach. There were two participants who recommended that the structure of the approach be modified. For Tom, the theme of appreciating the intervention's structure was less apparent, as he emphasized thinking the structure was too restrictive. He stated he "*felt dismissed and not fully heard*" and even "*ganged up on*" during the sessions. However, Tom also later mentioned that he has a tendency to ramble and get distracted and eventually admitted that the structure and the direct approach of the discernment counselor may

have been [the counselor's] way of keeping him focused on the important matters which needed to be addressed. Another participant, Andy, who was the leaning-in partner, referred to discernment counseling's structure as beneficial to his former wife. However, he struggled to see any personal benefits from the intervention given that his wife ultimately chose divorce.

Discernment counseling's structure offered participants psychoeducation about divorce

This next subtheme was also reflected by half of the people we interviewed. They mentioned discernment counseling helped them achieve a better understanding and knowledge about divorce through psychoeducation. For many participants, it was helpful to have portions of the discernment counseling sessions to discuss the various paths ahead of them, and to educate them about how this important decision would impact their lives, individually and systemically.

For a few participants, the confusion and fear of the unknown aspects of making this decision were not limited to the emotional divorce process but some participants also reported feeling unsure about the logistics of the legal divorce process as well. For example, Mary mentioned she found discernment counseling to be *“most helpful in terms of helping them both get clearer about what steps [they] wanted and needed to take logistically to get the divorce.”* She added that *“without discernment counseling, the divorce process would have taken longer and been much more chaotic.”* Jan mentioned learning more about the divorce process in her discernment counseling sessions too as she described how discernment counseling gave the former couple *“a format for having a critical discussion and a better understanding about how to go about getting divorced.”* It seems possible that discernment counseling can help some partners learn more about what to expect in the legal and emotional divorce process so they can be better prepared and possibly more confident in their decision-making process.

Cooperation post-divorce

The final theme was that discernment counseling helped participants achieve a new level of cooperation with their former spouse. This was a relevant theme in 8 of the 11 responses. Within this theme, there emerged three subthemes to illustrate where interviewees had experienced greater cooperation: (a) within their legal divorce process; (b) within their post-divorce coparent relationships; and finally (c) within their communication with their former partners, evidenced by (self-reported) reduced levels of conflict.

Partners were cooperative in the legal divorce process

Most participants described maintaining ongoing contact with their former spouse(s) related to the logistics and final arrangements of the divorce. These partners described cooperative and collaborative divorces and a few mentioned the ease of their legal divorce process. Several individuals described reaching a mutual decision to divorce, even though they reported being the spouse who was initially hoping for reconciliation. For example, Jan stated she and her former spouse filed a joint petition for divorce and that he agreed not to serve her with divorce papers. She said, *“now I see how lucky I was at the time, how respectful we were of one another, and we split everything including his retirement account and the equity in the house.”* Jan said *“there was nothing [they] really disagreed about in the*

process.” Finally, she concluded that because of their experience in discernment counseling, she and her former spouse “*were able to move forward with dignity.*” Mary indicated that she and her former spouse collaborated on a “do it yourself” divorce process using a “*downloaded a packet from [their local] County Court website.*” Her former “*partner filled out his portion of the paperwork, [they] talked about it together and discussed how to break things up financially.*” She indicated that [they] “*both agreed to everything and have already submitted their final paperwork.*” Mary suggested that their “*divorce would have been less smooth and would have taken much longer*” without the guidance they received from discernment counseling.

Cooperative coparent relationships

This subtheme references the impact that discernment counseling had on participants' ability to develop cooperative post-divorce coparenting relationships with each other. This was true for over half of our sample. Jan, who was married for nearly 30 years prior to her divorce and shares two adult daughters with her former husband, described “*making a very deliberate choice not to be bitter toward him,*” even though she learned he had been having affairs for several years. She described how she and her ex-husband shifted into roles as mutually supportive coparents. She mentioned that they were “*able to reach agreements about [their] daughters' college expenses and insurance payments*” and she talked about maintaining ongoing contact with her ex-husband for the benefit of their daughters. Another participant, Tom, a 59-year-old father of a teenage daughter, described a mutual decision between him and his former wife to “*not be bitter, feuding coparents.*” He characterized their post-divorce coparent relationship as “*supportive, cooperative, and overall really good.*” Tom added that they “*vowed to make it as easy for [their] daughter as possible,*” saying they “*have always put [her] interests first.*” Like Jan, Tom also described ongoing contact with his former wife for the benefit of their daughter, even mentioning taking several trips together and coming together for special events in their daughter's life.

In contrast, Cara described a highly uncooperative divorce process but acknowledged that they now interact cooperatively for the benefit of their child. Even though Cara did not describe her current interactions with her ex-husband as enjoyable or easy, she indicated that she and her ex are “*cooperative for the sake of [their] daughter.*” In a similar fashion, Andy, who was married for 12 years and shares two small children with his former wife, talked about his legal divorce process as “*shocking and very difficult.*” He talked about his feelings of grief and loss surrounding his former wife's decision to end the marriage, saying “*it felt like a part of me died when she left...I was so lost and grieving for a while.*” When asked about his post-divorce coparent relationship with his former wife, Andy described it as being highly cooperative as they “*agreed to communicate with one another for the benefit of their children.*”

Another participant, Sam, a 38-year-old woman, married for 15 years with two children, indicated that before discernment counseling, her relationship with her spouse was highly disengaged. But, after the intervention, it was much more cooperative. She said that “*even after the second session, we had a great conversation outside of discernment counseling that opened up the door for a different type of communication.*” She added that she and her former husband “*are working to reconcile our previous friendship in order to be the best coparents possible.*” When asked specifically about how discernment counseling impacted their post-divorce coparent relationship, this participant said not only did it “*open up the lines of communication, it gave [them] labels to describe [their] contributions to the state of our relationship without further confusion.*”

Finally, it is worth mentioning the outliers of this subtheme. Not everyone reported experiencing an increase in cooperation as a result of participating in discernment counseling. One person described having more difficult relationships with their former spouse(s) after participating in discernment counseling. Holly, who was married for 10 years with three children, described how her experiences in discernment counseling were “*not beneficial*” for them, adding that they “*stayed stuck for too long....and it just made things worse.*” Holly stated that she and her former spouse are not able to engage in any type of coparent relationship and still have a lot of conflict. She concluded by saying “*I would like to be able to coparent with him but we are not there yet....and I am not sure if we ever will be there.*”

DISCUSSION

Participants in this study reported generally achieving a greater sense of clarity around their or their partner's decisions to end their marriage through the discernment counseling process. Discernment counseling was reported to have provided a forum for honest conversations that increased participants' understanding about getting divorced and offered much-needed structure in their decision-making process. Participants also indicated that discernment counseling helped them negotiate their post-divorce coparenting relationship. These findings offer some encouraging news about this new treatment protocol. Future studies in this area could investigate specific mechanisms of change related to the discernment counseling approach. For example, what was it about the discernment counseling experience that contributed to the clarity and confidence participants achieved in their decision making? What about this process, the counselor, or the clients themselves contributed to them becoming better coparents than they might have been without going through this process (according to their perceptions)? This study also contributes to calls from other researchers about exploring ways that former spouses can coparent cooperatively after a divorce (Ahrns, 1994, 2006; Bonach, 2005).

In the popular press and even in society's psyche, there is a belief that divorce is “hard” on children and certainly this perspective can be validated in the research. However, the same researchers have also provided ample empirical support for the idea that conflicted and distressed marriages are also “hard” on children (Amato, 2000, 2005, 2010; Amato & Booth, 1997) and that divorce might offer some relief to the children of these marriages. If couples are able to reduce the amount of distress and conflict they experience associated with an unhealthy marriage and the resulting choice to divorce, and if they are able to meet in agreeable ways in their coparenting, there may be better outcomes for children who experience the divorce of their parents. We believe this is the direction discernment counseling researchers should focus on in the future. Being able to connect what happens in discernment counseling to parents' coparenting and the impact of that improved coparenting on specific child outcomes would help validate this approach. Of course, the current study can in no way claim that the children of these divorced parents are doing better than they would have without their parents going to discernment counseling. That claim is well beyond the scope of this study. But the results of this small-scale qualitative inquiry into the perceptions of coparenting among a sample of individuals who received discernment counseling is promising and something to build on.

We know that there are a variety of factors that impact the quality of coparent relationships after divorce. These include high levels of coparent communication and involvement, low levels of coparent conflict, and parental satisfaction with custody and financial arrangements and with the parenting skills of the other parent (Ahrns, 1994, 2006). Several of these factors are specifically addressed in the discernment counseling model (communication, reduction in conflict, greater understanding of the decision to divorce). Also, the difficulty and duration of the divorce process including attitudes

and hostility levels, and the use of mediation or other alternative dispute methods during the divorce process can have a substantial impact on the quality of a post-divorce coparenting environment (Baum, 2004; Bonach, 2005; Emery et al., 2001; Markham & Coleman, 2012). The participants in our study reflected that their experience in discernment counseling contributed to reduced conflict and greater understanding in the divorce process.

This study's findings suggest that some distressed couples who participate in discernment counseling may experience a decrease in conflict associated with divorce and an increased measure of cooperation as coparents. Coparenting relationships that are cooperative and low in conflict contribute to healthier child and family outcomes (Ahrons, 1994, 2006; Amato, 2005; Bonach, 2005; Sigal et al., 2011). It is too early to suggest that all who undergo discernment counseling and choose a divorce path will experience these same outcomes. However, this study provides some promising preliminary data to suggest that communication between former partners and coparenting efforts after divorce could be enhanced by going through discernment counseling prior to divorcing.

LIMITATIONS

While the findings from this study are promising they should be regarded cautiously. It should be remembered that the participants were from a sample of individuals who were in heterosexual (male–female) marriages. We still know very little about divorce among same sex couples (as same sex marriage was only legal across the US beginning in 2015) and nothing about how discernment counseling impacts these couples' coparenting relationships. This is an area that could benefit from a variety of studies including both small pilot studies and larger-scale family studies on how these families experience and manage divorce transitions, including outcomes for children. The limitations of this particular study include the small and homogeneous sample (mostly highly educated women with moderate- to high-income levels, who were “leaning-in” spouses). Also, the fact that we only interviewed one spouse of the divorced couple. Additionally, we had no assessment of child outcomes or children's perspectives on the divorce and their experiences of their parents' coparenting activities. This key information would provide a more detailed understanding of the impact of discernment counseling on former spouses' post-divorce communication and coparenting efforts. We see this latter point as the main contribution of this work. Healthy and cooperative coparenting relationships benefit children. Discernment counseling may help divorcing couples become better coparents. More research is needed on this approach at both process and outcome levels to validate this assertion.

ORCID

Steven M. Harris  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9022-1899>

ENDNOTE

¹ All names in this article are pseudonyms to respect and protect participant confidentiality.

REFERENCES

- Ahrons, C. (1994). *The good divorce: Keeping your family together when your marriage comes apart*. HarperCollins Publishers.
- Ahrons, C. (2006). Family ties after divorce: Long term implications for children. *Family Process*, 46(2), 53–65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2006.00191.x>

- Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269–1287. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x>
- Amato, P. R. (2005). The impact of family formation changes on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The Future of Children*, 15(2), 75–93.
- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650–666. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>
- Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (1997). *A generation at risk: Growing up in an era of family upheaval*. Harvard University Press.
- Baum, N. (2004). Typology of post-divorce parental relationships and behaviors. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 41(3/4), 53–79. https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v41n03_03
- Bonach, K. (2005). Factors contributing to quality coparenting: Implications for family policy. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 43(3/4), 79–103. https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v43n03_05
- Clarke-Stewart, A., & Brentano, C. (2006). *Divorce: Causes and consequences*. Yale University Press.
- Copen, C. E., Daniels, K., Vespa, J., & Mosher, W. D. (2012). First marriages in the United States: Data from the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth. *National Health Statistics Reports*, 49, 1–11.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Cui, M., Fincham, F. D., & Durtschi, J. A. (2011). The effect of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution: What makes a difference? *Personal Relationships*, 18, 410–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01306.x>
- Doherty, W. J., & Harris, S. M. (2017). *Helping Couples on the Brink of Divorce: Discernment Counseling for Troubled Relationships*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12264>
- Doherty, W. J., Harris, S. M., & Wilde, J. L. (2016). Discernment counseling for mixed-agenda couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 42, 246–255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12132>
- Emery, R. E., Laumann-Billings, L., Waldron, M. C., Sbarra, D. A., & Dillon, P. (2001). Child custody mediation and litigation: Custody, contact, and coparenting 12 years after initial dispute resolution. *Journal of Counseling and Clinical Psychology*, 69(2), 323–332. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-006X.69.2.323>
- Fagan, P. F., & Churchill, A. (2012). The effects of divorce on children. *Marriage and Religion Research Institute*, 1–48. http://marri.us/wp-content/uploads/publications/research_papers/EF12A22.pdf
- Feinberg, M. E. (2002). Coparenting and the transition to parenthood: A framework for prevention. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 5, 173–195.
- Harris, S. M., Crabtree, S. A., Bell, N. K., Allen, S. M., & Roberts, K. M. (2017). Seeking clarity and confidence in the divorce decision-making process. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 58(2), 83–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2016.1268015>
- Hawkins, A. J., Galovan, A. M., Harris, S. M., Allen, S. E., Allen, S. M., Roberts, K. M., & Schramm, D. G. (2017). What Are They Thinking? A National Study of Stability and Change in Divorce Ideation. *Family Social Science*, 56(4), 852–868. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12299>
- Konstam, V. (2009). Emerging adults and parental divorce: Coming to terms with “what might have been”. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 28(4), 26–40.
- Kreider, R. M., & Ellis, R. (2011). “Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2009.” Current Population Reports, P70-125, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 2011.
- Manen, V. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an active sensitive pedagogy*. The Althouse Press.
- Manen, V. (2007). Phenomenology of practice. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 1(1), 11–30. <https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr19803>
- Markham, M. S., & Coleman, M. (2012). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Divorced mothers' experiences with coparenting. *Family Relations*, 61, 586–600. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00718.x>
- McBroom, L. A. (2011). Understanding post-divorce coparenting families: Integrative literature review. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*, 23, 382–388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-7599.2011.00622.x>
- Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Sigal, A., Sandler, I., Wolchik, S., & Braver, S. (2011). Do parent education programs promote healthy post-divorce parenting? Critical distinctions and a review of the evidence. *Family Court Review*, 49(1), 120–139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2010.01357.x>

- Strohschein, L. (2007). Challenging the presumption of diminished capacity to parent: Does divorce really change parenting practices? *Family Relations*, *56*, 358–368. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2007.00465.x>
- Thomas, D. A., & Woodside, M. (2011). Resilience in adult children of divorce: A multiple case study. *Marriage & Family Review*, *47*, 213–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2011.586300>
- Wallerstein, J. S., & Lewis, J. M. (2004). The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *21*(3), 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0736-9735.21.3.353>

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

How to cite this article: Emerson AJ, Harris SM, Ahmed FA. The impact of discernment counseling on individuals who decide to divorce: experiences of post-divorce communication and coparenting. *J Marital Fam Ther*. 2021;47:36–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12463>