Intergenerational Effects of Conflict in Intimate Relationships

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INTERGENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF CONFLICT IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"

and the Degree Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of Psychology

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by

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Abstract

A survey was used to assess the effects of parental marital status and conflict on the intimate dating relationships of 154 undergraduate volunteers from two private Catholic institutions. Seventy-three percent of the participants were female, 13% were from divorced families, and most participants ranged from 19 to 24 years of age. The effects of parental divorce and conflict were found to be both beneficial and harmful to the adjustment of offspring and development of intimate relationships. Parental divorce, conflict, and low levels of family functioning were associated with increased involvement in steady dating relationships and more self-reported happiness within current intimate relationships. In contrast, parental conflict and low quality of family functioning were related to students’ threatening to break up with their partner. High quality of family functioning was linked to a secure attachment style in offspring, while low family functioning was related to an avoidant attachment style. High levels of student identity correlated with high dyadic adjustment and idealism, whereas low quality of family functioning was related to higher fear of intimacy. Based on these inconsistent results, it is possible that individuals from divorced and conflicctual families have biased perceptions of the quality of their dating relationships due to their experience of the troubled parental relationship, and that they subsequently choose to avoid the mistakes of their parents by avoiding or minimizing conflict within their personal intimate relationships. However, negative perceptions of quality of family functioning should not be discounted, as they appear to have detrimental effects on some areas of offspring adjustment. Perhaps students’ distorted perceptions combined with parental ability to distance their children from divorce-related conflict and model effective problem solving account for this pattern of results.
Intergenerational Effects of Conflict in Intimate Relationships

Marriage is the dominant way of life in the United States. Carstensen, Graff, Levenson, and Gottman (1996) report that over 95% of Americans marry at some point in their lives. However, not all marriages follow the standard adage “'Till death do us part.” Recent data suggest that the divorce rate continues to rise; between 50% and 67% of first marriages end in divorce (Gottman, 1998). As divorce rates soar, the number of children affected by divorce also increases. An estimated 50% of children today will experience the dissolution of their parents’ marriages (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998). Accordingly, interest in research on the psychological impact of divorce on children has also increased. Though this research has yielded contrasting results and fueled a debate over the degree and persistence of divorce’s effects on children, individuals on both sides of the controversy agree that the long term effects of divorce are variable (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Hayashi & Strickland, 1998).

On one side of the debate, it is argued that divorce is not necessarily harmful to children, rather, the experience may actually strengthen children in certain areas of their lives (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). In support of this position, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) indicate that adults from divorced and intact families experience comparable levels of happiness, anxiety, and similar beliefs about the future. Sinclair and Nelson (1998) found that students from divorced families did not experience lower levels of intimacy than children from intact families, and did not hold less functional relationship beliefs than students from intact families, with the exception of the belief that disagreement should be avoided in relationships. Though children often label their parents’ marital transitions as their most painful life experience, Hetherington et al. (1998) report that the majority of children from divorced
families and stepfamilies do not have significant problems and develop into competent adults who function within the normal range of adjustment.

Others argue that divorce has significant and persistent negative effects on children (Wallerstein, 1991). In a review of the divorce literature, Hetherington et al. (1998) report that children from divorced and remarried families are more likely than children from nondivorced families to have academic problems, exhibit externalizing behaviors and internalizing disorders, to be less socially responsible and competent, and to have lower self-esteem. Similarly, Sprecher, Cate, and Levin (1998) link parental divorce to negative effects on the psychological well-being, academic performance, and delinquent behavior of children and adolescents. Parental marital distress, conflict, and disruption have also been linked with depression, social withdrawal, poor social competence, health problems, poor performance in school, and a variety of conduct-related problems in children (Gottman, 1998). As these children reach adulthood, they may continue to be haunted by the effects of their parents’ marital problems; adult offspring of divorced families are less satisfied with their lives, experience lower socioeconomic attainment, and are more likely to be on welfare (Hetherington et al., 1998).

In an effort to resolve the controversy over the effects of divorce, Hetherington et al. (1998) thoroughly reviewed the divorce literature. Five mediating factors involved in the impact of divorce on children were analyzed, including: (1) individual vulnerability and risk; (2) family composition; (3) stress, including socioeconomic disadvantage; (4) parental distress; and (5) disrupted family process. Hetherington et al. (1998) concluded that all of these factors influence children’s adjustment in divorced and remarried families. Evidence supports the hypothesis that children and their parents have personal characteristics that directly influence their likelihood to
experience and have difficulty adjusting to marital transitions (Hetherington et al., 1998). These problems may influence children through shared genetic factors such as personality traits, or they might exert a more indirect influence through parents’ ineffective parenting skills (Hetherington et al., 1998). Furthermore, vulnerability to the outcomes of divorce (whether positive or negative) seems to involve a complicated interaction among various individual attributes, including age, personality, gender, and ethnicity (Hetherington et al., 1998).

The mediating role of family composition-parental absence is supported by the finding that children in two-parent families that have never been divorced are more competent than children of divorced parents (Hetherington et al., 1998). However, there is not a simple main effect of family composition or parental absence; the effects of family composition are modified by the reason for parental absence, quality of relationships among family members, and child gender. Contact with the non-custodial parent, a stepparent, or a substitute attachment figure (i.e., a grandparent, teacher, or coach) can enhance child adjustment (Hetherington et al., 1998).

Children’s adjustment is also affected by life stress and economic deprivation, though the effects of these stressors appear limited (Hetherington et al., 1998). The potentially harmful effects of family structure and economic hardship are mediated by inadequate parenting, such as failure to provide support, supervision, and positive role-modeling. Likewise, though parental distress is significant at the time of a divorce, research suggests that the effects of parental well-being are largely mediated through parenting of their children (Hetherington et al., 1998). Around the time of a divorce, parents may decrease involvement in their children’s lives, exhibit poor problem solving skills, or become depressed or neurotic. If distressed parents maintain good child rearing skills, however, negative effects on child well-being can be minimized.
Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998) propose that the effects of parent and child attributes, family composition, stress and socioeconomic disadvantage, and parental distress on child adjustment may be mediated through the direct influence of family process. Research conducted on the relationships between members of non-divorced families and stepfamilies supports the family process hypothesis and implies that the negative, conflict-laden, dysfunctional relationships between parents, parents and children, and siblings are related to differences in children’s adjustment. Hetherington et al. (1998) introduce a transactional model showing “multiple trajectories of interacting risk and protective factors” (p. 167), which is thought to be most effective in predicting the well-being of children. The conclusion that can be drawn from the work of Hetherington et al. (1998) is that the effects of divorce cannot be determined through examination of divorce per se, but that numerous mediating variables (i.e., risk and protective factors) must also be taken into account.

Bearing in mind that divorce’s effects on offspring are variable, the current study will focus on the adult offspring of divorce, and more specifically, how they handle the task of developing and maintaining intimate relationships compared to offspring of intact families. Gately and Schwebel (1992) found that some children may become strengthened in one or more areas of their lives through adjustment to their changed life situations before, during, and after their parents’ divorce. Individuals who appear to benefit from experiencing their parents’ marital transitions may grow psychologically and develop competencies because of what they learn as they deal with the challenges they are presented within the emotional fallout of the divorce. As a result, these individuals may enter adolescence and adulthood as healthy, psychologically well-adjusted persons, which holds positive implications for their future success in intimate
relationships (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). Hetherington et al. (1998) concur, underscoring the ability of most children of divorce to cope with their parents’ marital transitions.

Conversely, Sprague & Kinney (1997) and Amato (1996) report that the adult children of divorce commonly have a difficult time establishing and maintaining mutually rewarding heterosexual relationships. The adult children of divorce often evidence accelerated courtship behaviors, increased sexual activity and desire for sexual activity, negative attitudes about marriage and conflict within intimate relationships, and low self-esteem (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Hepworth et al., 1984; Johnston & Thomas, 1996; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that greater parental conflict was related to stronger attitudes of doubt and more negative attitudes toward marriage in general. Sprague and Kinney correlated parental divorce with greater likelihood of sexual activity and higher numbers of sexual partners. Similar effects were reported by Hepworth, Ryder, and Dreyer (1984), Johnston and Thomas (1996), and Wallerstein (1991).

Amato (1996) postulates that if the offspring of divorced parents marry, they have a greater risk of seeing their own marriages disintegrate, a phenomenon labeled the “intergenerational transmission of divorce.” This phenomenon is defined by Sprague and Kinney (1997) as the influence of parental marital status on subsequent offspring marital success. The strongest evidence for the intergenerational transmission of divorce consists of retrospective studies of divorced couples. Parental divorce is one of the strongest risk factors for subsequent offspring divorce; parental divorce increases the odds of dissolution within the first five years of marriage by 70% (Amato, 1996). Early divorce research suggested that parental divorce was the most important factor in predicting an individual’s future marital success, and the relationship
between parental divorce and offspring divorce is even stronger when both spouses are from divorced families (Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Amato, 1996; Johnston & Thomas, 1996).

Hetherington et al. (1998) postulate a possible mechanism for this effect: some young adults from divorced families exhibit more dysfunctional problem solving strategies (including denial, belligerence, criticism, and contempt) during marital interactions than do adult offspring of intact marriages. These problem solving strategies bear close resemblance to Gottman’s (1994) “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,”-- a set of negative behaviors including criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling-- behaviors that can be used to effectively predict which couples are headed for divorce. Thus, young adults from divorced families could be exhibiting the same dysfunctional behaviors that led to their parents’ marital dissolution, ultimately with the same end result.

In an attempt to elucidate the reasons why divorce does not affect all offspring in the same way, researchers have increasingly focused on conflict such as Gottman’s (1994) “Four Horsemen” within the marriage as the primary detrimental influence on children. Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) suggest that the degree of marital conflict is more important than whether or not the marriage ends in divorce. Similarly, Gabardi and Rosen (1992) hypothesize that overall level of conflict between parents, whether divorced or married, is the most significant predictor of college students’ relational difficulties. More intense parental conflict is also related to generally more pessimistic attitudes toward marriage and long term relationships (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Johnston & Thomas, 1996; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). For example, the adult children of divorced parents scored lower on a measure of dyadic trust and had a greater fear of rejection than children from nondivorced families, factors that could influence ability to initiate
and sustain romantic relationships (Johnston & Thomas, 1996). Gabardi and Rosen (1992) reported finding that a lower level of parental marital happiness was associated with a greater number of sexual partners in college students from families that remained intact. Sprecher, Cate, and Levin (1998) emphasize that when it comes to the transmission of functional love beliefs to children, the quality of the parents’ marital relationship is of primary importance, not just whether they divorce. This conclusion is based on Sprecher et al.’s (1998) finding that students whose parents’ marriage was intact and unhappy were more similar to a divorced group than an intact/happy group in regards to their love beliefs. Several researchers even suggest that offspring whose parents remain married and quarrel constantly are worse off than offspring from families where divorce lessens or eliminates the acrimony (Booth et al., 1984; Wallerstein, 1991).

Several theories have been proposed to explain the interpersonal mechanisms of the transmission of divorce. Three primary theories include: (1) developmental theory, (2) learning theory, and (3) personality theory. One of the prominent developmental theoretical approaches to this problem is adult attachment theory (Sprecher et al., 1998). Proponents of attachment theory suggest that the quality of the attachment relationship in infancy and childhood largely determines the quality of future intimate relationships (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998). Support for this theory comes from a survey conducted by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in which adult classification of personal attachment styles resulted in similar percentages to Ainsworth’s classifications of secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant styles of infant attachment, a finding which Hayashi and Strickland (1998) argue suggests a continuity in attachment style throughout the life span. They propose that growing up with low quality parent-child relationships and
prolonged familial conflict might be most destructive to future intimate relationships. This conflict may deteriorate the quality of the child’s relationship with either parent by forcing the child into loyalty triangles. Sprecher et al. (1998) note that adults who perceived their parents as having a happy and affectionate marital relationship were more likely to have a secure attachment style, though the relationship between parental divorce, attachment style, and offspring divorce has not been thoroughly evaluated.

In another developmental approach, Sinclair and Nelson (1998) discuss the relationship between divorce and intimacy in terms of a failure to resolve the developmental task of establishing intimacy and trust because of the instability of the turbulent parental relationship. Future relationships with the opposite sex are subsequently enacted in the pattern of the failed parental heterosexual relationship. Another developmental perspective is forwarded by Hepworth, Ryder, and Dreyer (1984), who note Erikson’s contention that the loss of a parent in adolescence or young adulthood can affect the tasks of developing intimacy and identity. The consequent insecurity can lead to impairment in the individual’s ability to enter a mature, intimate relationship, an insecurity that may be expressed by premature engagement in sexual activity, or avoidance of sexual relationships altogether (Hepworth et al., 1984; Booth et al., 1984). Furthermore, students from families with a high degree of conflict may have low expectations for emotional satisfaction in their romantic relationships, and instead meet their needs for intimacy through sexual activity (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Booth et al. (1984) found offspring from divorced families to have fewer reservations about dating, though they also demonstrated less desire for long-term intimate bonds. Hepworth et al. (1984) theorize that individuals affected by divorce may attempt to replace the absent family member as soon as
possible. Thus, developmental theory provides a possible explanation both for the tendency of
the adult children of divorce to engage in increased sexual activity and their pessimistic attitudes
toward marriage.

Learning theory is a second major approach utilized in explaining the transmission of
divorce. Amato (1996) contends that the effects of parental marital difficulty appear to exert
influence mainly through spouses' interpersonal behaviors during marital interactions.
Specifically, he believes parental divorce predisposes offspring to exhibit interpersonal behaviors
(such as inappropriate levels of anger, jealousy, hurt feelings, infidelity and inadequate
communication skills) that interfere with their ability to maintain mutually rewarding romantic
relationships, thus increasing the risk of offspring divorce. Parental behavioral modeling is
theorized to be the mechanism of this effect. Hayashi and Strickland (1998) assert that conflict
between parents models aggressive behaviors for children. Amato concurs, stating that adult
children from divorced families of origin are exposed to poor models of interpersonal
communication and behavior, and as a result may have difficulty learning the problem-solving
skills and interpersonal attitudes that promote successful adaptation to marital roles. Offspring
might in fact be predisposed to develop personality traits that worsen existing relationship
problems (Amato, 1996).

Personality theory comprises another major approach to analysis of the intergenerational
transmission of divorce. There is strong evidence that personality has a large genetic component
(Jockin, McGue, & Lykken, 1996; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Weiten & Lloyd, 1994). Previous
divorce research examined by Jockin et al. (1996) also demonstrates that certain personality traits
such as extroversion, neuroticism, low behavioral constraint, nonconformity, and low adherence
to traditional values are associated with divorce risk. They hypothesize that the children of divorce might be at increased risk of negative outcomes (such as divorce) not because of the emotional environment they were subjected to by their parents but because their parents share common genetic material with them. In other words, a substantial proportion of offspring divorce risk is genetically mediated (Jockin et al., 1996). As evidence of this theory, a twin study that estimated the extent to which divorce risk variation could be accounted for by the genetic contribution of one individual in the marriage (i.e., the twin) found approximately .53 of the samples’ variance in divorce risk could be attributed to the genetic contribution of one spouse. In a subsequent study conducted by Jockin et al. (1996), monozygotic (MZ) twin divorce correlations substantially exceeded the corresponding dizygotic twin correlations; in fact, divorce risk can be predicted almost as accurately with the personality profile of one’s MZ co-twin as with one’s own profile. Therefore, the same personality traits that predisposed parents to behaviors detrimental to their marriage could be passed on to the children, and might subsequently be harmful to offspring intimate relationships.

The current investigation evaluated the hypothesis that parental marital quality is related to the quality of adult offsprings’ intimate relationships while in college. Of particular interest were the effects of moderate to high levels of conflict within intact parent marriages. Individuals from divorced and/or conflictual families should report experiencing the lowest quality of intimate relationships in college. More specifically, the current study addressed whether: (1) students from divorced and/or conflictual families of origin were less likely to be involved in a steady dating relationship; (2) they would be less happy within the relationship; (3) students from divorced and/or conflictual families would experience shorter intimate relationships with higher
levels of sexual activity; (4) they would have less optimistic beliefs about future relationships; and (5) these students experienced lower levels of intimacy (higher fear of intimacy) within their romantic relationships. The present study will contribute to existing research information on college students’ intimate relationships through a comparison of the effects of parental conflict and family process within divorced and non-divorced families at two Catholic institutions. Measures utilized in the current study were chosen to assess a broad-based general representation of various areas of adjustment—possibly influenced by parental divorce—that might subsequently influence ability to develop and maintain healthy intimate relationships. To assess relationship history and outcome, participants were asked to respond to a survey that covered personal attachment style, level of personal relationship satisfaction, sexual behavior, fear of intimacy, and dating goals, as well as demographic information and religiosity. In addition, influential parent variables, including marital status, level of conflict, quality of family functioning, and perceived marital happiness of the parental relationship were taken into account.

Method

Participants

Volunteer undergraduate students were recruited from two small private institutions in the Midwest. These schools have a unique relationship; the two institutions share the same curriculum while maintaining separate identities as same-sex institutions. One hundred and fifty-four participants were surveyed through psychology courses designated as upper division social science courses. Upper division psychology courses were chosen in order to obtain students who were at least in their sophomore year of college. This decision was made in order to survey students who had spent more time in college and had probably experienced more intimate
relationships. The majority of participants (112, or 72.7%) were female, and 42 (27.3%) participants were male. Most participants were traditional students ranging in age from 19 to 24 years of age, and one individual indicated that she was over 25 years of age. Sophomores (N = 14) comprised 9% of the sample, 59 (38%) participants were Juniors, 76 (49%) were Seniors, 4 (3%) were 5th-year Seniors, and one individual (1%) did not fit a class category. Twenty participants (13%) reported that their parents were divorced, whereas 134 (87%) students were from nondivorced families. Participants were asked how often they attended religious services as a non-denominational measure of religiosity. Forty participants (26%) reported that they attended church weekly, 56 (36%) attended twice a month or monthly, and 58 (37%) rarely or never attended religious services.

Because the research consisted of an anonymous survey, the research was not subjected to Institutional Review Board approval.

Materials

A 124-item survey was compiled to assess perceptions of family and parent marital relationships, dating behavior, and quality of their romantic relationships. Questions included in the survey were based on a review of literature regarding the effects of divorce on offspring. Areas assessed by the survey included: current relationship status and satisfaction, sexual activity, fear of intimacy, attachment style, dating goals, family functioning, perceived quality of parental marital relationship and satisfaction, and a short demographic section.

The survey incorporated an attenuated version of Descutner and Thelen’s (1991) Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) and questions from self-report data used by these researchers in the development of the FIS. Descutner and Thelen based items for the FIS on the definition of the
fear of intimacy as the “inhibited capacity of an individual, because of anxiety, to exchange thoughts and feelings of personal significance with another individual who is highly valued” (p. 219). The FIS was designed to determine how the fear of intimacy influences intimacy within a close relationship or at the opportunity of a close relationship (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Participants responded to the modified FIS using a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from (1) not at all characteristic of me to (5) extremely characteristic of me. Responses to the FIS are summed to obtain a fear of intimacy score for each participant, with higher scores indicating greater fear of intimacy.

Several questions utilized by Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) in a questionnaire analyzing the impact of parental divorce on courtship were included in the present study. To analyze the quality of student dating relationships, questions such as “Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship with the person you are going with?” were used, and to examine the relationships of those who were not steadily dating, questions such as “I never seem to date members of the opposite sex with whom I feel I could develop a serious relationship.” were included. Some of Booth et al.’s (1984) questions regarding parental marital conflict over possessions, alimony, and trying to get children to choose a side were also included.

Participants’ characteristic style of interaction within romantic relationships, or adult attachment style, was assessed using Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) single-item measure of the three attachment styles. This measure was based on Ainsworth’s 1978 infant-caregiver classifications, worded to describe adult romantic love (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Participants were asked to choose which of three simple, one-paragraph descriptions of secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment types best described them (Hayashi & Strickland, 1998).
Hazan and Shaver found that over half (56%) of adults classified themselves as secure, while the remainder split fairly evenly between the avoidant (25%) and anxious/ambivalent (19%) categories.

The Social Dating Scale developed by Sanderson and Cantor (1995) was included to assess participant status on the developmental tasks of the formation of identity and intimacy, accomplished partially through the social dating experience. Four of the items on this 13-item scale deal with identity (1, 6, 10, and 13), while the remainder pertain to intimacy. Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) disagree strongly to (5) agree strongly, with higher scores indicating greater identity and intimacy.

The Kindness, Unkindness, Ability to Communicate, Disengagement, and Quality of the Family Relationship subscales of Lee’s (1997) Family Profile II were also included as an overall sample of family functioning. The five subscales measure the extent to which family members engage in altruistic actions for each other (Kindness), the extent to which family members act with selfish disregard for each other (Unkindness), the family’s ability to express themselves and understand others (Ability to Communicate), the extent to which members of the family act without considering other family members and communicating with each other (Disengagement), and the overall degree of satisfaction and positive regard for the family’s functioning (Quality of the Family Relationship) (Lee, 1997). Participants in the present study responded to 23 items asking how often (on a scale of 1 - 7, never - always) their family engages in the behaviors listed. The scale is summarized by adding the scores for each subscale and plotting them on a profile of percentile ranks provided by Lee (1997).

Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) was included in the present survey as a
measure of perceived parental conflict. The DAS, designed for use with couples, was reformatted and modified to allow participants to respond according to their perceptions of their parents' marital relationship on the dimensions of Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion, and Affectional Expression. For example, the item "Do you confide in your mate?" was converted to "Do your parents confide in each other?" Questions regarding parental sexual behavior were eliminated. Responses were given on Likert rating scales, the highest rating in each scale corresponding with the greatest degree of conflict or dysfunction.

Multiple original questions about dating behavior ("How long was your longest, closest exclusive dating relationship?") and parental marital status ("If your parents are married, how happily married do you think they are?") were developed for the purpose of the present study.

A complete copy of the questionnaire, including questions developed specifically for the current study, is in Appendix A.

Procedure

The complete questionnaire was divided into two subsections of approximately equal length. One subsection dealt with the participant's intimate relationships, the other pertained to the parental marital relationship. The sections were then counterbalanced by creating two forms. Questions pertaining to an individual's personal relationships were placed first in Form 1 and questions regarding the parental marital relationship were placed last. The order of subsections was reversed in Form 2. This was done to reduce the possibility of bias if participants discovered the purpose of the survey. Both forms included a short demographic section prior to the first subsection.

Surveys were inserted with a corresponding answer sheet in unsealed manila envelopes
(addressed to this researcher) and placed in alternating order. Survey packets were circulated to professors, who distributed them to students in their classes. Respondents were told by their instructors that they could voluntarily complete the survey, which was part of a senior Psychology major’s Honors thesis. Participants were instructed to fill out the survey only once, as there was some overlap in enrollment between classes that were given the survey, and respondents could either return the survey to their professor or through campus mail. Surveys that were returned to instructors were collected by the researcher. Confidentiality was maintained, as no specific identifying information was requested on the survey.

One hundred and twenty-three of the participants were given time in class to complete the survey, and 58 participants took the survey home. The in-class return rate was 100%, but only 31 (53%) of the 58 participants who took the survey home completed it and mailed it back to the researcher. Thirty participants were given extra credit by their professors to complete the survey. Seventy-eight participants (51%) responded to Form 1 and 76 (49%) responded to Form 2.

To simplify and organize data analysis, parent data were reduced to four variables representative of the targeted behaviors: marital status (divorced/nondivorced); overall ratings of family functioning based on a subscale of Lee’s (1997) Family Profile II; marital conflict as measured by Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale; and a combined variable (items 120, 123, and 125) labeled “idealism” which assessed offspring attitudes about the perceived quality of the parental marital relationship.

Data regarding offspring relationships were reduced and divided into six categories: dating behavior, dating attitudes, sexual behavior, attachment, identity, and fear of intimacy. The dating behavior category was comprised of four questions: “What is your current relationship
status?”, “How long was your longest, closest exclusive dating relationship?”, “Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship with the person you are going with?”, and “Some people get so upset or dissatisfied with the person they are going with, they threaten to break up the relationship. Has that ever happened in your present relationship?”

Dating attitudes included the questions: “How satisfied are you with the quality of your romantic relationships (overall)?”, “If you are currently in a romantic relationship, how long do you expect your relationship to last?”, “How optimistic are you that your relationship will last?”, “Keeping in mind the number of times you have gone out with a member of the opposite sex in the last six months, would you prefer to go out more often, go out the same amount, or go out less often?”, “I never seem to date members of the opposite sex with whom I feel I could develop a serious relationship.”, and “How satisfied do you expect to be in long-term or marriage-type relationships?”

Questions regarding respondents’ sexual behavior included: “Are you sexually active? For the purposes of this study, sexually active is defined as having sexual intercourse.”, “If you are sexually active, at what age did you first have sexual intercourse?”, and “If you are sexually active, how many sexual partners have you had?”

The attachment category was made up of one question, Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) single-item measure of the three attachment styles.

A subset of four identity questions were gathered from the Social Dating Scale (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995) and were summed to yield an identity score.

The fear of intimacy category was made up of scores derived from the Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991), questions #36 - #55 on the survey.
One additional variable, labeled "religiosity" was coded from item #4, "How often do you attend religious services?" to examine the relationship of respondent religious behavior to other variables. Students who reported that they attended religious services weekly were categorized as high in religiosity, students who reported that they attended bimonthly or monthly were medium, and students who attended rarely or never were low in religiosity.

Debriefing was accomplished through an article in a psychology newsletter, campus papers, and a TV program accessible to students at both institutions involved in the current study.

Results

Parent Characteristics and Student Dating Behaviors

Table 1 contains t-test comparisons of dating behavior between students from divorced versus nondivorced families. Respondents from divorced families of origin were more likely to be involved in a steady dating relationship, reported having longer intimate relationships, and reported a higher level of happiness with their current relationship. However, the two groups (divorced and nondivorced) did not show a difference in threatening to break up with their partners, $\chi^2 (N = 94) = .23, df = 1, p = .63$. Thus, it appears that parental divorce is related to adaptive dating behaviors.

Table 2 shows correlations of overall quality of family functioning, dyadic adjustment, and idealism with dating behavior. Relationship status showed a negative correlation with ratings of overall quality of family life; students who gave lower ratings to their family functioning were more likely to be involved in a dating relationship. Dyadic adjustment also showed a negative correlation with relationship status, as students who reported low levels of parental dyadic adjustment (i.e., more conflict) were more likely to be involved in a dating
Table 1. Comparison of Dating Behavior Between Students From Divorced (N = 20) Versus Nondivorced (N = 134) Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Divorced Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Nondivorced Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dating Behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in steady dating relationship</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longest dating relationship</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of happiness w/in current relationship</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Correlations of Overall Quality of Family Functioning, Dyadic Adjustment, and Idealism with Dating Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Dyadic Adjustment</th>
<th>Idealism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dating Behavior</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in steady dating relationship</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longest dating relationship</td>
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<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of happiness w/in current relationship</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05
** p < .01
relationship. Relationship status was not related to idealism. Length of intimate relationships was not correlated with quality of family life, dyadic adjustment scores, or idealism. Happiness within the respondent’s current dating relationship was not related to quality of family functioning or idealism, but students who reported higher levels of happiness in their current relationship also reported lower levels of dyadic adjustment (i.e., more conflict). Therefore, involvement in an intimate relationship and happiness within the student’s current relationship is related to low quality of family functioning and high levels of parental conflict, contrary to the expectation that these students would not be involved in relationships.

Table 3 shows means for quality of family functioning, dyadic adjustment, and idealism as a function of likelihood of threatening to break-up in student’s current relationship. Students who had threatened to break up with their partner reported the lowest quality of family life, lowest levels of parental dyadic adjustment, and the least idealistic view of their parents’ marriage. Thus, the students’ perceptions of their parents’ relationship was related to a key characteristic of their current dating relationship, consistent with the idea that poorer family functioning has a negative influence on offspring intimate relationships.

Parent Characteristics and Dating Attitudes

Table 4 contains t-tests of dating attitudes between students from divorced versus nondivorced families. Offspring from divorced families of origin reported higher overall levels of satisfaction with their intimate relationships, suggesting superior post-divorce adjustment in offspring of divorced parents. On the other hand, respondents’ expectation and optimism that their current relationship would last were not significantly related to parental marital status. Respondent satisfaction with the frequency of dates they went on was not related to parental
Table 3. Comparison of Student Rates of Threatening to Break Up Across Quality of Family Functioning, Dyadic Adjustment, and Idealism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Variable</th>
<th>Threaten to Break Up</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>28.37</td>
<td>25.50</td>
<td>28.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>6.73</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>103.83</td>
<td>85.50</td>
<td>97.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>21.83</td>
<td>29.87</td>
<td>25.68</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Comparison of Dating Attitudes Between Students From Divorced (N = 20) Versus Nondivorced (N = 134) Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Divorced Mean</th>
<th>Divorced SD</th>
<th>Nondivorced Mean</th>
<th>Nondivorced SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dating Attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction w/ romantic</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation that current relationship</td>
<td>4.58</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will last</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism that current relationship</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will last</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with statement re. dating</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>potential serious partners</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of satisfaction within</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>long-term relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
marital status, $X^2 (N = 152) = .96, df = 2, p = .62$. Offspring from divorced families were not more likely than students from nondivorced families to disagree with the statement: “I never seem to date members of the opposite sex with whom I feel I could develop a serious relationship.”, $t (148) = 1.92, p = .06$. Expectation of long-term satisfaction in intimate relationships was not related to parental marital status. Parental divorce had a mild, positive impact on offspring attitudes about dating.

Table 5 shows correlations between overall quality of family functioning, dyadic adjustment, and idealism and dating attitudes. None of these relationships were statistically significant.

**Parent Characteristics and Sexual Behavior**

The predicted relationship between parental divorce and offspring sexual activity did not reach significance, $X^2 (N = 154) = 2.60, df = 1, p = .107$. Respondents’ reported age at initiation of sexual activity and number of sexual partners were not significantly related to parental marital status. Student sexual behavior (sexual activity, age at initiation of sexual activity, and number of sexual partners) was unaffected by quality of family functioning, dyadic adjustment, and idealism. Parent characteristics did not relate to significant differences in any aspect of student sexual behavior.

**Religiosity and Sexual Behavior**

Tables 6 and 7 show means for sexual activity, and age at onset of sexual activity and number of sexual partners, respectively, as a function of attendance of religious services. Several significant relationships between religious and sexual behavior were found. Chi-square analysis revealed that individuals who attended religious services more often were less likely to be
Table 5. **Correlations of Overall Quality of Family Functioning, Dyadic Adjustment, and Idealism with Dating Attitudes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Dyadic Adjustment</th>
<th>Idealism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dating Attitudes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction w/ romantic relationships</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation that current relationship will last</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism that current relationship will last</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreement with statement re. potential serious partners</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of satisfaction within long-term rel.</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05
** p < .01
Table 6. **Comparison of Sexual Activity Across Attendance of Religious Services**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate of Religious Attendance</th>
<th>Sexual Activity</th>
<th>( \chi^2 )</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes Number (Percent)</td>
<td>No Number (Percent)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently (weekly)</td>
<td>10 (11%)</td>
<td>30 (47%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately (twice a month or monthly)</td>
<td>33 (37%)</td>
<td>23 (36%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely (a couple of times per year or never)</td>
<td>47 (52%)</td>
<td>11 (17%)</td>
<td>30.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. **Comparison of Age at Onset of Sexual Activity and Number of Sexual Partners with Rates of Religious Attendance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Religious Attendance Rate</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequently</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sexually active. Interestingly, respondents who exhibited high levels of religious behavior and were sexually active were likely to have initiated sexual activity at a younger age than their less religious counterparts, though they reported a lower total number of sexual partners. The religiosity variable was not related to any other variables in the analysis. In the current study, student sexual behavior was related more strongly to religious behavior than parent characteristics.

Parent Characteristics and Attachment

Chi-square analyses of attachment and parental marital status revealed that parental divorce did not affect attachment style, \( \chi^2 (N = 150) = .83, df = 2, p = .66 \). However, respondents who rated the overall quality of their family functioning highly were more likely to have a secure attachment style than those who had lower ratings of family functioning. Table 8 shows mean ratings of quality of family function broken down by attachment style. Attachment style was unaffected by dyadic adjustment, \( \bar{F} (2, 148) = 1.47, p = .23 \); and idealism, \( \bar{F} (2, 148) = .02, p = .98 \). Thus, consistent with the pattern for this sample, marital status was not related to attachment style, but perceptions of family functioning were.

Parental Characteristics, Identity, and Fear of Intimacy

Results of t-tests for mean ratings of identity and fear of intimacy between students from divorced versus nondivorced families showed that neither identity nor fear of intimacy was significantly related to parental marital status.

Table 9 shows correlations of overall quality of family functioning, dyadic adjustment, and idealism with identity and fear of intimacy. Respondent identity scores on the Social Dating Scale (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995) were not correlated with quality of family functioning,
Table 8. **Comparison of Attachment Style and Ratings of Quality of Family Functioning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Secure</th>
<th>Attachment Style</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Anxious/Ambiv.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Family Functioning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>28.84</td>
<td>25.59</td>
<td>26.50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>6.67</td>
<td>4.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9. **Correlations of Overall Quality of Family Functioning, Dyadic Adjustment, and Idealism with Identity and Fear of Intimacy.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Variable</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Dyadic Adjustment</th>
<th>Idealism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity (Social Dating Goals)</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Intimacy</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  
** p < .01
however, identity scores were positively correlated with dyadic adjustment and idealism, suggesting that students from families with low levels of conflict had a better sense of identity and a more idealized perception of their parents’ marriage. Respondents’ fear of intimacy scores were negatively correlated with quality of family functioning; higher fear of intimacy was associated with poorer family functioning. Fear of intimacy scores were not related to dyadic adjustment and idealism.

Discussion

The present study confirmed the hypothesis that parental marital status and quality affects the caliber of offspring intimate relationships while in college. However, parental divorce, marital conflict, and quality of family interaction evidenced a mixture of favorable and unfavorable effects on offspring intimate relationships, contrary to the hypothesized negative effects. Individuals from divorced families of origin were more likely to be involved in steady dating relationships, to experience intimate relationships of longer duration, to be happier within their current relationship, and report higher levels of overall satisfaction with dating relationships. Furthermore, low ratings of overall quality of family functioning were correlated with increased likelihood of offspring involvement in an intimate relationship. No significant relationships were found between parental marital status and offspring dating attitudes (i.e., satisfaction with dating relationships and optimism about future intimate relationships), and parental divorce was not related to a greater likelihood of sexual activity among college-age offspring. Divorce was also unrelated to threatening to break up, attachment style, identity, and fear of intimacy. Adaptive dating behaviors exhibited by the sample in the current study are consistent with other researchers’ findings that some individuals seem to benefit from
experiencing their parents' marital transitions (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). Therefore, the combined results for parental divorce and adaptive dating behaviors provide empirical support for the idea that divorce's effects on offspring may not always be harmful; in fact, parental divorce might prompt offspring to mature psychologically and become more competent in intimate relationships.

The current study also did not find increased sexual activity among offspring of divorced parents. This result is inconsistent with research that details divorce's negative, risk-taking effects on offspring. Increased sexual activity among the offspring of divorced parents has been documented by numerous researchers (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Hepworth et al., 1984; Johnston & Thomas, 1996; Sprague & Kinney, 1997). Failure to find heightened sexual activity in the sample is consistent with findings of beneficial effects of divorce on dating behaviors and dating attitudes.

In contrast, individuals who reported low quality of family functioning tended to threaten to break up with their partner more frequently than individuals who rated the quality of their family life highly. Individuals who reported that the overall quality of functioning within their family was high were more likely to have a secure attachment style than individuals who gave low ratings to the quality of their family life, while low quality of family functioning was also associated with high fear of intimacy scores. The finding that family relationships and interaction had the strongest effect on offspring intimate relationships suggests that parental conflict alone isn't necessarily the culprit of harmful influence on offspring. Parental conflict may be independent of family processes. If the family processes are dysfunctional, offspring are negatively impacted regardless of the dyadic relationship between the parents.
These findings are consistent with Hetherington et al. ’s (1998) contention that the effects of individual attributes, family composition, stressors (including socioeconomic disadvantage), and parental distress on offspring adjustment may be mediated through the direct influence of family process. Negative, conflict-laden, dysfunctional relationships between parents, parents and children, and siblings has been demonstrated to account for the differences in children’s adjustment. The deleterious effects of family process on offspring attachment and intimacy found in the current study provide empirical support for the mediating effects of family process, regardless of parental marital status. However, the finding that individuals from divorced and nondivorced families with lower levels of family functioning are more likely to be involved in a serious dating relationship contradicts the logical expectation that individuals with higher fear of intimacy and avoidant or anxious/ambivalent attachment styles would be less likely to be involved in dating relationships.

Low levels of dyadic adjustment (high parental conflict) were also associated with a greater likelihood of involvement in an intimate relationship and higher reported levels of happiness within the student’s current relationship, as well as not threatening to break up. Reported level of parental dyadic adjustment was not related to student dating attitudes or sexual activity. However, identity scores were positively correlated with dyadic adjustment; respondents who reported high identity scores also reported high levels of parental dyadic adjustment. These results appear to counter previous research findings which relate parental marital conflict to less successful intimate relationships (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992); pessimistic attitudes toward relationships (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Johnston & Thomas, 1996; Sprague & Kinney, 1997); low levels of trust (Johnston & Thomas, 1996); and high levels of sexual activity
(Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Parental conflict appears to be related to adaptive relationship behaviors (i.e., involvement in a serious dating relationship, higher reported levels of happiness within the current relationship, and not threatening to break up), while parental adjustment heightens students’ sense of identity.

Religiosity was also examined in an attempt to explain results obtained for student sexual behavior. In general, individuals who attended religious services regularly were less likely to be sexually active. Surprisingly, respondents who exhibited high levels of church attendance and were sexually active were likely to have initiated sexual activity at a younger age than their less religious counterparts, though they reported a lower total number of sexual partners than individuals who rarely attended religious services.

The results obtained in the present study present a complex picture of divorce’s effects on offspring intimate relationships. The finding that parental divorce and marital conflict were associated with increased likelihood of offspring involvement in a steady dating relationship, higher reported levels of happiness within the current relationship, and not threatening to break up was viewed from two perspectives. First, some individuals may indeed benefit from experiencing their parents’ marital transitions.

Gately and Schwebel (1992) suggest that successful coping with the demands of parental divorce may prompt emotional and personality growth in offspring. They found favorable offspring outcomes following parental divorce in four main areas: maturity, self-esteem, empathy, and androgyny. Maturity exhibited by offspring is an adaptive development that facilitates effective coping (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). The self-esteem of children who face parental divorce is also strengthened when they cope successfully with new responsibilities and
changed circumstances. Divorced parents can model adaptive coping behavior, and children can learn vicariously to be less fearful and cope more effectively (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). Additionally, some children from divorced and single-parent families show increased empathy and sensitivity for the needs of others, perspective-taking skills that are strengthened through providing emotional and practical support to family members (Gately & Schwebel, 1992). Offspring from divorced families of origin are also more likely to demonstrate increased androgyny. Androgyny may result from parental modeling of nontraditional attitudes and behaviors, or if children (by necessity or with parent encouragement) engage in nontraditional sex role activities following divorce.

Adaptive dating behaviors exhibited by individuals in the current study may indicate increased self-esteem, emotional maturity, and effective communication skills. Through the trials of their parents’ divorce, these students may have developed interpersonal skills and psychological strengths that allow them to successfully engage in normal dating behavior. An implication of these findings is that when offspring are given a developmentally appropriate amount of practical and emotional responsibility, the results can be beneficial to offspring adjustment.

Secondly, the findings that parental divorce and marital conflict were associated with favorable effects on offspring dating behavior and attitudes can be viewed with skepticism. It is possible that the intimate relationships of adult offspring from divorced and nondivorced families are not qualitatively different, but that individuals from divorced families of origin perceive their relationships as happy and of high quality because they are comparing them to their parents’ troubled marriage. Through observation of parent behaviors (i.e., conflict and divorce) that earn
negative consequences (i.e., emotional difficulty or social stigmatization), offspring may vicariously learn to avoid similar situations in their personal intimate relationships. This interpretation is supplemented by findings that offspring from divorced families are more likely to hold the relationship belief that disagreement in relationships should be avoided (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998). Offspring from divorced families may have learned to avoid conflict within their relationships, and therefore may be able to maintain intimate relationships and perceive them as happy because of a lack of both functional and dysfunctional conflict. This idea corresponds with one of Gottman’s (1994) effective styles of marital interaction, the “Avoiders.” Individuals within this type of relationship make light of their differences instead of resolving them. They do not attempt to persuade each other or compromise, instead, they resolve their issues by minimizing or avoiding them. In future research, Gottman’s (1998) procedure for observing couple interactions could be applied to both parent and offspring dyadic interactions. This procedure would allow researchers to eliminate possible bias in self-reported relationship quality and would evaluate objective levels of relationship quality through neutral observation of both parental and offspring couple interactions. Observation of offspring couples could also determine whether these individuals use an avoiding style of interaction within their intimate relationships.

Quality of family functioning and parental dyadic adjustment had both positive and negative relationships with offspring dating behavior, dating attitudes, sexual behavior, attachment, identity, and fear of intimacy. Parental marital status was related to adaptive dating behaviors, and was not associated with detrimental effects on offspring dating attitudes, sexual behavior, attachment, identity, and fear of intimacy. The pattern of results found in the current
study could be due to several mediating factors. First, the aspects of family life measured may not be the principle mediating factors in the divorce process. Though quality of family functioning seemed to mediate the effects of divorce on offspring, the present study did not investigate social support, socioeconomic advantage, sibling relationships, and personality of participants. If these factors were taken into account, the dynamic relationships between parent and offspring relationships could be further clarified.

Alternately, society’s attitudes toward divorce may have changed, and both parent and offspring divorce may theoretically be linked to a third variable: society’s sanctioning of divorce. Divorce has become more commonplace and more accepted by society (Hetherington et al., 1998). Because of an emphasis on personal fulfillment instead of family values, more couples might be inclined to end their marriage today than in the past due to the absence of motivation to stay in the marriage, and reduced societal resistance to the ending of a marriage (Santrock, 1999; Amato, 1996). Because of the reduced resistance to divorce, it is possible that low quality marriages dissolve before the couple has children or before the dysfunctional marital relationship begins to affect children. If the terminated marriage does affect children, current attitudes of acceptance might help facilitate child adjustment, whereas the divorce of a child’s parents may have been very traumatic and disruptive in the past.

As divorce has become more common, so has education, support, and intervention for both parents and offspring. Parent interventions include classes that cover legal aspects of divorce; custody, visitation and child support; the mediation process; the psychological impact of divorce upon families and children; and remarriage and post-divorce communication and parenting (Schuett, 1998). These classes are mandatory for couples obtaining a divorce in some
states. Therapeutic divorce support groups are also offered by mental health workers for parents or children within clinical, community, and school settings. Lessening the acrimony and dysfunction of family relationships immediately before, during, and after a divorce has been linked to increased adjustment in both parents and children (Hetherington et al., 1998). The positive impact of these divorce intervention efforts may be evidenced by the current study’s findings that divorce and parental conflict do not appear to have significant effects on offspring well-being.

Previous research findings on the intergenerational transmission of divorce should be interpreted with caution. As many as 67% of first marriages today end in divorce, a trend that started in the 1960's (Gottman, 1998; Hetherington et al., 1998). Statistically, overlap between successive generations affected by divorce is probable and should be expected at rates of at least 25% or 33%, but does not necessarily mean that divorce runs in families. The availability heuristic might be a possible cause for the belief in the “intergenerational transmission of divorce,” as individuals may be more likely to pay attention to the backgrounds of people from divorced families who may obtain divorces themselves. A possible method of accurately tracing the “transmission of divorce” would be to construct family pedigrees to follow the occurrence of divorce across generations. If the percentage of divorces within a single family are higher than expected rates, it could be construed as evidence for the validity of this phenomenon.

As poor quality of family functioning was linked to the highest level of dysfunctional relationship behaviors and students in this sample showed superior adjustment, it can be speculated that conflict and poor family functioning are reduced in this sample. Why? The uniqueness of the sample utilized in the current study should be emphasized as a possible
explanation for the results obtained. Respondents were recruited from two private Catholic institutions with high tuition. Students at the institutions primarily come from Caucasian, middle-to-upper class families in the Midwestern United States, and the average rate of Catholicism at the institutions is 80% to 90% percent of students. Catholicism should be expected to affect characteristics of the sample because Catholics have a highly negative view of divorce and it is difficult to obtain a divorce within the Catholic church. It was expected that the divorce rate of parents of students attending these institutions would be lower than the national average. The sample used in the present study had a parental divorce rate of 13%, a surprisingly low figure when compared to the national average of 50%. The expectation of a low parental divorce rate was based on research that postulates a strong link between religiosity and marital stability, as well as correlations found between religion and divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997; Joubert, 1995). Booth, Johnson, Branaman, and Sica (1995) observed that while increases in religiosity slightly lowered the probability of contemplating divorce, religiosity did not enhance marital happiness or reduce conflict. Booth et al. (1995) propose that the relationship between religiosity and marital quality may be reciprocal: religious activity may enhance a marriage, or individuals within a troubled marriage may seek increased religious involvement. Family processes, conflict tactics, and severity of existing conflict may also differ within this sample, as it is only representative of a small section of the general population. Various combinations of these factors may result in different levels of offspring adjustment, and may be the source of contradictory findings on the effects of divorce.

Perhaps a longitudinal design could help explicate the relationships found in the current study. The cross-sectional survey method used limited the amount of information that could be
gathered in regards to family situation, marital conflict, and offspring relationship behavior. A long-term study using self-report, observational, and archival data would provide a more comprehensive picture of divorce and mediating factors that may be involved in offspring adjustment.

Limitations of the present study mainly concern the sample used. The sample was selected from two small, private Catholic institutions. It was difficult to find individuals with a history of parental divorce in a fairly random sample of such a population, as evidenced by the fact that only 20 (13%) of the 154 participants were from divorced families of origin. These circumstances are not easily generalized to a broad population.

Findings that the effects of parental divorce and conflict are generally beneficial to the adjustment of offspring and development of intimate relationships are viewed with skepticism in light of the significant amount of empirical work showing the negative effects of divorce on offspring. Though these findings may actually reflect increased offspring adjustment and coping skills within intimate relationships, this researcher remains unconvinced. It is more likely that these individuals have biased perceptions of the quality of their dating relationships due to their experience of the conflictual parental relationship, and that they subsequently choose to avoid the mistakes of their parents by avoiding or minimizing conflict within their personal intimate relationships. Future research using a combination of observational, self-report, and archival data may be able to uncover the variable effects of divorce on future offspring behavior in intimate relationships. Perhaps students’ distorted perceptions combined with parental ability to distance their children from divorce-related conflict and model effective problem solving account for this pattern of results.
References

Amato, P.R. Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 58*, 628-640.


Appendix A

The Survey
Form 1

Using a #2 pencil, please fill out the following survey honestly and to the best of your ability on the corresponding answer sheet. Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Please read all questions CAREFULLY. If none of the listed answer choices fit your current situation, please leave them blank. If you have previously completed this survey, please don’t fill it out again, and hand in the blank survey packet. Thank you!!

1. Are you a student at a.) SJU or b.) CSB?

2. How old are you? If your age is not listed, please mark the closest one.
   a.) 18 (or younger) b.) 19-20 c.) 21-22 d.) 23-24 e.) 25 (or older)

3. What is your class?
   a.) first-year
   b.) sophomore
   c.) junior
   d.) senior
   e.) 5th year senior
   f.) other

4. How often do you attend religious services?
   a.) weekly
   b.) twice monthly
   c.) monthly
   d.) a couple of times per year
   e.) never

Please answer the following questions and record your answers on the answer sheet.

5. What is your current romantic relationship status?
   a.) not dating at all
   b.) dating several people casually
   c.) dating one person casually
   d.) dating one person exclusively
   e.) engaged
   f.) married
   g.) other (please list) _______________________

6. Are you sexually active? For the purposes of this study, sexually active is defined as having sexual intercourse.
   a.) yes   b.) no
7. If you are sexually active, at what age did you first have sexual intercourse?
   a.) not applicable   b.) 10-12   c.) 13-15   d.) 16-18   e.) 19-21   f.) 22+

8. If you are sexually active, how many sexual partners have you had?
   a.) not applicable   b.) 1-3   c.) 4-6   d.) 7-9   e.) 10-12   f.) 13+

*Source: self-report data, FIS (Descutner & Thelen, 1991).*

9. Do you consider yourself to be easy or difficult to get to know?
   a.) very easy   b.) easy   c.) somewhat easy   d.) difficult   e.) very difficult

10. How many people have you dated exclusively for longer than two months since the start of your senior year of high school?
    a.) 0-3   b.) 4-6   c.) 7-9   d.) 10-12   e.) 13+

11. How satisfied are you with the quality of your romantic relationships (overall)?
    a.) very satisfied
    b.) satisfied
    c.) somewhat satisfied
    d.) dissatisfied
    e.) very dissatisfied

12. How satisfied do you expect to be in long-term or marriage-type relationships?
    a.) very satisfied
    b.) satisfied
    c.) somewhat satisfied
    d.) dissatisfied
    e.) very dissatisfied

13. How comfortable are you in getting emotionally close to a significant other?
    a.) very comfortable
    b.) comfortable
    c.) somewhat comfortable
    d.) uncomfortable
    e.) very uncomfortable

14. How comfortable are you in getting physically close to a significant other?
    a.) very comfortable
    b.) comfortable
    c.) somewhat comfortable
    d.) uncomfortable
    e.) very uncomfortable
15. How long was your longest, closest exclusive dating relationship?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) less than 6 months
   c.) 6 months to 1 year
   d.) 1 - 1.5 years
   e.) 1.5 - 2 years
   f.) 2 + years

Source: (Booth et al., 1984)

16. Taking all things together, how would you describe your relationship with the person you are going with?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) very happy
   c.) somewhat happy
   d.) not too happy

17. Some people get so upset or dissatisfied with the person they are going with, they threaten to break up the relationship. Has that ever happened in your present relationship?
   a.) non-applicable    b.) yes       c.) no

18. Keeping in mind the number of times you have gone out with a member of the opposite sex in the last six months, would you prefer to go out more often, go out the same amount, or go out less often?
   a.) more often       b.) same amount    c.) less often

19. I never seem to date members of the opposite sex with whom I feel I could develop a serious relationship.
   a.) strongly agree
   b.) agree
   c.) agree somewhat
   d.) disagree
   e.) strongly disagree

20. If you are currently in a romantic relationship, how long do you expect your relationship to last?
   a.) less than 1 month
   b.) 1 - 6 months
   c.) 6 months - 1 year
   d.) 1 - 1.5 years
   e.) 1.5 years +
21. How optimistic are you that your relationship will last?
   a.) very optimistic
   b.) optimistic
   c.) somewhat optimistic
   d.) not optimistic
   e.) very unoptimistic

Source: (Hazan & Shaver, 1979)

22. Please choose one of the following paragraphs that best describes YOU (record your answers on the answer sheet):

   a.) I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me.

   b.) I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely and difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.

   c.) I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.
Source: (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995)

Please use the following scale to answer these questions about your CURRENT DATING RELATIONSHIP(S) OR YOUR LONGEST, CLOSEST EXCLUSIVE DATING RELATIONSHIP. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a. disagree strongly</th>
<th>b. disagree somewhat</th>
<th>c. neutral</th>
<th>d. agree somewhat</th>
<th>e. agree strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

In my dating relationships, I try to:
23. Maintain a strong sense of independence
24. Share my most intimate thoughts and feelings
25. Take care of my girl/boyfriend
26. Date those who make my life more comfortable and stable
27. Date people with whom I might fall in love
28. Keep my individual identity
29. Consider my girl/boyfriend my best friend
30. Spend a substantial amount of time with my girl/boyfriend
31. Consistently date someone
32. Determine what I want in a future relationship
33. Focus on possible future plans with my girl/boyfriend
34. Date those whom I can count on
35. Maintain a focus on my other life goals
Source: (Descutner & Thelen, 1991)

Part A: Imagine YOU are in a CLOSE, DATING relationship. Respond to the following statements as you would IF YOU WERE IN THAT CLOSE RELATIONSHIP. Rate how characteristic each statement is of you on a scale of a.) to e.) as described below, and record your responses on the answer sheet.

a.) not at all characteristic of me
b.) slightly characteristic of me
c.) moderately characteristic of me
d.) very characteristic of me
e.) extremely characteristic of me

In each statement "O" refers to the person who would be in the close relationship with you.

36. I would feel comfortable expressing my true feelings to O.
37. I would feel at ease telling O that I care about him/her.
38. I would be comfortable discussing significant problems with O.
39. A part of me would be afraid to make a long-term commitment to O.
40. I would be afraid to share with O what I dislike about myself.
41. I would be afraid to take the risk of being hurt in order to establish a closer relationship with O.
42. I would feel comfortable keeping very personal information to myself.
43. I would be nervous about being spontaneous with O.
44. I would be comfortable with having a close emotional tie between us.
45. I would be comfortable telling O what my needs are.
46. I would be afraid that O would be more invested in the relationship than I would be.
47. I would be afraid that I would be more invested in the relationship than O would be.
48. I would feel comfortable about having open and honest communication with O.
49. I would feel at ease to completely be myself around O.
50. I would feel relaxed being together (with O) and talking about our personal goals.
Part B Instructions: Respond to the following statements as they apply to YOUR PAST RELATIONSHIPS. Rate how characteristic each statement is of you on a scale of a.) to e.) as described below, and record your responses on the answer sheet.

a.) not at all characteristic of me
b.) slightly characteristic of me
c.) moderately characteristic of me
d.) very characteristic of me
e.) extremely characteristic of me

51. I have shied away from opportunities to be close to someone.
52. I have held back my feelings in previous relationships.
53. There are people who think that I am afraid to get close to them.
54. There are people who think that I am not an easy person to get to know.
55. I have done things in previous relationships to keep from developing closeness.

Please answer the following questions and record your answers on the answer sheet.

56. My original/biological parents are married and have only been married to each other.
   a.) true  b.) false
57. My original/biological parents are separated from each other, but are not divorced or remarried.
   a.) true  b.) false
58. My original/biological parents are divorced from each other.
   a.) true  b.) false
59. I have a stepmother (my original/biological father is remarried).
   a.) true  b.) false
60. I have a stepfather (my original/biological mother is remarried).
   a.) true  b.) false
61. The father from my family of origin has been divorced two or more times.
   a.) true  b.) false
62. The mother from my family of origin has been divorced two or more times.
   a.) true  b.) false
63. If your parents are divorced, how old were you when this occurred?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) 0-5 years of age
   c.) 6-10 years of age
   d.) 11-15 years of age
   e.) 16-20 years of age
   f.) 21+ years of age

64. If your parents are divorced or separated, was there conflict over which parent would retain possession of the house, car or furniture?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) yes, a lot of conflict
   c.) yes, a little conflict
   d.) no, not a lot of conflict
   e.) no, there was no conflict at all

65. If your parents are divorced or separated, was there conflict over the amount of alimony or child support to be paid?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) yes, a lot of conflict
   c.) yes, a little conflict
   d.) no, not a lot of conflict
   e.) no, there was no conflict at all

66. If your parents are divorced or separated, did either or both parents try to get you to side against the other parent?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) yes, one or both parents tried to get me to side with them often
   c.) yes, one parent tried to get me to side with him/her often
   d.) my parents didn’t make me choose sides, but I chose a side on my own
   e.) no, neither parent tried to make me choose sides

No source

67. If your parents are divorced or separated, was there conflict over who would have custody over you / and your siblings?
   a.) not applicable
   b.) yes, a lot of conflict
   c.) yes, a little conflict
   d.) no, not a lot of conflict
   e.) no, there was no conflict at all
Source: (Lee, 1997)

Write the letter from the following scale that best describes YOUR FAMILY. If your parents are divorced, answer according to when they were together. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

| a. never | b. almost never | c. once in a while | d. sometimes | e. frequently | f. almost always | g. always |

68. We do nice things for each other.
69. Some family members are rude to others.
70. Some members of our family have difficulty expressing themselves.
71. When we are at home family members usually do their own thing.
72. The overall quality of our family life is very good.
73. We give each other compliments.
74. Some family members are very critical of others.
75. Some members of our family are poor communicators.
76. Family members lead very separate lives.
77. We are satisfied with how we get along in our family.
78. Family members sacrifice for each other.
79. Some family members are cruel to one another.
80. Some members of our family have difficulty understanding others.
81. In our family, everyone is on their own.
82. The overall quality of our family life is very poor.
83. Family members give of their time for one another.
84. Some family members ridicule others.
85. Some family members can’t put their thoughts into words very well.
86. We do things as separate individuals rather than as a family unit.
87. Our family is about the way we want it to be.
88. We are compassionate.
89. Some family members are verbally abusive with one another.
90. Overall, the family gets along well.
Source: (Spanier, 1976)

Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please mark the letter from the following scale that best describes the approximate level of agreement or disagreement BETWEEN YOUR ORIGINAL/BIOLOGICAL PARENTS for each item on the following list. If your parents are divorced, answer according to when they were together. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. always agree</th>
<th>b. almost always agree</th>
<th>c. occasionally disagree</th>
<th>d. frequently disagree</th>
<th>e. almost always disagree</th>
<th>f. always disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

91. Handling family finances.
92. Matters of recreation.
93. Religious matters.
94. Demonstrations of affection.
95. Friends.
96. Conventionality (correct or proper behavior).
97. Philosophy of life.
98. Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws.
99. Aims, goals, and things believed important.
100. Amount of time spent together.
101. Making major decisions.
102. Household tasks.
103. Leisure time interests and activities.
104. Career decisions.
Please use the following scale to answer the next set of questions on your
ORIGINAL/BIOLOGICAL PARENTS’ RELATIONSHIP. If your parents are divorced, answer according to when they were together. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a.</th>
<th>b.</th>
<th>c.</th>
<th>d.</th>
<th>e.</th>
<th>f.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all of the</td>
<td>most of the</td>
<td>more often</td>
<td>occasionally</td>
<td>rarely</td>
<td>never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>time</td>
<td>than not</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

105. How often do your parents discuss or have they considered divorce, separation, or terminating their relationship?
106. How often does one (or both) of your parents leave the house after a fight?
107. In general, how often do you think things between your parents are going well?
108. Do your parents confide in each other?
109. Do your parents ever indicate that they regret that they became seriously involved with each other?
110. How often do your parents quarrel?
111. How often do your parents “get on each other’s nerves”?

Please answer the next questions on your ORIGINAL/BIOLOGICAL PARENTS’ RELATIONSHIP. If your parents are divorced, answer according to when they were together. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

112. Do your parents kiss each other?
   a.) every day
   b.) almost every day
   c.) occasionally
   d.) rarely
   e.) never

113. Do your parents engage in outside interests together?
   a.) they share all of their interests
   b.) they share most interests
   c.) they share some interests
   d.) they share very few interests
   e.) they do not share any interests
Please use the following scale to answer the next set of questions on your *ORIGINAL/BIOLOGICAL PARENTS’ RELATIONSHIP*. If your parents are divorced, answer according to when they were together. Record your answers on the answer sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>a.</th>
<th>b.</th>
<th>c.</th>
<th>d.</th>
<th>e.</th>
<th>f.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>never</td>
<td>less than a month</td>
<td>once or twice a month</td>
<td>once or twice a week</td>
<td>once a day</td>
<td>more often</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

114. My parents have a stimulating exchange of ideas.
115. My parents laugh together.
116. My parents calmly discuss something.
117. My parents work together on a project.

118. Do your parents ever have a difference of opinion or problem with not showing love for each other?
   a.) yes
   b.) no

119. The following descriptions represent different degrees of happiness in your parents’ relationship. The middle point, “happy,” represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the description which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your parents’ relationship.

   a.) extremely unhappy
   b.) fairly unhappy
   c.) a little unhappy
   d.) happy
   e.) very happy
   f.) extremely happy
   g.) perfect
120. Everything your parents have learned about each other has pleased them.
   a.) true
   b.) false

121. Your parents have some needs that are not being met by their marriage.
   a.) true
   b.) false

122. Your parents get angry with each other sometimes.
   a.) true
   b.) false

123. Your parents' marriage is a perfect success.
   a.) true
   b.) false

124. There are times when your parents do things that make each other unhappy.
   a.) true
   b.) false

125. No couple could live together with greater harmony than your parents.
   a.) true
   b.) false