


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Maggie R. Gilliland for the Master Of Science
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Title: Effects of Parental Divorce on Intimacy in Young
Adulthood

Abstract Approved: 

The present study investigated the impact of parental divorce and gender on college students' levels of intimacy. Participants were 95 undergraduate college students from intact and divorced families. Intimacy was measured in five areas using the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships inventory. These five areas included emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between students from intact families and students from divorced families on any of the five intimacy subscales. Contrary to predictions, students from divorced families did not obtain lower intimacy scores than students from intact families. Although women did score higher than men on the intellectual and recreational subscales, they did not report significantly different levels of emotional, social, or sexual intimacy.

These findings suggest that parental divorce does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for men or women. It

is possible that children from divorced families are just as able to develop intimate relationships as children from intact families.

The present study included participants in all types of relationships including friendships, family relationships, as well as romantic relationships. It is possible that children from divorced families experience more difficulty in developing intimate romantic relationships because of the lack of an appropriate model, typically the parents' relationship. Further research may benefit from distinguishing between romantic and other types of relationships.

Divorce is a different experience for every family. There are several factors that contribute to a child's adjustment following parental divorce. These factors may include remarriage, level of parental conflict, and quality of relationships within the family. Additional research was suggested to address these factors.

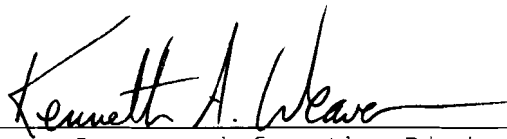
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IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD

A Thesis
Presented to
the Division of Psychology and Special Education
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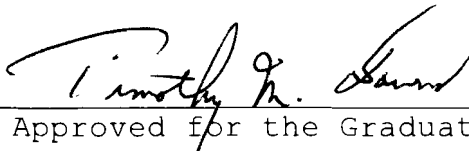
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Approved for the Division of
Psychology and Special Education



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Divorce has been studied extensively over the past several decades. However, the research concerning the effects of parental divorce on children has produced inconsistent results.

Some of the research has suggested that the effects of parental divorce fade as children move into adulthood, while other research has shown that the effects of divorce may be long lasting. Demographic variables, such as age of the child at the time of divorce and gender of the child, have been studied with regard to effects of parental divorce and have also produced inconsistent results. Much of the research in this area has focused on the impact of divorce on children's self-esteem, self-concept, and overall psychological well-being.

Although there has been an increasing amount of research in the area of divorce, the effects on issues of intimacy in early adulthood is a neglected area. Concern regarding the psychological effects that parental divorce may have on children is growing.

Research in this area has implications for professionals in the field of psychology, as well as for people who are coping with divorce that may seek help from

professionals in the field. A considerable number of people are faced with the psychological effects of divorce.

The majority of therapists may see individuals or families who are experiencing or have experienced divorce. Therefore, therapists must be prepared to help their clients deal with these issues. However, the conflicting results in this area suggest that psychologists are unsure of the effects that divorce has on the people involved. Therefore, research in this area must continue in an attempt to gain a better understanding in this area so professionals may better serve this population. The current research will contribute to the conflicting body of knowledge on the effects of divorce.

Literature Review

Divorce. Over the past several decades, research in the area of divorce has increased. Past research has focused primarily on short-term effects of divorce such as high emotional distress and behavioral problems (Wallerstein, 1991). Researchers agree that short-term effects following divorce do exist and negatively affect those involved. However, researchers have recently begun to suggest that divorce is not a single traumatic event but an ongoing stressful process that may produce long-lasting effects (Hillard, 1984; Kalter, 1987; Nelson, Allison, &

Sundre, 1992). Furstenburg (1990) predicted that the sudden change in family structure from a two parent to a single parent household could cause long-term financial difficulty as well as psychological stress. Hillard (1984) has proposed a three-stage divorce process, which includes a pre-separation stage, a separation or divorce stage, and a post-divorce stage. During the post-divorce stage, which may extend into adulthood, children must deal with decreased contact with the non-custodial parent as well as the parents' reactions to the situation.

Researchers have found several areas effected by parental divorce. Allison and Furstenburg (1989) used reports from teachers, parents, and the children themselves to conclude that children from divorced families experience more behavior problems, poorer academic performance, and psychological distress. In fact, children from divorced families may be twice as likely to seek mental health services as children from intact families (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). In addition, children from divorced families report more sexual activity and more sexual partners than children from intact families (Cherlin, Kiernan, & Chase-Landsdale, 1995; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). Gabardi and Rosen (1992) suggested that this increased sexual activity may be

an attempt "to achieve emotional intimacy through sexual activity with several partners rather than through a committed, emotional relationship with one person" (p. 44).

Children from divorced families also experience difficulty with trust in relationships; poor attitudes toward marriage, family, and intimate relationships; and less secure attachment styles (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Evans & Bloom, 1996; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992). A landmark study on the long-term effects of parental divorce is the California Children of Divorce Study (Wallerstein, 1991). This is a longitudinal study that began in 1971 and is ongoing today. Throughout this study, children from divorced families have been assessed at 5, 10, and 15 years following the divorce. At the 5-year follow-up, one third of the participants reported moderate to severe depression and many reported that the divorce had a great impact on their lives. At the 10-year follow-up, many of the participants were entering young adulthood. They reported sadness and resentment toward parents and continued to view the divorce as a significant event in their lives. Further, at the 15-year follow-up, participants reported anxiety and great concern about love, commitment, and marriage (Wallerstein, 1991). These issues may only become apparent as the children of divorce move into young adulthood

because at this point in their lives they first seriously consider marriage and commitment (Hillard, 1984; Wallerstein, 1991; Zill et al., 1993). Wallerstein concludes that "psychological consequences emerge developmentally on center stage when the young person is at the threshold of adulthood and contemplates the major life decisions of love, commitment, and marriage" (1991, p. 354).

Intimacy. Although intimacy is a common term in the literature, a variety of definitions have been suggested. Most definitions of intimacy include mutual need satisfaction and closeness on many levels. Intimacy has been defined operationally as "a process and an experience which is the outcome of the disclosure of intimate topics and sharing of intimate experiences" (Schaefer & Olson, 1981, p. 51).

Prager (1995) based intimate relationships on multiple intimate interactions, which include self-disclosure, affection, trust, acceptance, and appreciation. Intimate relationships may develop between friends, romantic partners, and parents and children. Schaefer and Olson (1981) believe that in intimate relationships an individual shares intimate experiences, such as feelings of closeness and sharing, in several areas and there is the expectation

that the experiences and the relationship will persist over time. The areas of intimacy that these authors refer to are emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational. Emotional intimacy involves experiencing a closeness of feelings with another person. Social intimacy is the experience of having common friends and common social networks. Sexual intimacy includes sharing affection and/or sexual activity. Intellectual intimacy is the experience of sharing ideas. Recreational intimacy includes shared interests or hobbies (Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

Although several studies have examined the effects of parental divorce on intimacy in young adulthood, the results are inconsistent. According to Wallerstein (1991), the effects of divorce may become more apparent in adolescent and adult romantic relationships because of an increasing desire but inability to develop intimacy and trust. Booth et al. (1984) reported that overall, parental divorce "decreases the desire for long-term intimate bonds" (p. 93). Research has also shown that one of the effects of parental divorce in young adulthood may be the inability to engage in intimate relationships. Ensign et al. (1998) compared young adults from divorced families with young adults from intact families on levels of intimacy. The results of this study indicated that participants from

divorced families reported lower levels of intimacy in relationships than did participants from intact families. The effects of parental divorce may emerge in areas of intimacy and relationships in young adulthood when people first seriously consider involvement in intimate relationships.

However, other studies have found that parental divorce does not impact intimacy in adult relationships (Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Taylor, Parker, & Roy, 1995). Sinclair and Nelson (1998) have suggested that negative effects of divorce may fade over time, which may explain the lack of differences they found between participants from divorced and intact families on measures of intimacy. These results suggest that further research regarding the impact of parental divorce on specific areas of intimacy may help clarify the conflicting results in the literature.

Gender. Men and women, regardless of parental marital status may differ in their approach to intimacy (Laurenceau, Pietromonaco, & Barrett, 1998; Prager, 1995). Men are more interested in physical or sexual intimacy, which they often see as the central feature of intimacy. Women favor verbal intimacy and tend to focus more on verbal expression of feelings. Women also tend to develop

intimate friendships more often than men do. Although their approaches to intimacy differ, men and women seem to agree that self-disclosure and partner responsiveness are key components of an intimate relationship (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Prager, 1995). According to Gabardi and Rosen (1992), women report greater levels of intimacy in their relationships than men do. Parental divorce may produce different effects for men and women because they differ in their approaches to intimacy.

While men may experience more immediate, short-term effects following parental divorce, women often experience more negative, long-lasting effects (Evans & Bloom, 1996; Kalter, 1997; McCabe, 1997). Wallerstein (1987) found that women from divorced families reported patterns of relationship difficulties and depression that emerged in late adolescence or early adulthood. The study further found that shortly following divorce boys displayed emotional and behavioral problems as well as poorer academic performance, while girls from divorced families did not differ from girls from intact families (Wallerstein, 1991).

McCabe (1997) has suggested that these results may be evidence for a "sleeper effect," which means that the effects of parental divorce on girls may not emerge until

adolescence or early adulthood. Zill et al. (1993) found that boys were more likely to react to parental divorce with under controlled behaviors such as conduct or behavior problems. Girls, on the other hand, are likely to respond with over controlled behaviors such as withdrawal and perhaps depression. Girls and boys both experience immediate negative effects of parental divorce but the boys' under controlled behaviors are more apparent.

However, women may experience more long-lasting effects, which may extend into adult relationships. Sinclair and Nelson (1998) found that women with divorced parents reported greater security and higher levels of intimacy in relationships than did men with divorced parents. These results are inconsistent with the majority of research on the differential effects of parental divorce on men and women. This inconsistency suggests that further clarification is needed.

Summary

The majority of research suggests that divorce does impact the development of intimate relationships in adulthood. However, this is a complex issue. Gender may also affect a child's well-being and ability to develop intimate relationships following divorce. Past research has

attempted to address these issues, but consistent effects have not been obtained.

Hypotheses

1. Men and women from intact families will obtain higher intimacy scores on the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) than men and women from divorced families.
2. Women from intact families will obtain the highest scores on the PAIR, while women from divorced families will obtain the lowest scores on the PAIR.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 95 students from intact and divorced families. They ranged in age from 18 to 25 and were enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a medium sized mid-western university during the spring 2000 semester. Participants from intact families were students whose parents had never been divorced ($n = 62$). There were 39 women and 23 men in the group from intact families. Participants from divorced families ($n = 33$) were 18 women and 15 men.

Design

The present study had a 2 (parental marital status, intact or divorced) X 2 (gender, men or women) between subjects, experimental design. The independent variables were parental marital status and gender. The dependent variables were the levels of intimacy reported by each participant on the five intimacy subscales measured by the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) inventory. The five dependent variables were scores on emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy as measured by the PAIR.

Instrumentation

The instruments used in this study included a demographic questionnaire and the PAIR inventory. The demographic questionnaire requested information regarding gender and parental marital status as well as relationship information (see Appendix A).

The PAIR inventory is a self-report measure designed by Schaefer and Olson (1981) to measure intimacy. This assessment tool can be used with people who are involved in a variety of relationships, from friendships to marriages. The inventory measures intimacy in a person's closest relationship and therefore does not reflect a globalized measure of intimacy. Intimacy is measured on five dimensions. The five subscales include (a) emotional intimacy, (b) social intimacy, (c) sexual intimacy, (d) intellectual intimacy, and (e) recreational intimacy. Responses are made on a five point Likert scale and range from disagree (0) to agree (4). Scores on the PAIR range from 0 to 96. Higher scores indicate higher levels of intimacy in the relationship whereas lower scores indicate lower reported levels of intimacy. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficient was used to demonstrate reliability of .70 or higher on all scales (Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

Procedure

A sign-up sheet was posted on which participants volunteered to participate in the study. Questionnaires were administered in a group setting by a 25-year-old Caucasian female experimenter. Each participant was asked to read and sign an informed consent document (see Appendix B). Participants were then given a demographic questionnaire and the PAIR inventory. For the purposes of this study, only the first section of the PAIR, perceived intimacy, was completed. The section of the PAIR concerning expected intimacy was omitted because the information obtained from this section was irrelevant for the purposes of this study.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

A score was obtained for each participant on each of the five types of intimacy measured by the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) inventory. The independent variables in the current study were parental marital status (divorced or intact) and gender (men or women). The dependent variables were the levels of intimacy on each of the five subscales measured by the PAIR inventory. The significance level was set at .05.

Of the 95 participants in the present study, 58 referred to romantic relationships when responding to the PAIR, while 37 referred to friendships or family relationships. Some data were discarded prior to analysis. Participants whose parents had divorced within the past year were excluded to eliminate those who were involved in parental divorce at the time of the study. Also, participants who had been divorced themselves were excluded to prevent effects of personal divorce from confounding the effects of parental divorce. Students over 25 years of age and international students were excluded to eliminate possible differences caused by age or culture. Some participants did not complete the items concerning sexual intimacy because they did not apply to

some types of relationships. As a result, these participants did not receive a score on the sexual intimacy subscale but the remaining subscales were analyzed.

A 2 X 2 (parental marital status by gender) between subjects factorial analysis of variance was performed on the total scores for each of the five subscales measured by PAIR inventory. The subscales included emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. Lower scores indicate lower levels of reported intimacy, while higher scores indicate higher levels of reported intimacy.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that men and women from intact families would score significantly higher than men and women from divorced families on the five intimacy subscales measured by the PAIR inventory. This hypothesis was not supported. Results indicate that the intimacy scores of men and women from intact families did not differ significantly on any of the five subscales from the scores of men and women from divorced families (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that women from intact families would obtain the highest scores on the five intimacy subscales of the PAIR, while women from divorced families would obtain the lowest scores. Results for emotional,

social, and sexual intimacy did not show significant main effects for gender. Overall, women did score higher than men on the intellectual and recreational subscales (see Table 1).

Results for intellectual intimacy showed a significant main effect for gender ($F(1, 95) = 5.819, p < .05$), but not for parental marital status ($F(1, 95) = .105, p = .747$). Women ($M = 74.95, SD = 16.08$) scored higher on the PAIR intellectual intimacy subscale than men ($M = 65.47, SD = 18.49$). Results on recreational intimacy also showed a significant main effect for gender ($F(1, 95) = 6.261, p < .05$), but not for parental marital status ($F(1, 95) = .279, p = .599$). Women ($M = 76.98, SD = 13.44$) scored higher on the PAIR recreational intimacy subscale than men ($M = 68.74, SD = 16.81$).

No significant interaction effects were found between parental marital status and gender for any of the five types of intimacy.

Table 1

Mean Intimacy Scores and Standard Deviations of Men and Women from Intact and Divorced Families on the Five Subscales Measured by the PAIR

Type of Intimacy	Men		
	Intact	Divorced	Total
Emotional	68.00 (17.31)	70.93 (21.15)	69.16 (18.85)
Social	58.09 (14.26)	62.13 (21.53)	59.68 (17.33)
Sexual	60.87 (16.80)	63.47 (21.95)	61.89 (18.76)
Intellectual	64.35 (17.64)	67.20 (20.24)	65.48 (18.49)
Recreational	67.83 (14.94)	70.13 (19.82)	68.74 (16.81)
Type of Intimacy	Women		
	Intact	Divorced	Total
Emotional	76.72 (15.10)	73.78 (17.04)	75.79 (15.65)
Social	67.33 (15.58)	63.56 (17.83)	66.14 (16.26)
Sexual	66.00 (20.91)	73.33 (16.63)	68.32 (19.81)
Intellectual	75.08 (15.99)	74.67 (16.75)	74.95 (16.08)
Recreational	76.62 (13.44)	77.78 (13.80)	76.98 (13.44)

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of parental marital status (intact or divorced) and gender on five types of intimacy, including emotional, social, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. Participants from intact families were students who reported that their parents had never been divorced. Participants from divorced families were students who reported that their parents had been divorced.

Hypothesis 1

Researchers agree that children often experience negative effects following parental divorce. Further, past research has suggested that parental divorce may affect children's ability to develop intimate relationships (Booth et al., 1994; Ensign et al., 1998; Evans & Bloom, 1996; Wallerstein, 1991). Therefore, it was predicted that men and women from intact families would obtain higher intimacy scores on the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) than men and women from divorced families.

This hypothesis was not supported by the present study. No significant differences on intimacy scores were

found between participants from intact families and participants from divorced families.

It is possible that children from divorced families experience difficulty in romantic relationships, but not in other types of relationships. Children from divorced families may not experience difficulty in developing intimacy in friendships, family relationships, or even short-term romantic relationships. As Wallerstein (1991) has suggested, difficulties may emerge in long-term romantic relationships because children from divorced families may not have an adequate model of an intimate romantic relationship. These difficulties may be reflected later in the children's romantic relationships. The present study included participants in several types of relationships such as romantic relationships, friendships, and family relationships. Also, the present study examined intimacy only in participants' closest relationship, which does not reflect a capacity to develop intimacy in a variety of relationships. Further research may benefit from distinguishing between various types of relationships in an attempt to help clarify the role of intimacy in each.

Hypothesis 2

Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that women reported greater levels of intimacy in relationships than men.

However, research has also found that women may be more adversely affected by parental divorce than men. Women may experience more long-lasting negative effects, which includes difficulty in developing intimate relationships following parental divorce (Evans & Bloom, 1996; Kalter, 1997; McCabe, 1997). In the present study it was predicted that women from intact families would obtain the highest intimacy scores on the PAIR, while women from divorced families would obtain the lowest intimacy scores. That is, women would be more affected by divorce than men.

The results did not support this hypothesis. Men and women reported similar levels of emotional, social, and sexual intimacy regardless of parental marital status. However, women scored higher on the recreational and intellectual intimacy subscales than men.

The present findings suggest that parental divorce does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for men or women. Perhaps children from divorced families are just as able to develop intimate relationships as children from intact families.

Further research is needed before any conclusions can be drawn regarding the effects of parental divorce on intimacy. The nature of a divorce, and therefore the effects of divorce, can vary tremendously from one family

to another. It is likely that factors such as remarriage, level of parental conflict, and quality of relationships within the family contribute to a child's adjustment following a divorce. Therefore, further research should address these factors.

The results of this study contribute to the complex and inconsistent body of research concerning the effects of divorce on children. Although this study suggests that parental divorce may not lead to a decreased ability to form intimate relationships, further research in this area is needed. There are a number of children who experience parental divorce. Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the effects of parental divorce so professionals may better serve this population.

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Appendix A
Demographic Questionnaire

Age: _____

Sex: Male Female (please circle)

Parents Marital Status: _____ Parents married, never divorced
(please check one) _____ Parents divorced

If your parents are divorced, how old were you at the time of the divorce? _____

Have you ever been divorced? Yes No (please circle)

Are you an international student? Yes No (please circle)

Which of the following would you currently consider to be your closest relationship?

_____ Friendship

_____ Spouse

_____ Significant Other (ie. boyfriend, girlfriend)

_____ Other _____ (please specify)

Appendix B Informed Consent Document

Read and sign this consent form. If you have any questions please ask the experimenter.

The Division of Psychology at Emporia State University supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

Students will be asked to complete the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships inventory as well as a brief demographic questionnaire, which will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships inventory has been used previously and presents no risk to the participant.

Questions or comments about this study should be directed to Maggie Gilliland, Division of Psychology and Special Education, (316) 341-5122.

Thank you for your participation.

"I have read the above statement and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved and I assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach."

Subject

Date

THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY THE EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS.

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