

# The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships

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## Abstract

The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult children's romantic relationships were examined in this short-term longitudinal study. Using a sample of 285 young adults, structural equation modeling supported the hypothesis that parental divorce and marital conflict were independently associated with young adult children's romantic relationships through different mechanisms: Parental divorce was associated with young adults' low level of relationship quality through a negative attitude toward marriage (positive attitude toward divorce) and lack of commitment to their own current relationships. However, marital conflict was associated with young adults' low level of relationship quality through their conflict behavior with their partner. These findings are discussed in terms of their implications for future research.

The development of romantic relationships in emerging adulthood has important implications both for the individual and for society (Berscheid, 1999; Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998). Successful romantic relationships promote personal well-being, whereas failure to establish and maintain such relationships is associated with both physical and emotional distress (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Weiss & Heyman, 1997; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997). Consequently, it is important to understand developmental precursors that increase the likelihood of developing stable and satisfying romantic ties (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Of all the factors that could

predict the quality of early adult romantic relationships, specific characteristics in the family of origin are especially relevant (Conger et al., 2000).

Despite their acknowledged importance, relatively little is known about which characteristics of the family of origin influence young adults' ability to successfully initiate and sustain romantic relationships and, more importantly, how they do so (Christensen, 1998; Parke, 1998). An exception is the long-standing interest in the impact of parental divorce on offspring outcomes where the intergenerational transmission of divorce is now well documented (Amato, 1996; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). Several recent studies have also examined the impact of marital conflict on offspring relationships (Feldman et al., 1998; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). In each case, however, little is known about the mechanisms responsible for the documented association. This study attempts to integrate these somewhat disparate literatures by investigating the potential effects, and

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This study was made possible by Grant 90FE0022/01 from the Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families awarded to the second author.

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underlying mechanisms, of parental divorce and marital conflict on offspring romantic relationships in emerging adulthood.

### *Theoretical perspectives*

Social learning theory suggests that behavior can be learned through observing the actions of others (Bandura, 1977). Thus, young adults may shape their behavior in their romantic relationships by observing marital interactions between their parents. Specifically, children may learn a variety of conflict behaviors from observing their parents arguing, and these observations are likely to shape their own conflict behavior in their romantic relationships in young adulthood.

Furthermore, social learning theory also suggests that in addition to learned behavior, young adults could develop their attitude toward marriage and divorce by observing their parents' marriage and divorce. Specifically, if children see a bad marriage between the parents and experience parental divorce, they are more likely to develop a negative view about marriage and see divorce as an easy way to end a problematic marriage. Furthermore, it is likely that such an attitude toward marriage and divorce will affect their own romantic relationships through their commitment to their relationships. For example, if a romantic relationship is viewed as something that is expendable and best terminated when inevitable difficulties arise, there is little incentive to have a strong commitment to the relationship. Therefore, young adults may determine to leave a less satisfying relationship rather than work on the relationship based on seeing the consequences of his or her parents' behavior (Kapinus, 2005).

In summary, based on social learning theory, it is likely that parental divorce may influence young adults' romantic relationships through shaping their attitude toward marriage/divorce and their commitment to their own relationships. However, parental conflict may influence young adults' romantic relationships through shaping their conflict behavior with their partner. In this study, we propose to test these potential differential mechanisms through which parents' marriage

(and divorce) influence young adults' romantic relationships.

### *Linking parental divorce to young adult romantic relationships*

The intergenerational transmission of marital quality and divorce is well documented (Amato, 1996; Wallerstein, 1987). The majority of studies found that compared with those whose parents did not divorce, young adults whose parents divorced are at greater risk for marital difficulties and divorce themselves (Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1997). Less well documented is the mechanism linking parental divorce to offspring relationship outcomes. Several studies have demonstrated that compared with children from intact families, children of divorce hold more pessimistic views of marriage and see divorce as a solution to a problematic marriage (Amato, 1996; Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Trent & South, 1992). Using national, longitudinal data from two generations, Amato and DeBoer (2001) suggested that parental divorce was associated with more problems in young adults' marriages because these young adults hold a weaker commitment to marriage. This finding is consistent with findings from several other studies on commitment as a potential mechanism explaining the association between parental divorce and young adult children's marriages (Glenn & Kramer, 1987; Greenberg & Nay, 1982; Webster, Orbuch, & House, 1995). Taken together, these findings suggest that parental divorce is associated with young adult children's marriage and divorce through a more negative attitude toward marriage (a more liberal attitude toward divorce) and a weaker commitment to marriage.

However, the majority of previous studies focus on offspring marital quality and divorce rather than on premarital romantic relationships. From a developmental perspective, certain beliefs and behaviors found to be predictive of marital outcomes are present in couple relationships before marriage (Conger et al., 2000). Therefore, it is critical to study premarital romantic relationships and not simply marriage. Findings from several studies have demonstrated a

negative association between parental divorce and young adult romantic relationships (see Bartell, 2006, for a review). To further explore the mechanisms of such an association, a few studies have demonstrated that attitude toward marriage/divorce and relationship commitment might link parental divorce and offspring romantic relationships (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). These studies, combined with those on offspring marriage, suggest that parental divorce could affect young adults' attitude toward marriage/divorce and their commitment to their own relationship, which in turn could affect their romantic relationship quality. However, attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to own relationships have rarely been included together to consider both as potential mediating mechanisms. When young adults hold a pessimistic attitude about marriage and believe divorce is an easier alternative than working on the marriage, it is possible that they would not devote much time and energy to their own romantic relationship with the idea that they could choose to simply leave the relationship if it did not work out. A declining commitment to a relationship could then decrease relationship satisfaction.

In this study, we investigate whether parental divorce influences young adults' romantic relationships through attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to their own romantic relationships. Specifically, we hypothesize that (a) offspring of divorced parents have a less optimistic attitude toward marriage and a more favorable attitude toward divorce; (b) this attitude, in turn, is expected to lead to a weaker commitment to their own current romantic relationship; and (c) attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to own romantic relationship will constitute the mechanism that links parental divorce to offspring relationship quality (i.e., divorce → attitude toward marriage/divorce → own relationship commitment → relationship quality).

#### *Linking marital conflict to young adult romantic relationships*

Romantic relationships are similar to marriage in that both tend to involve individuals

of equal status engaged in emotional and sexual intimacy and hence observation of parental interactions provides important information about how to relate to a romantic partner. As disagreements between partners are inevitable, their management is critical to developing a satisfying relationship; offspring experiences of interparental conflict are therefore particularly relevant to their romantic relationships. Consistent with this view, studies have documented a robust association between violence and abuse between parents and offspring partner abuse (Dumas, Margolin, & John, 1994; Kalmuss, 1984; Murphy, Meyer, & O'Leary, 1993; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). However, the association between less intense but more common expressions of interparental conflict and offspring's romantic relationships has often been ignored (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004).

When parents have problems in their behavioral interactions, such as problems in communicating, restraining criticism, and resolving conflict, it likely increases offspring risk for displaying similar problems in their own romantic relationships. Several studies suggest that young adults whose parents had interpersonal behavior problems exhibited more problems themselves (e.g., frequent criticizing and showing anger easily), which in turn, increased the odds that their marriages or relationships ended (Amato, 1996; Caspi & Elder, 1988; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Sanders et al., 1999). Using a sample of adolescents aged 14–18, Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) found that interparental conflict was linked to adolescent boys' (but not girls') higher levels of verbal and physical aggression toward their romantic partner. In a recent study, Cui, Fincham, and Pasley (2008) studied college students' romantic relationships and found that parental conflict was associated with young adults' conflict behavior and that this conflict behavior, in turn, was associated with their romantic relationship quality.

In summary, the results of these studies suggest that marital conflict is associated with young adult children's relationship conflict. We therefore hypothesized that (a) parental marital conflict will be positively related to offspring conflict with a romantic partner,

(b) offspring relationship conflict will be inversely related to the relationship quality they experience, and (c) offspring relationship conflict is the mechanism through which interparental conflict is linked to offspring relationship quality (i.e., interparental conflict → offspring relationship conflict → offspring relationship quality).

### *Overview of study*

The goal of this study was to examine whether parental divorce and marital conflict affect offspring relationship quality through different mechanisms. Based on social learning theory and the studies reviewed earlier, we propose that parental divorce will be associated with young adults' romantic relationships through a less optimistic attitude toward marriage (a more favorable attitude toward divorce) and a weaker commitment to their own relationships, whereas marital conflict will be associated with offspring romantic relationships through learned interpersonal conflict behavior. To ensure proper time ordering among the theoretical constructs, we evaluated parents' marital problems and young adults' attitude toward marriage/divorce at the first wave of data collection, young adults' commitment to their own relationships and conflict behavior 7 weeks later, and their report of relationship quality 14 weeks later.

Furthermore, several previous studies have examined the effects of divorce and conflict separately (Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Testing them separately ignores the fact that parental divorce and conflict are often related. For example, parents who divorce may fight before, during, and after their divorce. To evaluate the distinctive and differential effects of parental divorce and conflict, it is therefore important to include both and test their effects simultaneously (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Cui et al., 2008). Doing so has the potential to demonstrate the unique effects of each after controlling for the other, thereby providing stronger evidence for our differential mediation hypothesis.

Finally, Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that offspring were most likely to divorce

when their parents had divorced but had low levels of marital discord before divorce. We extended the research question by examining whether an interaction effect between parental divorce and conflict exists for our hypothesized differential mediating mechanisms. Given the exploratory nature of this interaction effect, we do not offer any specific hypothesis in testing the interaction between parental divorce and conflict.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from an introductory family and child science course at a large Southern university. Students received course credit for their participation. Of 995 students in the original sample, 521 students identified themselves as being in a heterosexual romantic relationship. The students were asked to complete a survey on family and romantic relationships at the beginning of the semester, 7 weeks later, and 14 weeks later. Among these 521 students, 2 were no longer young adults (older than age 30) and were therefore dropped from further analyses, 22 students reported one parent deceased, 18 reported parents never married, and 12 reported other parents' marital status (e.g., parents were in the process of getting a divorce). As a result, 467 met the study requirement of being under age 30 and either coming from an intact family or a divorced family. Among the 467 respondents, 182 had changed partners during this 14-week period of time and therefore reported on different partners at different time points. Because of the nature of the study question, we focused on the remaining 285 participants who had participated in all three waves of data collection and reported being with the same partner.

Comparisons were made between the 182 participants who had changed partners and the 285 participants who had the same partner during the study period. Specifically, independent-samples *t* tests were performed on continuous variables and the results showed no significant differences in mean levels of parental conflict, attitude toward marriage/divorce, commitment to

relationships, and relationship quality between the two groups. Chi-square tests were performed on categorical variables and the results showed no difference in family structure (i.e., parental divorce) between the two groups. However, results from the chi-square test on relationship status (i.e., dating nonexclusively, dating exclusively, and marriage/engaged) suggested that those who reported dating nonexclusively were more likely to have changed partners than those who reported dating exclusively or marriage/engaged. Overall, the comparisons suggested that participants in the two groups (those who were with the same partners vs. those who changed partners) showed little differences regarding most of the variables of interests. However, those dating nonexclusively, not surprisingly, were more likely to report having changed partners.

Of the 285 participants who completed the survey with the same partner across the three waves, 262 had complete data on all the variables of interest at all three time points. Again, using independent-samples *t* tests and chi-square tests on variables of interests to compare differences between those who had complete data ( $N = 262$ ) and those who had some missing data ( $N = 23$ ) revealed no evidence of selective attrition. Therefore, rather than deleting the cases with missing data, we used full information maximum likelihood, which provides less biased information than ad hoc procedures such as listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, or imputation of means (Little & Rubin, 1987; Rubin, 1976; Schafer, 1997). As a result, we included all 285 young adults who reported on the same partner across the three time points and used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the predicted relationships among constructs. Mplus 4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2007) was used to estimate the model.

### *Procedures*

All participants completed questionnaires on their parents' marital status and relationships, their attitude toward marriage/divorce, their commitment to their current romantic relationship, their conflict behaviors with their partner, and relationship quality.

They provided data at an initial assessment (Time 1), 7 weeks later (Time 2), and then 14 weeks later (Time 3).

### *Measures*

#### *Parental divorce (Time 1)*

A dichotomous variable was created to reflect whether the respondent's biological parents had divorced. The variable was coded as 0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*.

#### *Parents' marital conflict (Time 1)*

Parents' marital conflict was assessed using the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). The CPIC scale has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity when used with college samples (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). All participants were asked to assess their parents' marital conflict, and those who had experienced parental divorce were asked to report on parental conflict before the divorce. The measure used here focused on the objective properties of interparental conflict and included 12 items assessing three distinct dimensions of conflict behavior: frequency, intensity, and resolution. These three indicators have been shown to reflect a single latent construct of parental conflict (Bickham & Fiese, 1997; Grych et al., 1992). In this study, each indicator consisted of four items. Sample items included "My parents hardly ever argued or disagreed" (frequency), "My parents tended to get really angry when they argued or disagreed" (intensity), and "When my parents argued, they usually worked things out" (resolution). Each item had three possible responses: 1 = *true*, 2 = *sort of true*, and 3 = *false*. Items were recoded when necessary so a high score indicated a higher level of conflict. The  $\alpha$  coefficients for frequency, intensity, and resolution were .85, .87, and .83, respectively.

#### *Attitude toward marriage/divorce (Time 1)*

We assessed attitude toward marriage and divorce by asking participants about their general attitude toward marriage and divorce. The

scale comprised six items previously used by Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers (2007) for this purpose. Sample items included "It is okay for people to get married, thinking that if it does not work out, they can always get a divorce" and "The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage." Responses for each item ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. After reverse coding some items, the six items were summed together to create a composite score of general commitment to marriage, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude toward marriage and a more negative attitude toward divorce. In this sample, the  $\alpha$  coefficient was .73.

#### *Commitment to current relationship (Time 2)*

We also assessed the participants' commitment toward their own current relationship by using four items from the dedication subscale of Stanley's commitment scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This abbreviated scale has been widely used by Stanley, Markman, and Whitton (2002). The items ask the respondents about their commitment to their current relationship (e.g., "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter" and "I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now") with responses on each item ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. One item was reverse coded, and the four items were summed together to create a composite score of commitment toward their current relationship, with a high score indicating a high level of commitment. The  $\alpha$  coefficient was .75.

#### *Young adults' conflict behavior (Time 2)*

Relationship behavior was assessed using items adapted from the CPIC scale (Grych et al., 1992) which has been validated for use with college samples (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). As described in parents' marital conflict measure, the same 12 items were reworded to refer to the respondents' own relationship (for a similar use of the scale, see Steinberg, Davila, & Fincham, 2006) and

used to assess the three dimensions of conflict behavior (e.g., "We hardly ever argued or disagreed"). The  $\alpha$  coefficients for frequency, intensity, and resolution were .76, .82, and .71, respectively.

#### *Relationship quality (Time 3)*

Following Fincham and Bradbury (1987), assessment of relationship quality was restricted to subjective evaluations of the relationship. Specifically, we used four items from the couple satisfaction index (Funk & Rogge, 2007) to form the construct of relationship quality: satisfaction (from 1 = *worse than all others/extremely bad* to 6 = *better than all others/extremely good*), reward (from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much or extremely*), warmth and comfort (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*), and happiness (from 1 = *extremely unhappy* to 7 = *perfect*). Because the four items were based on different scales, they were standardized first and then summed together to evaluate relationship quality. The  $\alpha$  coefficient for this measure was .93.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the sample. Of the 285 respondents, 79 reported parental divorce and 206 were from intact families. Thirty-six were males and 249 were females. The average age of the sample was 19.25 years ( $SD = 1.25$ ). The majority were non-Hispanic Whites ( $n = 216$ ) and were in an exclusive dating relationship ( $n = 254$ ). The median for relationship duration was 1–2 years. Table 1 also provides the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all the variables and indicators for latent constructs.

### *Correlations*

In Table 2, we provide the correlations among the study variables and latent constructs. We first see that there was a significant positive association between parental divorce and marital conflict ( $r = .38, p < .01$ ). Second, both parental divorce and marital conflict were significantly correlated with young adult

**Table 1.** Descriptive information with demographic characteristics (N = 285)

Variables	<i>M</i> or <i>n</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Parental divorce			
Yes	79		
No	206		
Parents' marital conflict			
Frequency	7.01	2.59	4–12
Intensity	7.43	2.72	4–12
Resolution	6.77	2.32	4–12
Youth commitment to marriage	15.61	2.90	9–23
Youth commitment to own relationship	15.98	2.85	7–20
Youth conflict with partner			
Frequency	5.97	1.88	4–12
Intensity	6.29	2.14	4–12
Resolution	5.18	1.43	4–11
Relationship quality <sup>a</sup>	.80	3.13	–10.85 to 3.87
Other demographic characteristics			
Young adult gender ( <i>n</i> )			
Male	36		
Female	249		
Youth relationship type ( <i>n</i> )			
Dating exclusively	254		
Dating nonexclusively	15		
Married/engaged	14		
Relationship duration ( <i>n</i> )			
Less than 2 months	20		
3–4 months	23		
5–6 months	19		
7–12 months	61		
1–2 years	70		
2 years	44		
3+ years	48		
Youth age	19.25	1.25	17–24
Youth ethnicity ( <i>n</i> )			
Non-Hispanic White	216		
African American	21		
Hispanic	26		
Asian, Pacific Islander	4		
Others	18		

<sup>a</sup>The four items included in relationship quality were standardized first then summed together.

romantic relationship quality in the expected direction. Third, parental divorce was significantly associated with young adults' attitude toward marriage/divorce, attitude toward marriage/divorce was significantly associated with commitment to their own relationships, and commitment to their own relationships was

significantly associated with their relationship quality. Similarly, marital conflict was significantly associated with offspring relationship conflict, and offspring conflict was significantly associated with relationship quality. Based on these findings, we then estimated SEM models to test our hypotheses.

**Table 2.** Correlations among variables in the structural equation models

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parental divorce	1.00					
2. Parental marital conflict	0.38**	1.00				
3. Commitment to marriage	-0.16**	-0.07	1.00			
4. Commitment to own relationship	-0.04	-0.06	0.19**	1.00		
5. Youth conflict	-0.04	0.14**	-0.05	-0.29**	1.00	
6. Relationship quality	-0.12*	-0.27**	0.10	0.45**	-0.59**	1.00

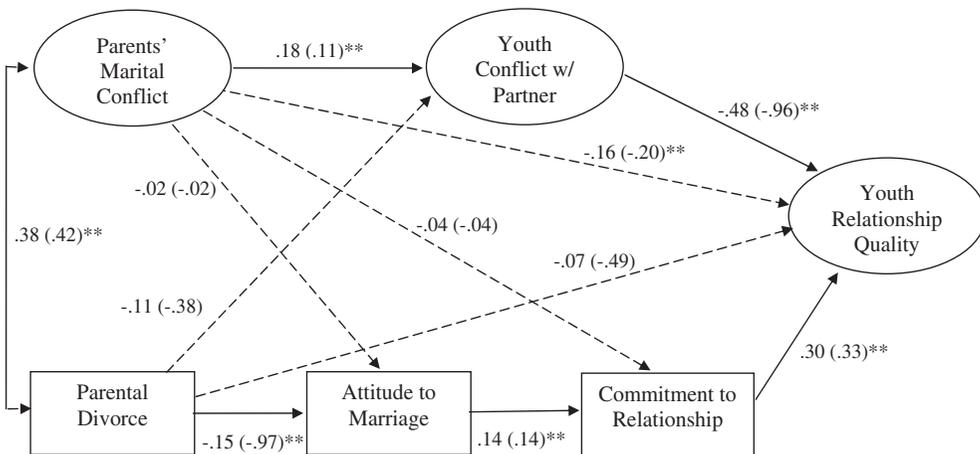
Note. Parental divorce: 0 = no, 1 = yes.  
 \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . Two-tailed test.

*Structural equation models*

Figure 1 shows the results of the hypothesized differential mediation model. Control variables, including gender (0 = male, 1 = female) and relationship status (dummy variables for dating exclusively, nonexclusively, and married/engaged), were included but not shown in Figure 1 for a clear presentation of the results. The fit indices all indicated a good fit of the model to the data (Kline, 2005):  $\chi^2(45) = 70.05$ ,  $p = .01$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .96, root mean square error of

approximation (RMSEA) = .04, and  $p$  close (pc) = .66.

Figure 1 illustrates several findings. As hypothesized, parents' marital conflict was significantly related to young adults' conflict behavior ( $b = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), which in turn was significantly related to their relationship quality ( $b = -.48$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Similarly, parental divorce was significantly related to young adult children's less favorable attitude toward marriage ( $b = -.15$ ,  $p < .01$ ), attitude toward marriage/divorce was significantly related to young adults' commitment to their current romantic relationships



**Figure 1.** Differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships.

Note. Standardized coefficients are outside the parentheses and unstandardized coefficients are inside the parentheses. Solid lines indicated significant paths and dashed lines indicated non-significant paths.  $\chi^2(45) = 70.05$ ,  $p = .01$ , CFI = .98, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .04, pc = .66. \*\* $p < .01$ . One-tailed test.

( $b = .14$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and commitment to current relationship, in turn, was positively associated with their relationship quality ( $b = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ). In addition, the originally significant direct association between parental marital conflict and young adults' relationship quality ( $-.27$ ,  $p < .01$ , in Table 2) was reduced ( $-.16$ ,  $p < .01$ , in Figure 1) once youth conflict was added into the model. Similarly, the original significant direct association between parental divorce and young adult's romantic relationship quality was no longer significant ( $-.07$ , *ns*) once attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to own relationship were added to the model.

In addition, the mediating effect from parents' marital conflict to young adults' relationship quality through youth conflict behavior ( $-.09$ ) was reliably different from zero using the recommended procedure of evaluating statistical significance with bootstrapped standard error (95% confidence interval based on 2,000 resamples:  $-.16$  to  $-.02$ ; Dearing & Hamilton, 2006; Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Similarly, but to a lesser degree, the mediating effect from parental divorce to offspring relationship quality through attitude toward marriage/divorce and to one's own relationship was also significant ( $-.05$ , 95% confidence interval based on 2,000 resamples:  $-.14$  to  $-.01$ ).

Regarding control variables (results not shown), relationship status was related to attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to current relationships. Specifically, compared with those dating nonexclusively, those dating exclusively demonstrated a more positive attitude toward marriage. Both those dating exclusively and those married/engaged showed a higher level of commitment to their relationship than those dating nonexclusively. Gender was not significantly related to any of the outcome variables.

In order to test whether the differential effect shown above is indeed statistically different, we then conducted a series of model comparisons. First, we ran the model in Figure 1 but constraining the path from parents' marital conflict to youth conflict and the path from parental divorce to youth conflict

to be equal. This model yielded a chi-square of 73.85 with 46 *df*. Comparing this model with Figure 1, the chi-square change was statistically significant,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.80$ ,  $p = .05$ , suggesting that the path from parents' marital conflict was statistically stronger than the path from parental divorce to youth conflict. Similarly, a second model with paths from parental divorce and marital conflict to commitment to marriage set to be equal yielded a chi-square of 74.55 ( $df = 46$ ), and the significant chi-square change from the model in Figure 1,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 4.50$ ,  $p < .05$ , also suggested that parental divorce has a statistically stronger association with commitment than marital conflict to commitment to marriage.

We also examined alternative models to further test the hypothesized ordering of the variables and relationships. Specifically, we evaluated parental marital problems in Time 1, the hypothesized outcome (young adult romantic relationship quality) at Time 2 and the hypothesized potential mediators (e.g., commitment and conflict) at Time 3. The results from the alternative model indicated that relationship quality did not mediate the associations between parental marital problems and behavior or parental marital problems and commitment, and the model fit ( $\chi^2 = 81.01$  with  $df = 45$ ) was worse than the hypothesized model in Figure 1.

Finally, we tested the potential moderating effect between parental divorce and marital conflict on the different mechanisms. Specifically, we first tested the moderating effect of parental divorce on the mediating model of marital conflict on relationship quality through young adults' conflict behavior. The model comparison between young adults whose parents had divorced and those whose parents did not divorce showed no statistical difference on the path coefficient estimates. Similarly, the mediating model for parental divorce on young adults' relationship quality through attitude and commitment did not differ for those whose parents showed high levels of conflict versus those whose parents showed low levels of conflict. In summary, the study did not find moderating effects of parental divorce and conflict on the different mechanisms hypothesized.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine potential differential mechanisms that might account for the relationships between parental divorce and marital conflict and young adults' relationship quality. Specifically, we identified two potential mechanisms. On one hand, we hypothesized that parental divorce would be associated with young adults' relationship quality through a more negative attitude toward marriage (a more favorable attitude toward divorce) and a weaker commitment to their own relationships. On the other hand, we hypothesized that marital conflict would be associated with young adults' relationship quality through learned conflict behavior that would be manifest in the offspring's relationship. Results from our SEM analyses supported this differential mediation hypothesis. Specifically, parental divorce was related to a less positive attitude toward marriage (more positive attitude toward divorce), and the negative attitude toward marriage was related to a weaker commitment to their current romantic relationship, which was, in turn, linked to lower relationship quality. In contrast, parents' marital conflict was positively related to young adults' conflict behavior to their partner, which was linked to lower relationship quality. In light of prior research that examines the impact of parental divorce and conflict separately, it is important to note that in this study each was tested after controlling for the other. For example, parents' marital conflict explained significant variance in youth conflict after controlling for parental divorce.

The findings on parental divorce and young adult relationships serve to underline the importance of our study as it examined the processes through which parental divorce might affect young adults' romantic relationships. The significance of the mediating effect of parental divorce on youth relationship quality through attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to their own relationships was tested by bootstrapping the effect rather than using the Sobel test because the sample size was moderate ( $n < 400$ ; Bollen & Stine, 1990; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams,

2004; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The test showed that the mediation was statistically significant. These findings extend those from several other studies on marriage and romantic relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Jacquet & Surra, 2001) and suggest that attitude toward marriage/divorce and commitment to current relationship mediates the impact of parental divorce on the quality of young adults' romantic relationships.

The findings also supported our hypothesis on the impact of marital conflict; we found that parents' marital conflict was associated with young adult children's romantic relationship quality. Based on social learning theory, we proposed and found that parents' marital conflict was associated with young adults' romantic relationship quality through their conflict behavior in interactions with their partner. This finding, combined with findings from earlier studies (Cui et al., 2008; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004), demonstrates the intergenerational transmission of conflict behaviors in relationships that influence relationship quality and satisfaction.

Furthermore, this study addressed an important question on the influence of parental divorce versus marital conflict on young adults' romantic relationships. Some studies have focused on either parental divorce or marital conflict separately. The problem with this approach is that when studying one factor but ignoring the other, it is hard to differentiate their effects because parental divorce and marital conflict tend to be related. Therefore, to evaluate the distinctive effects of parental divorce and marital conflict, both parental divorce and conflict should be tested simultaneously. Some studies have included both parental divorce and marital conflict, but few studies have examined the potentially different pathways through which they may influence offspring relationship outcomes by directly and statistically testing the path differences. This study contributes to the current literature by demonstrating that parental divorce and marital conflict are associated with young adults' relationship outcome through different mechanisms.

Finally, our study also tested the potential interaction effect between parental divorce

and conflict on young adults' romantic relationships. Amato and DeBoer (2001) suggested that marital discord had a moderating effect on the association between parental divorce and offspring's probability of divorce. Specifically, they found that parental divorce was more strongly associated with offspring divorce if the parents showed low levels of conflict before the divorce than if their parents showed high levels of discord. Our study extended the research question to couples in romantic relationships. Although our findings suggested a similar pattern of the association between parental divorce and parental conflict on offspring relationship quality, the interaction was not statistically significant. Future research is needed to further examine this issue.

The present findings should, however, be viewed in the light of several limitations. First, although longitudinal, the data analyzed remain correlational and, therefore, do not speak directly to causal inference. However, collecting data on parents' marital relationships and youth attitude toward marriage/divorce at Time 1, young adults' commitment to their relationships and conflict behavior at Time 2, and relationship quality at Time 3 reduced measurement bias and ensured the temporal ordering of the theoretical constructs. Second, our sample comprised undergraduate students from a Southern university, the majority of whom were non-Hispanic White females in a dating relationship. Future research is needed to test the generalizability of the findings to other ethnic groups, developmental stages, and geographic locations. In particular, there were far more female participants than male participants in our study. The null finding on gender difference in this study may be due to limitations in the power to detect gender effects. Future studies therefore need to further examine potential gender differences by including larger numbers of participants from both genders. Third, the measure of parental divorce was a simple dichotomous variable asking participant if their parents had divorced. No information was available on the timing of parental divorce, or on later family structure (e.g., stepfamily

formation). Future studies need to further examine the situation surrounding parental divorce to examine potential factors that could explain variations in the effect (Bartell, 2006). Fourth, the measures used in this study were all from target offspring's self-report, which may inflate the associations among the constructs (Bank, Dishion, Skinner, & Patterson, 1990). Future studies are needed to assess whether the association exists using partner or observer reports. However, Rogge and Bradbury (1999) found similar results when using self-reported questionnaires and behavioral observation, which increased our confidence in the current findings. Finally, the effects in the models demonstrating mediation are mostly small effects. However, such small effects are common in mediation models given that mediation coefficients are the products of two or more coefficients. Moreover, small effects are not necessarily trivial effects (Cui, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1979) and could have substantial meanings on the association between parental marital problems and young adults' romantic relationships.

Despite these limitations, this study addressed important theoretical issues in regard to parental divorce/conflict and young adults' relationship outcomes. The findings suggest that parental divorce and marital conflict decreased young adult children's romantic relationship quality differently through a weaker commitment and conflict behavior, respectively. These results help to pinpoint specific links in the processes linking parental divorce and marital conflict and offspring relationship quality. This is important information as it can be used to inform where preventive intervention might be focused in an effort to reduce the adverse impact of parental divorce and marital conflict on relationship development in emerging adulthood.

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