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# The effect of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution: What makes a difference?

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MING CUI, FRANK D. FINCHAM, AND JARED A. DURTSCHI

*The Florida State University*

## Abstract

It was proposed that parental divorce does not have a uniform effect on young adults' romantic relationships and that differential outcomes depend on how young adults perceive their parents' divorce. Using a sample of 571 young adults, structural equation modeling suggested that, compared with those from intact families, young adults whose parents divorced held a more favorable attitude toward divorce. A positive attitude toward divorce was associated with lower commitment to their romantic relationship, which in turn affected its dissolution. More importantly, young adults' perception of parental divorce varied depending on interparental conflict and parents' marital quality before the divorce. The variation in the perception of interparental divorce was linked to relationship dissolution via attitude toward divorce and relationship commitment.

Until recently, it was assumed that romantic relationships in youth were not particularly important or formative (see Arnett, 2004; Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999; Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). But recent data have made it clear that such an assumption is no longer tenable (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Collins, 2003). Romantic relationships in young adults are important for at least three reasons. First, the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships are critical developmental tasks for youth during the transition to adulthood (Amato et al., 2008; van Dulmen, Gony, Haydon, & Collins, 2008). Second,

romantic relationship development and dissolution have important consequences on youth well-being and behavioral adjustment (e.g., Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; van Dulmen et al., 2008). Finally, patterns of romantic relationships in youth could be predictive of later relationships and marriage in adulthood (Raley, Criseey, & Muller, 2007). For example, frequent relationships and relationship breakups could be an indication of an inability to have successful long-term relationships (e.g., Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006). Consequently, it is important to understand developmental precursors that increase the likelihood of establishing stable and satisfying romantic relationships.

Of all the factors that could predict young adult romantic relationship satisfaction and dissolution, specific characteristics in the family of origin are especially relevant (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). In particular, parental divorce has been demonstrated to have an impact on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution (Bartell, 2006). However, the effects of divorce are diverse and

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Ming Cui and Jared A. Durtschi, Department of Family and Child Sciences, The Florida State University. Frank D. Fincham, Family Institute, The Florida State University.

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Correspondence should be addressed to Ming Cui, Department of Family and Child Sciences, 216 Sandels Building, The Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306, e-mail: mcui@fsu.edu.

complex (e.g., Buchanan, 2000), and not all children from divorced families experience relationship difficulties and dissolution. Only limited research has focused on the factors that can explain variation in the impact of parental divorce on offspring. This study addresses this issue by investigating how parental divorce may affect young adult romantic relationship dissolution differently through perceptions of parental divorce, attitudes toward divorce, and commitment to one's romantic relationship.

### *The importance of studying romantic relationship dissolution*

Even though romantic relationships during emerging and young adulthood could be self-focused and unstable (Arnett, 2004), as Collins and van Dulmen (2006) pointed out, substantial continuity in close relationships and development in one period of life builds upon development from an earlier time. This view is consistent with the cognitive-developmental model (Furman & Simon, 1999) as well as the life course perspective (Elder, 1985). For example, Lichter and Qian (2008) argued that experiences of relationship breakups could make it easier to terminate the next relationship, including marital relationships. From a developmental perspective, Karney and Bradbury (1995) also suggested that some risk factors for marital problems and divorce could be identified in premarital relationships. Attitudes and behaviors related to romantic relationships could predict future marital attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 1993; Bayer, 1969). Therefore, establishing stable romantic relationships is one of the major developmental tasks during emerging adulthood (Conger et al., 2000; Fincham & Cui, 2011). Consequently, it is important to examine romantic relationship dissolution and factors that could predict relationship dissolution (Rodrigues et al., 2006; Simpson, 1987).

Although some researchers have proposed that youth should explore their options in romance and gain relationship experience in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004), most research findings have shown that young adults do not break up their romantic relation-

ships for the purpose of exploring further romantic options. Instead, relationship dissolution is usually preceded by low levels of commitment, low relationship efficacy, high levels of conflict, poor communication, cheating, aggression, and low relationship satisfaction and quality (see Rodrigues et al., 2006; Simpson, 1987). Several studies have shown that close, secure, and positive relationships last longer than relationships characterized by conflict and low commitment (e.g., Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006). Therefore, this study examines the association between parental divorce and youth relationship dissolution, and whether youth's attitudes toward divorce and commitment to their current relationships mediate such an association.

### *The effects of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution*

Nearly half of marriages today end in divorce (Amato & Irving, 2006; Cherlin, 2009). It is therefore important to examine how young adults from family contexts marked by parental divorce cope with the task of developing their own romantic relationships. The cognitive-developmental model proposes that youth develop cognitive representations from their relational experiences and these cognitive representations are activated in relevant social situations (Bartell, 2006; Collins & Read, 1994; Furman & Simon, 1999). Specifically, cognitive representations consist of memories of past experiences and observed relational experiences, including parental divorce. Such representations are hypothesized to influence youth's beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about self and others, which, in turn, affect how they perceive and behave in their own relationships. Similarly, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) also predicts that observing parental divorce can shape young adults' attitudes toward divorce and involvement in their own romantic relationships.

Both the cognitive-developmental model and social learning theory suggest that parental divorce does not necessarily affect young adults' attitude toward divorce uniformly but rather likely depends on young adults'

experience of their parents' divorce, including the level of interparental conflict and marital quality before the divorce. Furthermore, it is likely that relationship commitment is similarly affected by parental divorce. Specifically, 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 develop patterns of leaving a less than satisfying relationship rather than work on the relationship based on modeled behavior from their parents.

Earlier studies have demonstrated the intergenerational transmission of divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1997; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Pope & Mueller, 1976). A few studies have extended this line of inquiry to examine the impact of parental divorce on nonmarital unions of offspring and have yielded similar results. For example, using a British sample, Kiernan and Cherlin (1999) found a positive association between parental divorce and offspring relationship dissolution. Using a Swedish sample, Gahler, Hong, and Bernhardt (2009) found similar results. However, these studies examined relationship dissolution in general terms and did not differentiate marriage from nonmarital relationships.

Only a few studies have examined the association between parental divorce and young adult romantic relationships specifically. Using a random sample of 464 young adult couples in romantic relationships, Jacquet and Surra (2001) found that compared to women from intact families, women from divorced families reported less relationship satisfaction. Ross and Mirowsky (1999) also found that parental divorce was associated with less happy relationships. Sassler, Cunningham, and Lichter (2009) found that, compared with youth who grew up in intact families, youth who grew up with divorced parents reported lower romantic relationship satisfaction and a heightened perception that their own romantic relationships would end. Weigel (2007) also suggested that young adults from divorced families were more likely to gain the message that

relationships are not permanent. Similarly, several other studies have documented that children of divorce report less desire for long-term relationships (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986). Even though these studies have focused on romantic relationships, they examined relationship satisfaction and expectations of relationship dissolution rather than actual relationship dissolution. This study will examine the association between parental divorce and young adults' actual romantic relationship dissolution.

Given the limited research on parental divorce and young adult relationship dissolution, it is not surprising that little is known about potential mechanisms that link parental divorce to offspring romantic relationship dissolution. However, several studies on parental divorce and offspring divorce have found that divorce attitude and commitment to marriage mediated the association between the two. For example, compared with children from intact families, children of divorce hold more pessimistic views of marriage and more liberal attitudes toward divorce, and see divorce as a solution to a problematic marriage (e.g., Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1997; Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1985; Trent & South, 1992). Similarly, other studies have suggested that youth from divorced families show lower levels of commitment to their marriages (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Rogers, 1999; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). As noted, all these studies focused on parental divorce and offspring divorce, rather than on premarital romantic relationships. This study therefore attempts to examine the potential mediating effects of divorce attitude and commitment to current relationship on the association between parental divorce and young adults' premarital romantic relationship dissolution.

A review of the limited research in this area suggests that, similar to the research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce, attitude toward divorce and commitment to current relationship could play an important role in explaining the association between parental divorce and premarital relationship outcomes.

Segrin and Taylor (2006) studied young couples in romantic relationships and found that parental divorce was associated with diminished beliefs in lifelong marriage. Riggio and Weiser (2008) found that parental divorce was related to positive attitude toward divorce and more negative relationship outcomes, including low relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction among college students. Cui and Fincham (2010) also found that parental divorce was associated with positive attitudes toward divorce, low relationship commitment, and low relationship quality. These studies suggest that parental divorce may influence divorce attitude and relationship commitment, which will affect relationship quality, but none of these studies actually examined relationship dissolution.

If people hold a pessimistic attitude about marriage and believe that divorce is an easier alternative than working on the marriage, it is possible that they would also not devote much time and energy to a current 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 increase the odds of relationship failure. Therefore, it is expected that having a favorable attitude toward divorce would lead to low commitment through a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly, having an optimistic attitude about marriage and a more conservative attitude toward divorce could promote greater commitment to a romantic relationship. Therefore, the first goal of this study is to examine whether parental divorce influences young adults' romantic relationship dissolution through attitude toward divorce and commitment to current relationship. On the basis of the earlier research findings, we proposed that:

H1: *Compared with offspring from intact families, young adults whose parents divorced would hold a more favorable attitude toward divorce. This more favorable attitude toward divorce would be associated with low commitment to a current relationship, which in turn would increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution.*

### *The differential effects of parental divorce on romantic relationship dissolution*

Much less studied is the variation in relationship outcome within the population of children of divorce. Not all children of divorce experience difficulties in their own relationships. Parental divorce is not a uniform experience and diverse experiences associated with parental divorce may account for variation in romantic relationship outcomes among children of divorce (Bartell, 2006). Therefore research is needed to examine specific aspects of the parental divorce experience that may be associated with differential effects on romantic relationship dissolution.

One of the most important factors that could affect romantic relationships among children of divorce is interparental conflict before and during the divorce. Recent studies have found that young adults' perceptions of interparental conflict are associated with their own romantic relationship problems (e.g., Cui, Fincham, & Pasley, 2008; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). Parental divorce is usually preceded by conflict between parents. However, children's perception of interparental conflict could vary depending on the content, frequency, and intensity of the conflict. Research on interparental conflict and child adjustment has shown that parental conflicts that are overt, intense, and child related are more strongly associated with child maladjustment than conflicts that are less evident (covert), intense, and not child related (Davies & Cummings, 2006; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Therefore, children of divorce could form different perceptions of their parents' divorce based on their degree of exposure to interparental conflict and the extent to which they feel "caught in the middle." High levels of such experiences can be very hard for children. For these children, parental divorce following high levels of observed conflict may be viewed as a relief. Studies have shown that for those children who were freed from a high-conflict home environment by parental divorce, their well-being actually improved (Booth & Amato, 2001; Jekielek, 1998). Consequently, these children could develop a more positive attitude toward divorce. In

fact, Kapinus (2005) found that among young adults whose parents remained married across the study period, those who reported higher levels of interparental conflict believed that their parents should have divorced. Furthermore, these young adults also reported more positive views of divorce. However, if parents manage to handle their conflict away from the children and leave their children out of the conflict, these children may not observe high levels of interparental conflict and therefore may not view their parents' divorce as necessary. Consequently, they may still view marriage positively and not favor divorce as a means of dealing with marital problems. As a result, compared with children of divorce who experienced high levels of interparental conflict, these children of divorce could have a more conservative attitude toward divorce.

In addition to the observed interparental conflict before divorce, the limited research in this area also suggests that children's evaluation of the quality of their parents' marriage before divorce also affects their attitude toward divorce. For example, parental divorce is found to be associated with positive attitudes toward divorce among children who view their parents as having had low marital quality before divorce. In addition, children who are happier after parental divorce are more likely to accept divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Cunningham & Thornton, 2005). Kapinus (2005) found that young adults who believed their parents had lower marital quality were more likely to hold tolerant views of divorce. However, this study used a sample of parents who were married. Overall, these studies demonstrate the importance of examining situations surrounding parental divorce. However, extant research on this topic is quite limited and no studies have tested potential mediating processes. Therefore, this study will extend previous research from focusing on divorce attitude as an outcome to testing the mediating role of attitude to divorce and commitment in the association between parental divorce and offspring relationship dissolution.

The second goal of this study, therefore, is to examine whether the association between parental divorce and offspring relationship

dissolution is, at least partially, explained by young adults' perception of parental divorce. Specifically, we propose that if children observed high levels of interparental conflict before parental divorce and believed their parents' marriage before the divorce was bad, they will tend to see the divorce as a necessary outcome and may even feel relieved by it. From their perception of their parents' divorce experience, these young adults may develop a generally favorable attitude toward divorce. However, if children did not observe high levels of conflict and believed their parents had a relatively good marriage, they may think that divorce was not necessary and their parents' marriage could have been saved if they had tried harder. From their perception of their parents' divorce, these young adults could form a less favorable attitude toward divorce. Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

*H2: Children's observed interparental conflict and marital quality before parental divorce would have an impact on how they (children of divorce) perceive their parents' divorce. The experience of their parents' divorce, in turn, would influence their general attitude toward divorce. Finally, as in H1, we will test whether divorce attitude and commitment mediate the association between offspring experience of parental divorce and their own romantic relationship outcomes.*

## **Method**

### *Sample and procedure*

Participants were undergraduate students at a large Southern university in an introductory course on families across the lifespan, a class that meets university liberal studies requirements. Students taking this course came from various departments across campus (e.g., education, psychology, exercise science, nursing, biological science, nutrition, merchandizing, etc.) and are more representative of the student population in the university than students typically found in the psychology undergraduate subject pool. Of the 1,291 students in the original sample, 662 identified themselves

as being in a romantic relationship and had parents who were either living together or divorced (536 had lived with both biological parents and 126 experienced parental divorce). One hundred thirteen were young men and 548 were young women. On average, their romantic relationship duration was about 1 year. Of the 662 participants, 571 had complete data on all the variables of interest. Among the 571 participants, 111 were from divorced families. Examination of participants with incomplete data showed no indication of selective attrition. Therefore, 571 participants were included to test H1 (divorce vs. intact families). Among them, 111 young adults of parental divorce were used to test H2 (among divorced families).

Students in the class were offered multiple options to earn extra credit. One of the options, approved by the local Institutional Review Board, was to complete the measures used in this study. Before doing so, they read a consent form explaining the voluntary nature of the participation and were told that the instructor in the course was not one of the researchers conducting the survey. At an initial assessment, all participants completed questionnaires on their parents' marital status and conflict, their attitude toward marriage and divorce, and relationship questions. They provided data again 7 weeks later and 14 weeks later.

### Measures

To test H1 (divorce vs. intact families), measures of parental divorce and general attitude toward marriage and divorce obtained at Time 1, commitment to current relationship at Time 2, and relationship dissolution at Time 3 were included.

#### *Relationship dissolution*

Relationship dissolution was assessed 14 weeks after the initial assessment by asking whether the relationship reported in previous waves had ended. The variable was coded as 0 = *no* and 1 = *yes*.

#### *Parental divorce*

A dichotomous variable was created to evaluate the status of parental divorce. The

variable was coded as 0 = *intact* and 1 = *divorced*.

#### *Attitude toward divorce*

Attitude toward marriage and divorce was assessed using items from the Attitude Toward Divorce Scale (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). This six-item measure asks respondents about their attitude toward divorce. Each item ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Two indicators were formed based on factor analyses. The first indicator consisted of three items favoring divorce (e.g., "It is okay for people to get married, thinking that if it does not work out, they can always get a divorce"). The three items were summed together to form the indicator. The second indicator consisted of three items disapproving divorce (e.g., "Marriage is for life, even if the couple is unhappy"). These items were reverse scored and then summed together. Thus, a high score on both indicators reflected a more favorable attitude toward divorce.

#### *Commitment to current relationship*

Participants' commitment toward their current relationship was assessed 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 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.

To test H2 (within divorce families), measures of interparental conflict before divorce, parents' marital quality before divorce, and perceptions of own parents' divorce were included in addition to the above described measures used to test H1.

### *Observation of interparental conflict before parental divorce*

For young adults whose parents divorced, their report of interparental conflict before their parents' divorce was assessed to evaluate the degree of conflict between the parents before they divorced, and this measure was used in testing H2 (for young adults from intact families, observed interparental conflict was also assessed and was used as a control variable in testing H1). Observed interparental conflict was assessed using several items adapted from the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Twelve items were selected that assessed three distinct dimensions of conflict behavior: frequency, intensity, and resolution. These three indicators have been shown to reflect a single latent construct, labeled "conflict properties" (Grych et al., 1992). 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*. Some items were reverse coded so that a high score indicated a high level of conflict. The  $\alpha$  coefficients for frequency, intensity, and resolution were .86, .88, and .85, respectively.

### *Evaluation of parents' marital quality before parental divorce*

Within the subsample of children of divorce, a single item was used to ask the participants to "describe your parents' relationship before they divorced." The responses ranged from 1 = *as bad as it gets* to 10 = *as good as it gets*.

### *Perceptions of parental divorce*

Children of divorce were asked about their perceptions of their parents' divorce. A seven-item scale was developed for the study, and participants rated their responses to the items on a scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree*

to 10 = *strongly agree*. Two indicators of a latent construct of perception of parental divorce were created. The first indicator consisted of three items reflecting the perception that their parents should not have divorced and that the divorce was unnecessary (e.g., "In my opinion, my parents' marriage was good enough that divorce wasn't needed"). The three items were summed together to form the indicator and the  $\alpha$  coefficient for this measure was .85. The second indicator consisted of four items reflecting the perception that parental divorce was necessary (e.g., "My parents' marriage was so bad that divorce was necessary" and "When my parents divorced, I felt relieved because they had such a bad relationship"). The items were reverse coded and then added together. Coefficient  $\alpha$  for this measure was .89. A high score on both indicators reflected the perception that parents should not have divorced (i.e., parents' marriage was not that bad and divorce was unnecessary).

In addition, participants' gender and relationship duration were also included as control variables. Youth gender was coded as 0 = *male* and 1 = *female*. Relationship duration was also assessed by asking about the length of the relationship (1 = *less than 2 months*, 2 = *3–4 months*, 3 = *5–6 months*, 4 = *7–12 months*, 5 = *1–2 years*, and 6 = *2 + years*).

## **Results**

### *Descriptive statistics*

Table 1 provides the means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for the study variables for the whole sample as well as by parental marital status. Overall, young adults from divorced families reported a more favorable attitude toward divorce than those from intact families. Young adults of divorce also reported a slightly lower level of relationship commitment. In addition, a higher proportion of young adults of divorce reported relationship dissolution over the 14-week period. However, the differences in relationship commitment and dissolution between the two groups were not statistically significant.

**Table 1.** Descriptive information with demographic characteristics by parental divorce

Variables	Total ( <i>N</i> = 571)	Divorced ( <i>N</i> = 111)	Intact ( <i>N</i> = 460)
(Favorable) Attitude toward divorce			
Favor couple divorce	7.44 (1.64)	<b>8.06 (1.74)</b>	<b>7.28 (1.58)</b>
Favor couple stay together (recode)	7.03 (1.54)	<b>7.28 (1.38)</b>	<b>6.97 (1.57)</b>
Interparental conflict			
Frequency	6.86 (2.63)	<b>8.90 (2.50)</b>	<b>6.37 (2.42)</b>
Intensity	7.34 (2.74)	<b>8.77 (2.86)</b>	<b>7.00 (2.60)</b>
Resolution	6.57 (2.39)	<b>8.73 (2.28)</b>	<b>6.04 (2.10)</b>
Parents' marital quality before divorce		4.35 (2.11)	
Young adults' perception of parental divorce			
Parents should not have divorced (unnecessary)		11.35 (7.00)	
Parental divorce necessary (recode)		21.25 (10.47)	
Relationship commitment	15.16 (3.13)	14.86 (3.14)	15.23 (3.13)
Relationship dissolution ( <i>n</i> )			
No	421	79	342
Yes	150	32	118
Control variables			
Young adult gender ( <i>n</i> )			
Male	85	14	71
Female	486	97	389
Relationship duration	4.33 (1.63)	4.39 (1.71)	4.32 (1.61)

*Note.* Mean values are outside parentheses and standard deviations are inside parentheses. Parents' marital quality before divorce and young adults' perception of parental divorce were assessed among young adults from divorced families only. The ranges of the variables for the whole sample were: favor divorce (3–12), favor stay together (3–12), interparental conflict frequency (4–12), intensity (4–12), resolution (4–12), relationship commitment (4–20), and relationship duration (1–6). Bolded pairs indicate that the mean differences between the divorced and intact groups are statistically significant at  $\alpha = .01$  or  $.05$ .

### Correlations

Table 2 provides the correlations among the study variables for the whole sample ( $N = 571$ ). Parental divorce was significantly correlated with offspring's favorable attitude toward divorce ( $r = .19, p < .01$ ). In addition, favorable attitude toward divorce was also negatively correlated with commitment to current relationship ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ). Finally, commitment to relationship was negatively correlated with relationship dissolution ( $r = -.28, p < .01$ ). Regarding control variables, interparental conflict was significantly correlated with parental divorce and young adults' divorce attitude. Young women showed a more favorable attitude toward divorce than young men, and relationship

duration was associated with higher commitment and less likelihood of relationship dissolution.

Table 3 shows correlations among the study variables for the divorced subsample ( $N = 111$ ). Reports of interparental conflict before parental divorce and parents' marital quality before divorce were highly correlated with offspring perceptions of parental divorce ( $r = -.57, p < .01$  between interparental conflict and divorce perception, and  $r = .68, p < .01$  between marital quality and divorce perception). Young adults' perception of parental divorce (as "unnecessary") was significantly associated with less favorable attitude toward divorce ( $r = -.40, p < .01$ ). Attitude toward divorce was also

**Table 2.** Correlations among variables in the structural equation model for the whole sample

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Parental divorce	1.00						
2. Interparental conflict	.42**	1.00					
3. (Favorable) Attitude toward divorce	.19**	.13**	1.00				
4. Relationship commitment	-.05	-.10**	-.17**	1.00			
5. Relationship dissolution	.03	.05	.04	-.28**	1.00		
6. Young adult gender	.03	.08	.09*	-.01	-.04	1.00	
7. Relationship duration	.02	-.07	.02	.21**	-.18**	.04	1.00

Note.  $N = 571$ . Parental divorce: 0 = intact and 1 = divorced. Relationship dissolution: 0 = no and 1 = yes. Young adult gender: 0 = male and 1 = female.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . Two-tailed test.

**Table 3.** Correlations among variables in the structural equation model for the divorced sample

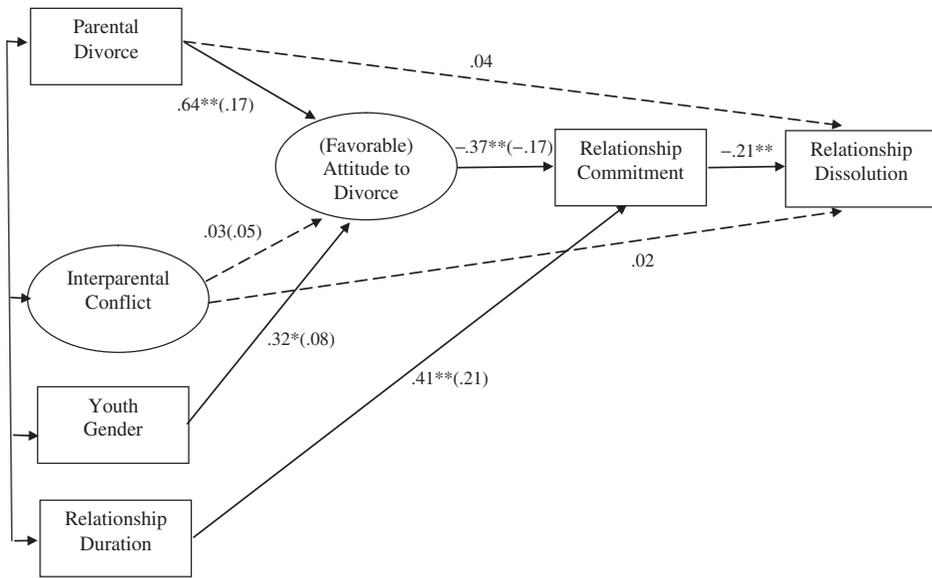
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Interparental conflict	1.00							
2. Marital quality before divorce	-.64**	1.00						
3. Perceptions of parental divorce (unnecessary)	-.57**	.68**	1.00					
4. (Favorable) Attitude toward divorce	.25*	-.28**	-.40**	1.00				
5. Relationship commitment	-.07	.08	.17	-.29**	1.00			
6. Relationship dissolution	.14	-.06	-.15	.04	-.31**	1.00		
7. Young adult gender	.23*	-.09	-.11	.01	.03	-.06	1.00	
8. Relationship duration	-.19*	.12	.23*	-.06	.46**	-.40**	-.04	1.00

Note.  $N = 111$ . Relationship dissolution: 0 = no and 1 = yes. Young adult gender: 0 = male and 1 = female.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . Two-tailed test.

significantly associated with relationship commitment. Finally, relationship commitment correlated significantly with young adults' romantic relationship dissolution. Regarding control variables, young women reported a slightly higher level of interparental conflict before divorce than young men. Those with

longer relationships reported higher levels of relationship commitment and stability. With these preliminary findings, we now turn to structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypotheses. Mplus 5.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2007) was used to estimate the following SEMs.



**Figure 1.** The effects of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution (testing H1).

*Note.*  $N = 571$ . For continuous endogenous variables, unstandardized coefficients are outside parentheses and standardized coefficients are inside parentheses. For relationship dissolution, only unstandardized coefficients (log odds) are reported.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . One-tailed test.

### SEM testing H1

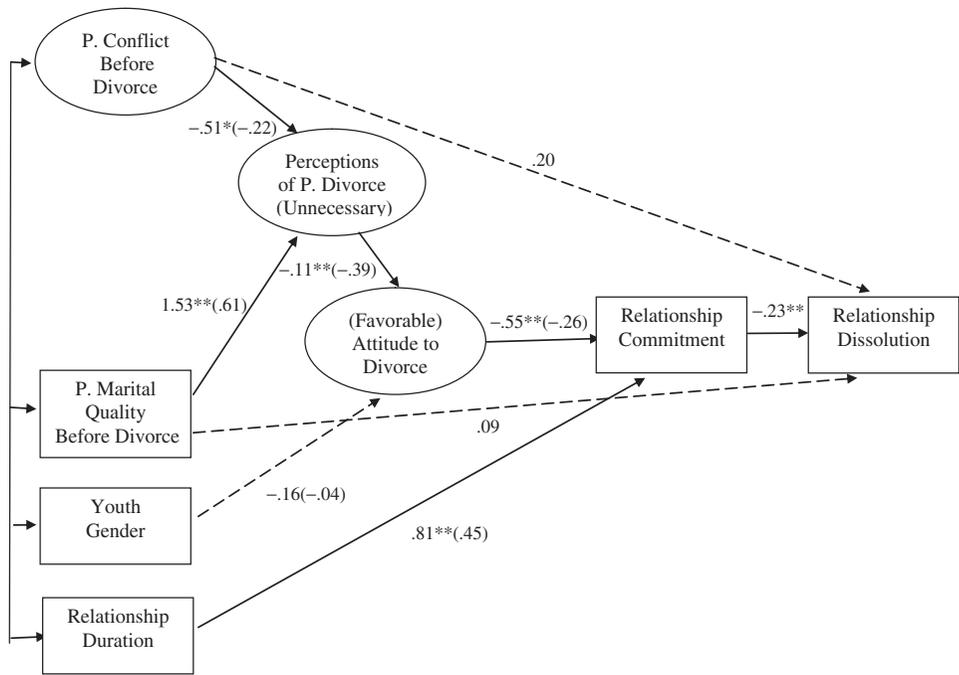
Figure 1 shows the results of the SEM testing H1 with the whole sample ( $N = 571$ ). The  $-2$  log likelihood was 14,481.56. Young adults' report of interparental conflict was included as a control variable. In addition, paths from gender and relationship duration (as control variables) to all endogenous variables were tested, but only the significant paths are reported in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the support for our initial hypothesis. First, it can be seen that experiencing parental divorce was positively associated with a more favorable attitude toward divorce ( $b = .64$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Furthermore, favorable attitude toward divorce was significantly and negatively related to romantic relationship commitment ( $b = -.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Relationship commitment, in turn, was significantly and negatively related to relationship dissolution ( $b = -.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ), suggesting that a one-unit increase or decrease in commitment was associated with .21 unit decrease or increase in the log of the odds

of relationship dissolution. To interpret this in terms of the odds ratio ( $e^{-.21} = .81$ ), a one-unit increase or decrease in commitment resulted in a corresponding decrease or increase in the odds of relationship dissolution by a factor of .81 or by 19% ( $1 - .81 = .19$ ). In sum, support was found for H1 as there was a pathway from parental divorce to relationship dissolution via attitude to divorce and relationship commitment.

### SEM testing H2

Figure 2 shows the results of the SEM testing H2 with the subsample of young adults from divorced families ( $N = 111$ ). The  $-2$  log likelihood was 4,182.31. Figure 2 reveals several important findings. First, as hypothesized, both young adults' reports of interparental conflict and marital quality before divorce were significantly associated with young adults' perceptions of their parents' divorce ( $b = -.51$ ,  $p < .05$  from parental divorce to divorce perception;  $b = 1.53$ ,  $p < .01$  from marital quality to divorce perception).



**Figure 2.** Variation in parental divorce and young adults’ romantic relationship dissolution (testing H2).

Note.  $N = 111$ . For continuous endogenous variables, unstandardized coefficients are outside parentheses and standardized coefficients are inside parentheses. For relationship dissolution, only unstandardized coefficients (log odds) are reported. P. = Parental.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . One-tailed test.

Second, perception of parental divorce (as “unnecessary”) was, in turn, significantly associated with less favorable attitude toward divorce. Third, attitude toward divorce was significantly associated with relationship commitment. Finally, relationship commitment was related to relationship dissolution ( $b = -.23$ ,  $p < .01$ , odds ratio =  $e^{-.23} = .80$ ), suggesting that a one-unit increase or decrease in commitment decreased or increased the odds of relationship dissolution by a factor of .80 or by 20%. In sum, our second hypothesis was supported as young adults’ reports of interparental conflict and marital quality before the divorce were related to their perceptions of parental divorce, which in turn were linked to general attitude toward divorce. As before, divorce attitude and commitment mediated the association between offspring experience of parental divorce and their own romantic relationship dissolution.

**Discussion**

This study examined the association between parental divorce and young adults’ romantic relationship dissolution. We hypothesized that parental divorce would be linked to young adults’ relationship dissolution via their attitude toward divorce and relationship commitment (H1). More importantly, motivated by the need to understand variation in the impact of parental divorce, we hypothesized that the impact of parental divorce on young adults’ romantic relationship dissolution would vary depending on their perception of parental marital quality and conflict before parental divorce (H2). Results from SEM analysis supported both hypotheses.

Comparing offspring from intact families and divorced families (H1), we found that young adults from divorced families demonstrated a more favorable attitude toward divorce than those from intact families. This

favorable attitude toward divorce was associated with lower levels of commitment to their own romantic relationships, which in turn were associated with relationship dissolution during the 14-week study period. This finding is consistent with those from earlier studies on the association between parental divorce and offspring divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1997; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Pope & Mueller, 1976). Furthermore, it extended the association of parental divorce and offspring divorce to the association between parental divorce and offspring romantic relationships and suggested similar findings. This is important because attitudes and behaviors in romantic relationships have been found to predict future attitudes and behaviors in marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1993). Therefore, by investigating how parental divorce affects young adult romantic relationships, researchers may be able to identify early signs of future marital and relational problems.

Although premarital relationship dissolution may be quite different from divorce, the findings from this study document a similar influence of parental divorce on relationship dissolution. However, it is true that youth might explore their relationship options and enter and exit relationships multiple times before settling on someone to marry (Arnett, 2004). Therefore, relationship dissolution could be due to many different reasons. Among all the different reasons for relationship dissolution, some of these relationship breakups might be for the better and even promote personal growth, such as termination of relationships that are physically aggressive or that have a negative impact on the youth (e.g., preventing youth from pursuing education and career, problem behaviors such as drug use, etc.; see Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Manning, Giordano, Longmore, & Hocevar, 2011). Furthermore, there is considerable variation in the association between parental divorce and youth relationship dissolution. For some young adults, parental divorce may lead to delay in relationship formation or determination to keep their relationships (Cui, Wickrama, Lorenz, & Conger, 2011; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

Conversely, despite the various reasons for relationship dissolution and the differential impact of parental divorce on relationship dissolution, the significant findings in this study did suggest that a certain pattern in relationship dissolution occurred that was explained by relationship commitment, divorce attitude, and parental divorce. However, it should also be noted that no direct association between parental divorce and youth relationship dissolution was found (as indicated in the correlation tables and models). Instead, the effect from parental divorce on youth relationship dissolution was indirect through divorce attitude and relationship commitment.

Identification of the mechanisms linking parental divorce and offspring relationship dissolution was an important finding in this study. Few studies have tested mechanisms that might account for the relationship between parental divorce and offspring relationship outcomes, especially when it comes to premarital relationship dissolution. Even though the correlation between parental divorce and relationship dissolution was not significant, Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998) have extended the mediating test proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and suggested that the significance of such an association between two variables is not required for testing potential mediating effects between them given the above significant correlations involving the mediating variables (also see Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The results from this study suggest that parental divorce is associated with a positive attitude toward divorce and low relationship commitment, which in turn is associated with higher odds of relationship dissolution. Young adults who have experienced parental divorce are likely to see divorce as an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage; they therefore display a more favorable attitude toward divorce. This attitude toward divorce could be generalized to romantic relationships and affect their devotion to such relationships. Lower commitment, in turn, increased the odds of relationship dissolution.

However, nearly half of all marriages today end in divorce (Amato & Irving, 2006; Cherlin, 2009), and not all children of divorce

experience relationship difficulties and dissolution (Bartell, 2006). This calls for further investigation of how the context in which a parental divorce takes place affects children differently. Analysis of the subsample of children of divorce suggested that children's report of interparental conflict and parents' marital quality before parental divorce influenced how these young adults perceived parental divorce (supporting H2). Those who observed that their parents had engaged in intense and frequent fighting viewed their parents' divorce as a desired outcome following a bad marriage. These young adults tended to have a more favorable attitude toward divorce. Conversely, those who observed less conflict between their parents held more optimistic attitudes toward marriage and were relatively disapproving of divorce. Compared with those of parental divorce with high observed conflict, these young adults (low observed conflict) had better relationship stability and were less likely to report relationship dissolution.

The findings on differential effects of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution make several important contributions to the literature. First, they suggest that parental divorce does not have a uniform effect on young adult children's romantic relationships. Divorce can have both positive and negative results. For some children, the parents' divorce can be devastating. Other children may grow from the experience. In particular, the present findings suggest that when children observe high interparental conflict before parental divorce and perceive their parents as having low marital quality, they are more in favor of their parents' divorce and therefore form a more positive attitude toward divorce. This is consistent with the cognitive-developmental model and social learning theory, which propose that young adults' attitude toward divorce and behavior in their own relationships are shaped by how they observe and perceive their parents' marriage and divorce and that different experiences with parental divorce have different effects on young adults' romantic relationships.

These findings emphasize the importance of the context in which divorce occurs,

particularly family processes before divorce. Children have different types of reactions to parental divorce depending on the situation surrounding the divorce. Our results suggest that divorce following overt, intense, and frequent conflict between parents in a bad marriage is especially harmful. Indeed, studies on child adjustment following parental divorce have shown that parents' conflict accounts for up to 50% of the variance in child outcomes attributed to parental divorce (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1991). Findings from this study suggest that interparental conflict before divorce could lead to offspring becoming fearful of the kind of committed relationship represented by marriage and may also cause offspring to develop a more favorable attitude toward divorce and, by extension, a greater willingness to terminate a romantic relationship. This finding suggests that it is important for parents to handle divorce well so as to minimize its effect on children. Specifically, parents could discuss their problems away from the children and handle the divorce in a constructive manner that is least harmful to children. This might include such things as giving age-appropriate explanations to children as to what is going to happen to them (e.g., where are they going to live, whether they will go to the same school, how and when to visit noncustodial parents, and whether siblings will stay together) and making them feel loved and protected during the divorce process so that they do not end up feeling responsible for their parents' divorce.

The present findings should, however, be viewed in light of several limitations in the data. First, the subsample of offspring from divorced families was rather small ( $N = 111$ ) for testing a relatively complex model. Second, even though the sample consisted of both young men and women, the majority of the participants were young women. Third, our sample comprised undergraduate students from a Southern university, the majority of who were non-Hispanic Whites. Fourth, even though we had data on whether the relationship ended in the follow-up survey 14 weeks later, given that the average duration of these relationships were over 1 year, it is hard to fully capture relationship dissolution in a 14-week interval. Fifth, unfortunately, we do not

have data on reasons for relationship dissolution. This means that the failure to take into account the different types of breakups could affect the strength and interpretation of the findings. Specifically, some relationship dissolutions may not be due to low commitment. Future studies should further examine different reasons for relationship dissolution and the potential consequences of such relationship dissolutions. In fact, ending a dangerous relationship (e.g., an abusive relationship) is not only necessary but also critical, and young adults should learn the skills to exit such harmful relationships. Sixth, we do not have data on the timing of parental divorce. Previous studies have suggested that timing of parental divorce is associated with the probability of offspring divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996). Similarly, timing of parental divorce could have a similar impact on premarital relationship dissolution.

Finally, the measures used in this study were all obtained from the target youth, which may inflate the associations among the constructs (Bank, Dishion, Skinner, & Patterson, 1990). However, even though the measures used in this study were retrospective self-reports, perceived marital conflict and quality could have real consequences on youth's attitude, commitment, and behavior in relationships. For the purpose of our study on how participants perceived their parents' marriage and divorce and how their experience affected their attitude and behavior based on the cognitive-developmental model, perceptions might be especially relevant to their representations of the parental divorce and their current relationships.

Despite these limitations, this study addressed important issues with regard to parental divorce and young adult children's relationship outcomes. The findings suggest that parental divorce increased young adult children's romantic relationship dissolution through their forming a more positive attitude toward divorce (relationship termination) and consequently a lower level of commitment toward one's own relationship. More importantly, variations in the effect of parental divorce could be explained by perceived interparental conflict and marital quality before

parents' divorce. These results help to pinpoint specific mechanisms that link parental divorce and young adults' relationship dissolution and potential factors contributing to the differential effects of parental divorce on offspring romantic relationships. This is valuable information as it can be used to inform preventative interventions by identifying potential intervention targets in an effort to reduce the adverse impact of parental divorce on youth relationship development. The importance of such information is emphasized by recent government attempts to promote couple relationship education in countries such as Australia, Japan, Norway, Great Britain, and the United States (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008), and especially in view of recent efforts to provide relationship education to young adults in college (see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011).

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