

# The Unique Influences of Parental Divorce and Parental Conflict on Emerging Adults in Romantic Relationships

Scott R. Braithwaite<sup>1</sup> · Reed A. Doxey<sup>1</sup> · Krista K. Dowdle<sup>1</sup> · Frank D. Fincham<sup>2</sup>

Published online: 24 August 2016  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2016

**Abstract** Parental divorce and parental conflict influence children across multiple domains, including risk of divorce in their own marriages. However, parental conflict and divorce, both separately and the interaction between the two, have not often been studied in premarital relationships, especially when considering possible mechanisms mediating these effects. In a large sample of emerging adults ( $N = 353$ ), we show that when the most plausible mediating mechanisms are simultaneously considered, only relational commitment mediates the influence of parental conflict on outcomes. Parental conflict in the absence of divorce was associated with less commitment and, in turn, less relationship satisfaction and stability in emerging adult children's romantic relationships, whereas parental conflict was unrelated to outcomes for children whose parents divorced. Implications for theory and preventive interventions are discussed.

**Keywords** Commitment · Emerging adulthood · Intergenerational transmission of divorce · Parental conflict · Parental divorce

## Introduction

Parental divorce and parental conflict influence offspring well-being across various domains, including risk of divorce in their own marriages (see Amato 2010, for a

review). A number of studies have suggested mechanisms that may explain this increased risk of divorce, but the preponderance of the evidence for these mechanisms is indirect. In fact, most research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce focuses on offspring marital outcomes and limited attention has been given to the premarital relationships of emerging adults. Emerging adulthood is a time when many individuals form new habits as they experience new contexts. Emerging adults in healthy dating relationships tend to have better mental and physical health (Braithwaite et al. 2010). The present study is among the first examinations of how both perceived parental conflict and the occurrence of divorce influence the relationships of emerging adult offspring; specifically, we test mechanisms through which parental divorce might influence offspring's current relationships and whether these mechanisms are primarily a function of parental divorce or parental conflict or an interaction of both of these.

## Influence of Parental Divorce and Interparental Conflict on Development

Research has consistently shown that parental divorce is associated with short- and long-term adverse outcomes for children of divorce (Amato 2001a; Amato and Keith 1991). For example, children of divorce have higher levels of conduct problems and lower levels of school achievement, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social adjustment, and poorer relationships with parents, particularly fathers (Amato 2001a; Amato and Keith 1991; Grych and Fincham 1990). Moreover, adult offspring whose parents divorced, when compared to their matched peers whose parents did not divorce, experience poorer mental health, and more marital discord (Amato 2003). Indeed, more than 20

---

✉ Krista K. Dowdle  
kristadowdle@byu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University, 286 TLRB, Provo, UT 84602-5543, USA

<sup>2</sup> Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

studies confirm that offspring who experienced parental divorce are more likely to experience marital dysfunction and divorce themselves (Wolfinger 2005). The majority of evidence suggests that divorce in and of itself does not lead to these poorer long-term outcomes; rather, divorce seems to influence offspring outcomes via parental conflict (Amato 1993; Hetherington et al. 1998). Yet parental conflict does not explain all the variance in these outcomes; many studies show that divorce continues to exert an incremental impact on outcomes even when controlling for marital conflict (e.g., Morrison and Coiro 1999). It is therefore important that continuing research on this topic examines divorce, parental conflict, and the interaction of these when examining offspring outcomes.

A number of studies suggest that an interactive effect between parental conflict and divorce is likely. Interactions between these variables have been observed in other areas of research; the interaction of parental conflict and divorce increases internalizing disorders (Jekielek 1998), and externalizing disorders (Strohschein 2005), and decreases the quality of parent–child relationships (Yu et al. 2010). Regarding romantic relationship outcomes, interactive effects have been examined in the marriages of adult children of divorce (Amato and DeBoer 2001) but not as often in the premarital relationship of emerging adults. Our paper seeks to address this limitation by more directly examining how parental conflict, divorce, and their interaction influence specific relational processes in the romantic relationships of emerging adults.

### **Why Examine Relationships that Precede Marriage?**

An important, longitudinal study that followed a large cohort from childhood to age 33 showed that the differences between children from divorced families and children from intact marriages became larger over time, becoming most pronounced as they enter adulthood (Cherlin et al. 1998). The authors of this study suggested that divorce seemed to place individuals on a different trajectory, one that may alter patterns in ways that contribute to less well-being in their own marriages and that these changes may mediate the observed differences in outcomes in adulthood; yet, there has been less of an emphasis on studying the portions of the trajectory that immediately precede marriage, namely emerging adulthood. Yet it is likely that many of the problems observed in marriage have their roots in patterns of interaction and attitudes that can be observed in premarital unions (Collins 2003; Conger et al. 2000) and societal trends have shifted in recent years away from marriage and toward cohabiting unions and other arrangements in which children are increasingly raised outside of marriage (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2013); thus, understanding

these relationships and how parental conflict and divorce influences their quality becomes an important piece of information in its own right. In the present study, we seek to explore this by examining whether parental conflict and divorce influence the premarital relationships of emerging adults.

### **In What Ways Might Parental Divorce and Distress Influence Emerging Adult Relationships?**

Researchers have advanced a number of potential mechanisms through which parental conflict and divorce might influence offspring relationships, but evidence for many of them is indirect or incomplete. The theories with perhaps the best empirical support focus on conflict management, relational commitment, attitudes toward divorce, and attachment processes.

#### *Conflict Management*

According to social learning theory, children of divorce are more likely to divorce because they imitate their parents' problematic interpersonal processes in their own romantic relationships. Sanders et al. (1999) showed that children of divorce demonstrated higher rates of problematic communication and conflict tactics in their own marriages. In a study that examined both conflict management and demographic variables that predict divorce, demographic factors did not mediate the relationship between parental divorce and offspring marital outcomes, but conflict management did (Story et al. 2004). Similarly, Amato (1996) examined demographic variables, attitudes toward divorce, and conflict management and found that demographics and divorce attitudes explained only modest proportions of the variance in outcomes, whereas conflict management explained a sizeable amount. Parental divorce and interparental conflict predict poorer intimate communication in non-married young adults (Herzog and Cooney 2002). Interparental conflict also carries over into non-intimate relationships as well. In another study examining premarital relationships, Cui and Fincham (2010) showed that parental conflict predicted higher levels of conflict and poorer relationship satisfaction in the relationships of emerging adult children of divorce. However, they failed to examine whether parental divorce moderates the effects of perceptions of parental conflict on children's outcomes; we assess this interactive effect in the present study.

#### *Relational Commitment*

In an interesting and somewhat counterintuitive finding, Amato and DeBoer (2001) demonstrated that children of divorce whose parents reported low marital conflict prior to

the divorce were more likely to divorce than children of divorce whose parents reported high conflict prior to divorce. From this finding, the authors infer that a lack of commitment to marriage is transmitted and contributes to children's propensity to divorce in their own marriages. Although this seems like a reasonable inference, the evidence is only indirect as this study did not have any measures of relational commitment. Whitton et al. (2008) did look at commitment in newlywed couples and found that parental divorce was associated with decreases in women's commitment even when controlling for parental conflict. Cui and Fincham (2010) found that parental divorce predicted less commitment among children of divorce, whereas parental conflict predicted higher levels of conflict and poorer relationship satisfaction. However, both studies did not examine whether parental divorce moderates the effects of perceptions of parental conflict on children's outcomes. In our study, we address these gaps in the research by more directly assessing the influence of parental conflict, divorce, and their interaction on offspring relational commitment in emerging adulthood.

#### *Attitudes Toward Divorce*

Social learning theory (Bandura 1977) suggests that parental divorce and parental conflict can affect attitudes toward divorce. Attitudes about divorce have been shown to be more liberal among children of divorce, and these attitudes account for some of the variance in explaining marital outcomes (Amato 1996). Similarly, Cui et al. (2011) found that children of divorce reported more favorable attitudes toward divorce, lower commitment, and a higher likelihood of relationship dissolution. They also found that attitudes toward divorce were correlated with parental conflict. In comparing the attitudes of young adults with divorced parents to their peers without divorced parents, Kozuch and Cooney (1995) found those with divorced parents were less likely to think being raised by two parents was important and more likely to think cohabitation before marriage was acceptable. Further, they found parental conflict (whether or not the parents divorced) predicted higher acceptance of cohabitation and not marrying at all, as well as predicting a lower importance placed on commitment in marriage and avoidance of divorce. We attempted to further investigate these findings by including conflict management and attachment as well as relationship commitment and attitudes toward divorce as mediators of parental conflict and divorce and relationship satisfaction and dissolution.

#### *Attachment*

Despite the clear theoretical connections between parental conflict, divorce, attachment, and children's relationship

functioning, research synthesizing these topics is scant. Hetherington (2003) showed that both parental conflict and divorce were associated with decreased parent-child attachment, but divorce had a stronger, negative effect on parent-child attachment than conflict. Conger et al. (2000) showed that those whose parents were more involved and nurturing toward their child had adult children who were low in hostility and high in warmth to their romantic partners; that is, good parenting predicted better relationship functioning in early adulthood. Likewise, parental conflict has been shown to increase child internalizing and externalizing behaviors via parenting behavior (Cui and Conger 2008; Kaczynski et al. 2006). Amato and Cheadle (2005) found that children who had greater tension with their parents early in their life were negatively affected in adulthood, including achieving lower education, higher marital discord, and weaker ties with both of their parents in two successive generations. Adults who had good relationships with their parents in their teenage years can counteract reported high levels of trust in others, despite having witnessed high levels of interparental conflict and divorce in their parents (King 2002). Although these findings fit well with attachment theory, these studies did not directly assess child attachment. Davies and Cummings' (1994) emotional security hypothesis posits that marital conflict is especially distressing for children because of its implications for stability—in other words, children worry that conflict may lead to divorce. This theorizing is consistent with not only the idea that attachment processes are relevant to offspring romantic relationships, but also the idea that the influence of parental conflict is likely moderated by whether or not parents divorce. In this study, we seek to examine whether exposure to parental conflict is associated with attachment style and whether attachment style mediates the quality and stability of offspring premarital relationships.

#### **The Present Study**

The present study examines the effect of marital conflict, divorce, and their interaction on the most plausible mechanisms offered to account for the transmission of parental divorce and relationship satisfaction. Using samples of emerging adults attending college who were in premarital relationships, we tested the following hypotheses: First, we predicted that parental conflict and divorce would be associated with poorer relationship satisfaction and more breakups, over the course of a semester, among emerging adults in romantic relationships. Second, we predicted that the association between parental conflict and divorce and offspring outcomes would be mediated by less relational commitment, poorer conflict management, more liberal attitudes toward divorce, and less secure relational

attachment. Finally, we predicted that parental divorce would moderate the effect of parental conflict; specifically, we predicted that parental conflict would be more strongly associated with poor outcomes among those whose parents divorced than among those whose parents remained married.

## Methods

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 353 students drawn from an introductory family science course that fulfilled a general education requirement at a large public university in the southeast, who received course credit for their participation. The participants were drawn from a larger study examining college student interpersonal relationships; this larger study was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board. For inclusion in this study, we selected respondents who indicated that they were in a committed romantic relationship. We only asked participants whether they were currently in a romantic relationship. We did not ask whether the relationship was with a same-sex or an opposite-sex partner. We do not have a theory about why our results would differ based on sexual orientation. Thus we did not include sexual orientation in our model. The average age of respondents was 20 years (range 18–54,  $SD = 2.5$ ), 82 % were women, and the ethnic background of the sample was distributed as follows: Caucasian, 67 %; African-American, 17 %; Latino, 9 %; and "Other," 7 %. The majority of respondents were only in a committed dating relationship, but 7 % reported being engaged. Regarding relationship duration, 32 % of respondent had been in their relationship for 6 months or less, 42 % between 6 and 12 months, and 26 % for 1 year or more; 13 % of respondents reported that they were cohabiting. Regarding parent's marital status, 63 % of the sample reported that their parents were married, 28 % reported that their parents were divorced, and 9 % reported "Other" (e.g., one parent deceased, parents never married)—"Other" responses were coded as missing.

Participants completed an online survey that assessed the variables described below. Approximately 8 weeks later, participants completed a follow-up survey reporting on whether they had broken up with their romantic partner over the course of the semester.

### Measures

#### *Interparental Conflict*

Parents' marital conflict was assessed using the Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict (CPIC) scale (Grych

et al. 1992) that has been validated for use among emerging adults (Bickham and Fiese 1997; Moura et al. 2010). It assesses several dimensions of the child's perceptions of parental conflict including frequency (CPIC-F), intensity (CPIC-I), and resolution (CPIC-R). These three subscales have been shown to reflect a single latent construct of parental conflict and, in our study, using them as latent indicators of a latent variable provided a good fit to the data. Sample items included "My parents hardly ever argued or disagreed," "My parents tended to get really angry when they argued or disagreed," and "When my parents argued, they usually worked things out." Higher scores on the frequency scale indicate more frequent parental conflict. Higher scores on the intensity scale indicate more intense parental conflict. The resolution scale was reverse scored; higher scores on this scale indicate less observed resolution following parental conflict. In this sample,  $\alpha$  averaged .84 across scales.

#### *Relational Commitment*

To assess commitment attitudes, we used subscales from Stanley and Markman's Commitment Inventory (1992), including dedication (Dedication), couple identity (Couple ID), satisfaction with sacrifice (Will. to Sac.), and alternatives monitoring (Alt. Monitor.). Sample items included "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter," "I tend to think about how things affect 'us' as a couple more than how things affect 'me' as an individual," "I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself," and "I know people of the opposite sex whom I desire more than my partner." Scales are scored such that higher scores reflect higher levels of commitment. Average  $\alpha$  was .83 across scales.

#### *Conflict Management*

We used the constructive communication and demand-withdraw (CPQ-DW) scales from the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ). The constructive communication subscale generates indices of positive communication (CPQ-POS) and negative communication (CPQ-NEG). The CPQ is highly correlated with observationally coded problem solving behavior ( $r = .70$ , Hahlweg et al. 2000); in the present sample,  $\alpha$  averaged .77 across scales. The revised conflict tactics scale (CTS-2) physical assault subscale was also used. The CTS-2 is a well-validated and widely used measure for assessing intimate partner violence (Straus et al. 1996). We used the physical assault subscale (e.g., "I twisted my partner's arm" or "pulled my partner's hair"). This subscale was coded to reflect how frequently the indicated tactics were in the past month

ranging from 0 (*This never happened*) to 25 (*More than 20 times*). The most severe items on these scales were omitted leaving the resultant scale with 10 items. In this sample,  $\alpha = .91$ .

#### *Prodivorce Attitudes*

This six-item scale (PD) assesses the degree to which respondents endorse attitudes that facilitate relationship dissolution (e.g., “The personal happiness of an individual is more important than putting up with a bad marriage”). On this scale, higher scores reflect more endorsement of prodivorce attitudes. This subscale has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties (Amato and Rogers 1999). In the present sample,  $\alpha = .65$ .

#### *Attachment*

Beginning with an existing categorical measure of attachment, Collins and Read (1990) developed a dimensional measure that we used to assess avoidant (Attach-Av.) and anxious (Attach-Anx.) attachment. Sample items are “I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others” and “I often worry that my partner does not really love me.” This measure has demonstrated good reliability (average test–retest over 2 months = .64) and good factorial, convergent, and discriminant validity (Collins and Read 1990). In the present study,  $\alpha$  for these scales averaged .69. We scored the scales for our latent variable such that higher scores reflect higher levels of insecure attachment.

#### *Relationship Satisfaction*

Starting with 180 relationship satisfaction items, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an item response theory analysis to develop a four-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties, creating the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI). A sample item is “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” All items were answered on a six-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* with higher scores indicating more satisfaction. This measure correlates  $r = .87$  with the widely used dyadic adjustment scale and  $r = -.79$  with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory. We created a latent variable defined by the four items on this scale; higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction.

#### *Breakup*

We assessed whether the relationship that participants indicated at the beginning of the semester ended at any point in the academic semester that they completed the

study. Responses were coded as 1 = *broke up*, 0 = *did not break up*.

#### *Parental Divorce*

Parental divorce was assessed by asking whether their parents had divorced. Responses were coded as 1 = *divorced*, 0 = *did not divorce*.

## Results

### Data Analysis Plan

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) in *Mplus 7.1* (Muthén and Muthén 2013) to examine our hypotheses regarding the influence of parental divorce, parental conflict, and their interaction on the romantic relationships of emerging adult offspring. Structural equation modeling is an excellent analytic approach for testing these hypotheses for a number of reasons. First, it allows for simultaneous tests of hypotheses while accounting for the contextual influence of all the other predictors in the theoretical model. Second, it allows us to examine the shared variance in our latent constructs in addition to parsing out error variance, which increases statistical power. Third, it allows for multiple groups analysis to test for interaction effects. Finally, it allows us to examine mediation in the context of a moderation effect (moderated mediation).

Prior to conducting structural analyses to examine our research questions, we analyzed the measurement model and used modification indices to obtain optimal fit; our measurement model provided an excellent fit to the data:  $\chi^2(104) = 143.32$ ,  $p = .01$ , RMSEA = .03, CFI = .99, and each of our models reported below provided an adequate or better fit to the data. Model fit indices are available from the first author upon request. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1.

In models where we examined the influence of the mediating variables on relationship satisfaction, we used maximum likelihood estimation. In models where breakup was the outcome (1 = broke up, 0 = did not break up), we used weighted least squares mean and variance (WLSMV) estimation, which is the default estimator in *Mplus* for categorical outcomes. Because multiple group analysis is the preferred approach to test moderation when the moderator in an SEM model is a categorical indicator with two levels (Muthén and Muthén 2013; Schumacker and Marcoulides 1998), we used this approach. Specifically, we examined the differences between a model in which the measurement and structural parameters were freely estimated to a model in which those parameters are constrained to be equal across groups. For each model we

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics

	CSI1	CSI2	CSI3	CSI4	Parental Div.	CPI-C-F	CPI-C-R	CPI-C-I	Divorce Att.	CTS-ASLT	CPQ-NEG	CPQ-POS	CPQ-DW	Breakup	Attach-Av	Attach-AnxD	Couple ID	Dedication to Sac	Will to Sac	Alt. Monitor.	
Mean	5.03	5.11	5.22	5.19	0.31	2.18	2.39	2.07	2.49	4.94	2.37	3.06	2.56	0.11	2.52	2.21	4.99	3.65	5.13	5.17	
SD	1.04	1	1.01	1.1	0.46	0.63	0.62	0.69	0.44	15.68	1.54	1.88	1.84	0.32	0.63	0.7	1.05	0.79	1.03	1.40	
CSI1	1																				
CSI2	<b>0.86</b>	1																			
CSI3	<b>0.78</b>	<b>0.79</b>	1																		
CSI4	<b>0.69</b>	<b>0.70</b>	<b>0.65</b>	1																	
Parental Div.	-0.02	0.03	0.05	-0.02	1																
CPI-C-F	<b>-0.14</b>	<b>-0.13</b>	-0.08	-0.08	<b>0.28</b>	1															
CPI-C-R	<b>-0.16</b>	<b>-0.12</b>	-0.07	-0.07	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.81</b>	1														
CPI-C-I	<b>-0.10</b>	-0.09	-0.06	-0.03	<b>0.14</b>	<b>0.74</b>	<b>0.65</b>	1													
Divorce Att.	-0.07	-0.05	-0.08	-0.07	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.06</b>	1												
CTS-ASLT	-0.07	-0.04	-0.12	-0.07	0.02	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.13</b>	0.06	1											
CPQ-NEG	-0.09	-0.08	-0.10	-0.08	<b>0.14</b>	0.10	<b>0.1</b>	0.09	0.08	<b>0.39</b>	1										
CPQ-POS	<b>-0.31</b>	<b>-0.27</b>	<b>-0.29</b>	<b>-0.19</b>	0.08	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.18</b>	<b>0.11</b>	0.03	<b>0.34</b>	<b>0.37</b>	1									
CPQ-DW	<b>-0.14</b>	<b>-0.11</b>	<b>-0.18</b>	-0.09	0.08	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.02	<b>0.31</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>0.40</b>	1								
Breakup	<b>-0.17</b>	<b>-0.19</b>	<b>-0.15</b>	<b>-0.14</b>	0.05	<b>0.12</b>	0.06	0.06	0.1	0.02	0.07	0.06	0.02	1							
Attach-Av	-0.1	<b>-0.12</b>	<b>-0.13</b>	<b>-0.11</b>	0.08	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.14</b>	0.04	0.04	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.13</b>	1						
Attach-Anx	-0.09	<b>-0.12</b>	-0.09	-0.08	<b>0.11</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.12</b>	0.01	0.1	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>0.18</b>	0.08	<b>0.31</b>	1					
Couple ID	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.17</b>	<b>0.18</b>	-0.03	-0.01	-0.05	-0.03	-0.15	-0.1	-0.06	-0.23	-0.02	-0.21	-0.10	-0.10	1				
Dedication	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.48</b>	<b>0.47</b>	-0.01	-0.08	-0.03	-0.07	-0.12	-0.11	-0.04	-0.24	-0.10	-0.14	-0.11	-0.04	<b>0.48</b>	1			
Will to Sac	<b>0.29</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>0.27</b>	-0.11	-0.07	-0.03	-0.05	-0.04	-0.06	-0.11	-0.19	-0.07	-0.14	-0.05	-0.10	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.43</b>	1		
Alt. Monitor.	<b>0.32</b>	<b>0.35</b>	<b>0.29</b>	<b>0.27</b>	-0.06	-0.10	-0.07	-0.09	-0.12	-0.18	-0.19	-0.3	-0.12	-0.21	-0.18	-0.18	<b>0.39</b>	<b>0.36</b>	<b>0.28</b>	1	

All values are untransformed; bolded values indicate  $p < .05$

CSI, Couples Satisfaction Index (items 1–4); Parental Div., parental divorce; CPI-C-F, frequency of parental conflict; CPI-C-R, resolution of parental conflict; CPI-C-I, intensity of parental conflict; Divorce Att., attitudes toward divorce; CTS-ASLT, physical assault; CPQ-NEG, negative communication patterns; CPQ-POS, positive communication patterns; CPQ-DW, demand-withdraw pattern; Breakup, whether participant experienced a breakup during academic semester; Attach-Av, avoidant attachment style; Attach-Anx, anxious attachment style; Couple ID, couple identity; Will to Sac., willingness to sacrifice; Alt. Monitor., alternatives monitoring



examine,  $\chi^2_{\text{diff}}$  tests indicated a significantly different fit between the freely estimated model and the constrained model; thus, we report outcomes for each group. Our two groups were comprised of those whose parents had not divorced ( $n = 245$ ) and those whose parents had divorced ( $n = 108$ ).

### Does Parental Divorce Influence Emerging Adult Relationships?

We first examined whether parental divorce is associated with relationship satisfaction in emerging adults' romantic relationships as shown in Fig. 1. Parental divorce was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction or commitment attitudes but was associated with more favorable attitudes toward divorce  $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .001$ , poorer conflict management  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ , and a more insecure attachment style  $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .05$ . None of these variables mediated the association between parental divorce and relationship satisfaction.

We next examined the same model but used breakup as the outcome variable (11 % of respondents reported ending their romantic relationship over the course of the semester). Parental divorce was not significantly associated with breakup, nor did any of the variables mediate the association between parental divorce and breakup.

### The Interactive Influence of Parental Conflict and Divorce on Emerging Adult Relationships?

#### *The Influence of Parental Conflict on Relationship Satisfaction*

For those whose parents did not divorce, parental conflict was not directly associated with relationship satisfaction, but it was associated with less commitment  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , poorer communication  $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ , more insecure attachment style  $\beta = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ , and more favorable attitudes toward divorce  $\beta = .13$ ,  $p < .05$ . Regarding mediation, parental conflict was associated with emerging adult relationship satisfaction indirectly via decreased commitment (indirect effect  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $p = .001$ ). None of the other variables significantly mediated this association.

For those whose parents did divorce, parental conflict was not associated with relationship satisfaction, commitment, communication, or attitudes about divorce, although it was associated with more insecure attachment style  $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .05$ . None of the variables significantly mediated the association between parental conflict and relationship satisfaction.

In sum, our data show that when parents do not divorce, parental conflict is associated with less commitment and, in

turn, less relationship satisfaction, but no such relationship exists for those whose parents divorce.

#### *The Influence of Parental Conflict on Breakup*

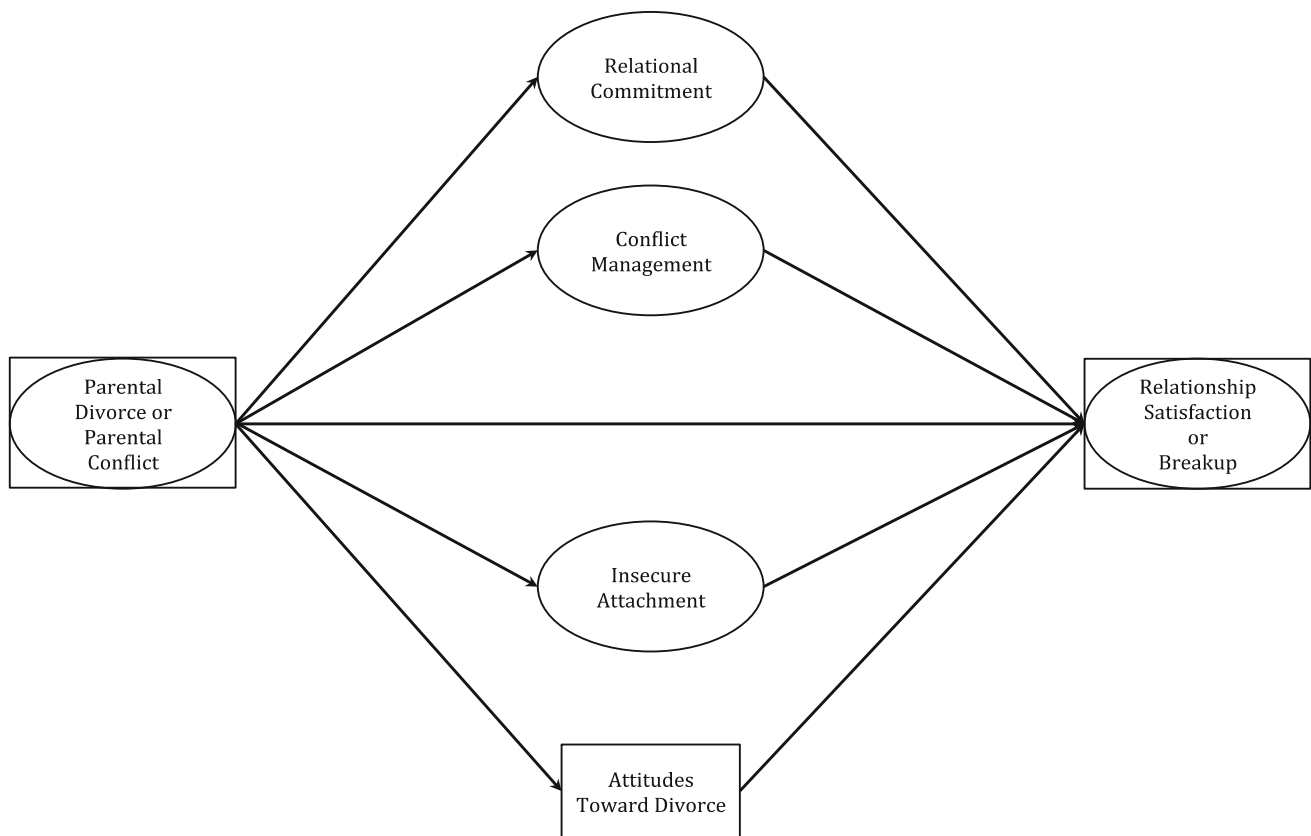
For those whose parents did not divorce (10.2 % of whom had a breakup over the course of the semester), parental conflict was not directly associated with breakup. Higher levels of commitment were associated with less breakup  $\beta = -.59$ ,  $p < .00$ , but none of the other potential mediators were significantly associated with breakup. Regarding mediation, parental conflict was associated with decreased commitment which, in turn, was associated with an increased likelihood of breaking up (indirect effect  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

For those whose parents did divorce (13.9 % of whom had a breakup over the course of the semester), parental conflict was not directly associated with breakups. Commitment was associated with fewer breakups ( $\beta = -.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ), whereas poorer conflict management ( $\beta = -.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and having a more insecure attachment style ( $\beta = .55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were associated with more breakups. However, none of these variables significantly mediated the association between parental conflict and breaking up.

In sum, our data show that when parents do not divorce, parental conflict is associated with less commitment and, in turn, more breakup, but no such relationship exists for those whose parents divorce.

## Discussion

Research has shown that exposure to parental conflict and divorce are associated with a higher risk of poor offspring relational outcomes, including marital distress and divorce, but the mechanisms through which this association operates are only beginning to be understood. The purpose of this study was to examine how parental conflict and parental divorce are associated with the relationships of emerging adult offspring with the aim of better understanding the mechanisms of action in the association. In two samples of emerging adults in committed romantic relationships, we examined the viability of relational commitment, conflict management, attitudes toward divorce, and insecure attachment as potential mechanisms of action. Although parental conflict was associated with each of the potential mechanisms, only relational commitment mediated the association of parental conflict on outcomes, and the effect of parental conflict differed based on whether parents divorced. In our study, parental conflict in the absence of divorce was associated with less commitment and, in turn, less relationship satisfaction and stability in emerging adult children's romantic



**Fig. 1** Conceptual mediational model under examination

relationships, whereas parental conflict was unrelated to outcomes for children whose parents divorced. In other words, parental conflict was associated with less commitment, satisfaction and stability if parents stayed married, but did not have the same deleterious effects if parents divorced. These findings have a number of implications for theories of intergenerational transmission of relationship functioning, contextual theories of parental conflict, and prevention efforts that aim to reduce the burden of marital distress, divorce, and their sequelae.

### Contributions to Theories of Intergenerational Transmission of Relationship Functioning

Sociological research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has a number of notable strengths such as large, representative samples and impressive longitudinal designs, but these strengths are mitigated by some weaknesses such as less focus on psychological constructs and interpersonal processes, as well as less optimal measurement. Consequently, studies using more person-centered approaches have been suggested as an important next step in this area of research (Lansford 2009). In our study, we attempted to respond to this call by more directly testing hypotheses that have been implied by sociological studies.

Despite findings that attitudes toward divorce are more robust predictors of relationship dissolution than commitment (Cui et al. 2011), the findings of our model are most consistent with Amato and DeBoer's (2001) commitment hypothesis—the notion that parental divorce influences offspring relationship outcomes via relational commitment as opposed to other variables, such as attitudes toward divorce. In our study, we used well-validated, comprehensive measures of a number of plausible mechanisms of action and found support for the role of commitment in mediating the intergenerational transmission of relationship functioning. Our findings extend this theory by showing that parental conflict is associated with decreased commitment among those whose parents do not divorce, but that these variables are not reliably associated among emerging adult children whose parents do divorce.

Importantly, our study failed to find robust support for some important competing theories including the conflict management hypothesis, which is, perhaps, the best-supported theory up to this point. It is worth noting, however, that the conflict management theory of transmission may be the best-supported theory because sociological studies are more likely to include measures of conflict but less likely to include psychologically oriented variables like attachment and commitment. It is also important to note



that none of these theories are mutually exclusive; that is, just because we found support for commitment as a mechanism, it does not mean that conflict management, divorce attitudes, etc., are immaterial.

Our findings were also inconsistent with the stress relief hypothesis which suggests parental divorce may relieve the stress of continued exposure to parental conflict (Wheaton 1990) and thus lead to improvements post-divorce. Our findings show that parental conflict was associated with negative outcomes only for those whose parents had not divorced; this effect, however, may operate differently for internalizing and externalizing disorders, and other proximal effects associated with marital conflict and divorce. Our findings help to fill a gap in research by examining a different portion of the trajectory between exposure to parental conflict and outcomes for adult children of divorce.

### Parental Conflict and Commitment Among Children of Divorce

Our findings are consistent with research showing that if the marital conflict precedes divorce, the conflict seems to be the “active ingredient” in explaining children’s outcomes (Grych and Fincham 1990); but our study adds to this body of knowledge by showing that the impact of this “active ingredient” differs based on whether or not the parents divorce. The “good enough marriage” hypothesis asserts that children who see their parent’s marriage as “good enough” prior to divorce are more likely to divorce than those whose parent’s marriage is fraught with conflict (Amato 2001b). According to the theory, this is because when children view the dissolution of a relationship that in their eyes was “good enough,” it undermines their own sense of commitment to marriage thus increasing the probability of divorce in their own marriage(s). Said, another way, it is not so much the divorce, but the child’s perceptions of the need for a divorce that predict whether the child will also experience divorce. Our findings could suggest a logical corollary to this hypothesis: When children see the parents’ marriage as deeply flawed, ending it may protect them from a weakening of commitment to their own future relationships.

A similar idea in the attachment literature suggests that individuals with avoidant attachment styles are quicker to detect threats in relationships and quicker to escape relationships to protect the self from harm (Ein-Dor et al. 2011). In our study, insecure attachment did not mediate these effects, but there may be overlap between our conceptualization of commitment and the attachment construct being described by these authors. Alternatively, perhaps attachment acts as an intervening variable predicting commitment, rather than being a concurrent mediator.

Future research including specific measures of these constructs need to explore these ideas and help to untangle the role of commitment and attachment in the romantic relationships of emerging adults exposed to parental conflict.

Although we established commitment as a viable mediator of the intergenerational transmission of relationship dysfunction, our study did not discern the processes that led from parental conflict to the construct of commitment. Were the observed effects present because viewing a tumultuous, but intact marriage up-close fosters the notion that one should not tolerate a bad relationship? And regarding the null effect of parental conflict among those whose parents did divorce, did that occur only because parental divorce spared those participants exposure to parental conflict? Answering these questions is an important next step in this area of research.

### Implications for Practice

Our research provides important information about mechanisms of action in the intergenerational transmission of relationship functioning by showing that attitudes hypothesized to play a role in marriage have their roots in premarital relationships. Emerging adulthood is part of an important but understudied portion of the developmental trajectory between exposure to parental conflict, parental divorce, and offspring marriage (Cherlin et al. 1998). Further, emerging adults in college have become a target population for preventive intervention within that trajectory (Braithwaite et al. 2010), yet we have a very incomplete picture of how the possible dots are connected between exposure to parental conflict and relationship functioning in adult romantic relationships. Our study is among the first to provide direct evidence of the influence of the interaction of parental conflict and parental divorce on this portion of that trajectory and suggest that commitment plays a key role in relationship outcomes. As we move toward tailoring premarital interventions to the needs of individuals, we might assess commitment attitudes among those in premarital relationships and craft our efforts toward adaptively strengthening commitment.

Currently, most premarital interventions are delivered after people have selected a partner and focus primarily on improving conflict management (e.g., PREP; Markman et al. 2010). Our findings do not suggest we should abandon this approach, and rather they suggest that commitment is another very important piece in this puzzle. The idea of trying to foster commitment among those in premarital relationships could be seen as problematic because not all relationships *should* persist despite obstacles. Thus, teaching about commitment in premarital relationships needs to be done in a contextualized way that takes into account important factors like intimate partner violence

and high levels of negative conflict to ensure that those receiving the intervention do not mistakenly infer that commitment to a relationship is appropriate in all circumstances. This is especially important given that those with a lower education level may have a more difficult time leaving poor relationships.

Inevitably, our study is limited in a number of ways. Although it had a longitudinal component as it examined whether relationships broke up over the course of an academic semester, the length of a semester may not be long enough to allow for a complete view of the processes at work. Also, reports of parental conflict were retrospective and we did not follow respondents into marriage. Our sample was comprised of college students in a social science course and is therefore limited in terms of certain demographics, such as educational attainment, income. Consequently, generalizability is limited to those who have completed at least some college, though this includes the majority of Americans—63 % of Americans report completing at least some college (Pew Research Center 2013). It is possible that having a higher level of education allows individuals to have the skills to navigate poor relationships and escape them in a better way. Further, our sample had significantly more women than men; to provide some context to this limitation, we analyzed the effect of gender on outcomes and found that it was not significantly associated with either of our outcome variables. Future research should seek to replicate these results in samples with a more balanced representation of both men and women to provide converging evidence for these parameter estimates.

Our sample only included college students in romantic relationships. Given that we were investigating the effects of parental relationship and divorce on current relationships, this could be an important limitation. It is likely that at least some of the college students who were not in our study were not in romantic relationships for reasons related to the state of their parents' relationships. More research needs to be done to understand how this interaction works.

The alpha for our prod divorce measure is less than desirable. However, our alpha for that measure was consistent with times the measure has been used previously ( $\alpha = .63$  in 1980,  $\alpha = .65$  in 1983, and  $\alpha = .67$  in 1988; Amato and Rogers 1999). While lower reliability reduces our power to detect an effect when one is present, having a perfectly reliable measure that suffers from construct underrepresentation is also a limitation. On balance, our alpha is slightly lower than we would like, but still in a range that can provide useful information. Moreover, it is still more reliable than, for example, a typical fMRI task (Bennett and Miller 2013).

A final limitation has to do with the role of breaking up among emerging adults in college. Our participants are emerging adults, and in this phase of life, breaking up is a

healthy, normative part of relationships; however, it is possible that the effects of commitment that we observed in this study become more pronounced as these individuals enter long-term, committed relationships such as marriage. Moreover, because breakup was not an entirely common occurrence, our sample may not have provided enough variability to fully explore the relationship between parental conflict, commitment, and breakup, whereas our sample had good variability in relationship satisfaction allowing for a more powerful examination of the association between our predictors and emerging adult relationship satisfaction.

Balancing these limitations are a number of strengths. Our study represents an important synthesis of divorce and conflict research at a person-centered, psychological level in a developmental period that is only now receiving specific focus in this area of research. Our findings advance theory by showing that not only the micro-context, but the macro-context matters: Only when parental conflict is coupled with marital stability, it is adversely associated with offspring relational commitment and, in turn, less satisfying stable emerging adult relationships. In contrast, when parental conflict is coupled with divorce, it is not associated with less commitment—indeed, it may foster greater commitment and, in turn, more satisfying, and stable emerging adult relationships. Thus, in trying to understand the influence of family-of-origin variables, if we consider only divorce or only parental conflict, we are likely missing something important.

**Acknowledgments** This study was made possible by Grant # 90FE0022/01 from the Department of Health And Human Services Administration for Children and Families awarded to Frank Fincham.

## References

- Amato, P. R. (1993). Family structure, family process, and family ideology. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55(1), 50–54.
- Amato, P. R. (1996). Explaining the intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58, 628–640.
- Amato, P. R. (2001a). Children of divorce in the 1990s: An update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15(3), 355.
- Amato, P. R. (2001b). Good enough marriages: Parental discord, divorce, and children's long-term well-being. *Virginia Journal of Social Policy and the Law*, 9(1), 71–94.
- Amato, P. R. (2003). Reconciling divergent perspectives: Judith Wallerstein, quantitative family research, and children of divorce. *Family Relations*, 52(4), 332–339. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00332.x.
- Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 650–666. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x.
- Amato, P. R., & Cheadle, J. (2005). The long reach of divorce: divorce and well-being across three generations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 191–206.
- Amato, P. R., & DeBoer, D. D. (2001). The transmission of marital instability across generations: Relationship skills or commitment

- to marriage? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(4), 1038–1051.
- Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991). Parental divorce and adult well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53(1), 43–58.
- Amato, P. R., & Rogers, S. J. (1999). Do attitudes toward divorce affect marital quality? *Journal of Family Issues*, 20(1), 69–86.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bennett, C. M., & Miller, M. B. (2013). fMRI reliability: Influences of task and experimental design. *Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Neuroscience*, 13(4), 690–702. doi:10.3758/s13415-013-0195-1.
- Bickham, N. L., & Fiese, B. H. (1997). Extension of the children's perceptions of interparental conflict scale for use with late adolescents. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 11, 246–250.
- Braithwaite, S. R., Delvi, R., & Fincham, F. D. (2010a). Romantic relationships and the physical and mental health of college students. *Personal Relationships*, 17(1), 1–12.
- Braithwaite, S. R., Lambert, N. M. N., Fincham, F. D. F., & Pasley, K. K. (2010b). Does college-based relationship education decrease extradyadic involvement in relationships? *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(6), 740–745. doi:10.1037/a0021759.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013). *Unmarried childbearing*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved April 22, 2013, from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/unmarry.htm>.
- Cherlin, A. J., Chase-Lansdale, P. L., & McRae, C. (1998). Effects of parental divorce on mental health throughout the life course. *American Sociological Review*, 63(2), 239–249.
- Collins, W. A. (2003). More than myth: the developmental significance of romantic relationships during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 13(1), 1–24. doi:10.1111/1532-7795.1301001.
- Collins, N. L., & Read, S. J. (1990). Adult attachment, working models, and relationship quality in dating couples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(4), 644–663.
- Conger, R. D., Cui, M., Bryant, C. M., & Elder, G. H. (2000). Competence in early adult romantic relationships: A developmental perspective on family influences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 224–237.
- Cui, M., & Conger, R. D. (2008). Parenting behavior as mediator and moderator of the association between marital problems and adolescent maladjustment. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 18(2), 261–284. doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2008.00560.x.
- Cui, M., & Fincham, F. D. (2010). The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 17(3), 331–343. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01279.x.
- Cui, M., Fincham, F. D., & Durtschi, J. A. (2011). The effect of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship dissolution: What makes a difference? *Personal Relationships*, 18(3), 410–426. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01306.x.
- Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 116(3), 387–411. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.116.3.387.
- Ein-Dor, T., Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2011). Attachment insecurities and the processing of threat-related information: Studying the schemas involved in insecure people's coping strategies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(1), 78.
- Funk, J. L., & Rogge, R. D. (2007). Testing the ruler with item response theory: Increasing precision of measurement for relationship satisfaction with the Couples Satisfaction Index. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21(4), 572–583. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.21.4.572.
- Grych, J. H., & Fincham, F. D. (1990). Marital conflict and children's adjustment: A cognitive-contextual framework. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(2), 267–290.
- Grych, J. H., Seid, M., & Fincham, F. D. (1992). Assessing marital conflict from the child's perspective: The children's perception of interparental conflict scale. *Child Development*, 63(3), 558–572.
- Hahlweg, K., Kaiser, A., Christensen, A., Fehm-Wolfsdorf, G., & Groth, T. (2000). Self-report and observational assessment of couples' conflict: The concordance between the communication patterns questionnaire and the KPI observation system. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(1), 61–67. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00061.x.
- Herzog, M. J., & Cooney, T. M. (2002). Parental divorce and perceptions of past interparental conflict. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 36(3–4), 89–109. doi:10.1300/J087v36n03\_06.
- Hetherington, E. M. (2003). Intimate pathways: Changing patterns in close relationships across time. *Family Relations: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 52(4), 318–331.
- Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M., & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53, 167–184.
- Jekielek, S. M. (1998). Parental conflict, marital disruption and children's emotional well-being. *Social Forces*, 76(3), 905–935.
- Kaczynski, K. J., Lindahl, K. M., Malik, N. M., & Laurenceau, J. (2006). Marital conflict, maternal and paternal parenting, and child adjustment: A test of mediation and moderation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(2), 199–208. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.20.2.199.
- King, V. (2002). Parental divorce and interpersonal trust in adult offspring. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(3), 642–656.
- Kozuch, P., & Cooney, T. M. (1995). Young adults' marital and family attitudes: The role of recent parental divorce, and family and parental conflict. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 23(3–4), 45–62.
- Lansford, J. E. (2009). Parental divorce and children's adjustment. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(2), 140–152. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6924.2009.01114.x.
- Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., & Blumberg, S. L. (2010). *Fighting for your marriage*. New York: Wiley.
- Morrison, D. R., & Coiro, M. J. (1999). Parental conflict and marital disruption: Do children benefit when high-conflict marriages are dissolved? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61(3), 626–637.
- Moura, O., Santos, R. A., Rocha, M., & Matos, P. M. (2010). Children's perception of interparental conflict scale (CPIC): Factor structure and invariance across adolescents and emerging adults. *International Journal of Testing*, 10, 364–382.
- Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. O. (2013). *Mplus user's guide* (7th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Muthén & Muthén.
- Pew Research Center (Ed.). (2013). *American Adults better educated than ever before*. Pew research center. Retrieved May 8, 2013, from <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/american-adults-better-educated-than-ever-before/>.
- Sanders, M. R., Halford, W. K., & Behrens, B. C. (1999). Parental divorce and premarital couple communication. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13(1), 60–74. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.13.1.60.
- Schumacker, R. E., & Marcoulides, G. A. (1998). *Interaction and nonlinear effects in structural equation modeling*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (1992). Assessing commitment in personal relationships. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54(3), 595–608.
- Story, L. B., Karney, B. R., Lawrence, E., & Bradbury, T. N. (2004). Interpersonal mediators in the intergenerational transmission of

- marital dysfunction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(3), 519–529. doi:[10.1037/0893-3200.18.3.519](https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.18.3.519).
- Straus, M. A., Hamby, S. L., Boney-McCoy, S., & Sugarman, D. B. (1996). The revised conflict tactics scales (CTS2): Development and preliminary psychometric data. *Journal of Family Issues*, 17(3), 283–316. doi:[10.1177/019251396017003001](https://doi.org/10.1177/019251396017003001).
- Strohschein, L. (2005). Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67, 1286–1300.
- Wheaton, B. (1990). Life transitions, role histories, and mental health. *American Sociological Review*, 55(2), 209–223.
- Whitton, S. W., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2008). Effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(5), 789–793.
- Wolfinger, N. H. (2005). *Understanding the divorce cycle: The children of divorce in their own marriages*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Yu, T., Pettit, G. S., Lansford, J. E., Dodge, K. A., & Bates, J. E. (2010). The Interactive effects of marital conflict and divorce on parent–adult children’s relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 282–292. doi:[10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00699.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00699.x).