
Young Adult Romantic Relationships: The Role of Parents' Marital Problems and Relationship Efficacy

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This study examined the link between parental divorce and marital conflict and young adult romantic relationships, and it tested whether offspring efficacy beliefs and conflict mediate this association. Young adults (N = 358) provided data at three time points each separated by 7-week intervals. Results from structural equation modeling demonstrated that (a) parents' marital conflict, rather than parental divorce, was associated with offspring conflict behavior; (b) relationship efficacy mediated this association; and (c) conflict behavior, in turn, mediated the association between efficacy beliefs and the quality of offspring romantic relationships. These findings are discussed in terms of their implications for understanding the impact of parents' marital problems on romantic relationships in young adulthood. Their implications for preventive interventions and future research are also outlined.

Keywords: *parental divorce; marital conflict; efficacy; romantic relationships*

Romantic relationships during early adulthood have important implications both for the individual and for society (Berscheid, 1999; Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998). Successful romantic relationships promote personal well-being whereas failure to establish and maintain such relationships has been associated with both physical and emotional distress (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Simon & Marcussen, 1999; Weiss & Heyman, 1997; Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, & Elder, 1997). Consequently, it is important to understand developmental precursors that increase the likelihood of developing stable and satisfying romantic ties. In this regard, the family of origin is recognized as especially relevant across numerous theoretical frameworks (Conger, Cui, Bryant,

& Elder, 2000). Despite the acknowledged importance of the family of origin, little is known about which characteristics of family of origin influence young adults' ability to successfully initiate and sustain romantic relationships and how they do so (Christensen, 1998; Parke, 1998). The present study addresses these issues by investigating specific family of origin predictors of the behavioral interactions and the quality of early adult romantic relationships.

Linking Parents' Marital Problems to Young Adult Romantic Relationships: A Developmental Perspective on Romantic Relationships

The literatures on romantic and marital relationships point to the value of a developmental approach to understanding romantic involvements (Conger et al., 2000). Many theoretical models of romantic relationships incorporate preresolution predictors into their conceptual frameworks (see, e.g., Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Bryant & Conger, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Tallman, Burke, & Gecas, 1998). Particular attention is given to the family of origin, which is thought to affect (directly or indirectly) interaction in and quality of later romantic and marital ties (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Tallman et al., 1998).

One of the most relevant and important family of origin predictors of offspring romantic relationships is the

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parents' marital relationship (e.g., Amato, 1996; Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Wallerstein, 1987). More than 40% of children born to married parents will experience the divorce of their parents (Emery, Otto, & O'Donohue, 2005), and exposure to parental divorce has been related to a number of adverse outcomes (Amato, 1996). In particular, children of divorced parents are at greater risk for marital difficulties and divorce themselves, and the "intergenerational transmission" of marital quality and divorce is well documented (e.g., Amato, 1996; Amato & Booth, 1997).

However, it is unlikely that relationship difficulties only arise with marriage; indeed, data show that beliefs and behaviors predictive of marital outcomes are present in couple relationships well before marriage (e.g., Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). As a consequence, divorce researchers have begun to examine offspring romantic relationships in early adulthood. Parental divorce has been linked to more pessimistic views of romantic relationships and to more problematic communication behaviors (e.g., more conflict, withdrawal) in premarital romantic relationships (e.g., Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Sanders et al., 1999). However, as Bartell (2006) points out, there are inconsistencies in research linking parental divorce to offspring romantic relationships. Notable among these is the fact that parental divorce is related to lower relationship satisfaction in some studies (e.g., Ross & Mirowsky, 1999) but not in others (e.g., Kirk, 2002). We consider what might underlie inconsistent findings on the link between parental divorce and offspring relationship outcomes.

Understanding Parental Divorce and Romantic Relationships in Early Adulthood

Although differences in research findings no doubt reflect variability in research methods, it is doubtful that this factor alone accounts for inconsistent findings. This is highlighted by the fact that divorce does not occur in isolation from other marital and family processes. In particular, there are extensive literatures documenting the impact of marital conflict and parent-child relations on child outcomes (for reviews, see Erel & Burman, 1995; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Both of these processes are associated with parental divorce as divorce is usually preceded by marital conflict and often affects parent-child relationships.

Notwithstanding these observations, few studies have considered such processes when examining the link between parental divorce and offspring romantic relationships. It is particularly important to study interparental conflict when examining the impact of divorce on offspring for at least three reasons. First, there are data to show that interparental conflict is linked to conflict in

offspring romantic relationships (e.g., Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1998). Second, because divorce is usually preceded by interparental conflict it can serve as a proxy for high marital and family conflict (Brach, Camara, & Houser, 2000; Kurdek & Fine, 1993; Sergin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). For example, studies on child adjustment (e.g., internalizing and externalizing problems) following parental divorce have shown that parents' marital conflict accounts for up to 50% of the variance in child outcomes attributed to parental divorce (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1991). Third, interparental conflict does not necessarily end with divorce and continues to affect children (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). It therefore appears that consideration of interparental conflict is critical to acquiring a more complete understanding of the impact of parental divorce on offspring romantic relationships.

In terms of young adult romantic relationship outcomes, studies that document the impact of parental divorce on such relationships note that it is important to examine parental conflict in addition to parental divorce (e.g., Booth & Edwards, 1990; Gabardi & Rosen, 1992; Sprague & Kinney, 1997; Wallerstein, 1987). Yet research that examines both marital conflict and parental divorce in relation to premarital relationship outcomes is rare. Sergin et al. (2005) found that even though offspring of divorced parents reported significantly higher levels of conflict in their family of origin, controlling for conflict decreased minimally the association between parental divorce and close relationship outcomes among offspring (e.g., likelihood of divorce, negative attitude toward marriage). They concluded that marital conflict had "a very modest impact on the magnitude of the parental divorce effect" (p. 372). However, in addition to using a measure that focused on family conflict and not on interparental conflict per se, Sergin et al.'s study included participants from 18 to 85 years old and did not focus on young adults. Amato and DeBoer (2001) offer a counterintuitive finding that demonstrates the importance of jointly examining divorce and marital conflict; they showed that children of divorce whose parents reported low marital conflict before the divorce were more likely to divorce than children of divorce whose parents reported high conflict before the divorce. However, Amato and DeBoer focused on marital instability and divorce, not premarital relationship interaction and quality.

In the absence of systematic research that examines the parental divorce effect in the context of interparental conflict, an understanding of this effect in relation to premarital relationships remains incomplete at best. Further restricting our understanding of parental divorce in this context is the absence of longitudinal data, which are critical to understanding the developmental course of romantic relationships in early adulthood.

Consequently, we examine parental divorce and interparental conflict in a short-term longitudinal study.

The Search for Mechanism

Documenting an association between parents' marriage and offspring relationship development in young adulthood begs the question of why such an association exists. There is widespread recognition of the need to examine the mechanisms through which parental divorce and conflict might affect young adults' romantic relationships (Amato, 2007; Conger et al., 2000; Feldman et al., 1998). In particular, Bradbury et al. (1998) proposed that enduring dispositions acquired earlier in life, including beliefs about relationships, influence adaptive interactional processes that eventually determine relationship success or failure.

One set of beliefs that has been related to interactional processes at both the conceptual and empirical levels is efficacy expectations (Doherty, 1981; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a). Rooted in a broader self-efficacy theory, efficacy involves the belief "that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes" (Bandura, 1977, p. 79). In the present context, efficacy is defined as an individual's belief that he or she can carry out the behavior needed to resolve conflict in intimate relationships (Doherty, 1981). There is evidence that efficacy beliefs determine a couple's persistence in conflict resolution discussions, the styles they employ in conflict resolution, and their willingness to participate in discussions of marital problems (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a; Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990; Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983). If people do not believe they can successfully resolve conflicts with their partner, they are unlikely to expend much effort engaging in conflict resolution discussions, and they may employ poor resolution styles when they do. Therefore, it is expected that low relationship efficacy beliefs will be related to more conflicts on the same issue again and again, as well as to more poorly resolved conflicts. Given a substantial literature showing that conflict behavior is associated with marital quality, it is important to identify the origin of efficacy beliefs. The foundation of these beliefs can be traced to the family of origin in that studies have found that parents' marital problems decreased young adult children's relationship efficacy (e.g., Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Toomey & Nelson, 2001). It can therefore be argued that children exposed to parental divorce or to a significant amount of parental disagreement and conflict, especially intense and poorly resolved conflicts, are likely to have low efficacy beliefs regarding relationship conflict.

Low efficacy beliefs may not only be consequential for conflict behavior. Indeed, models of close relations that incorporate efficacy expectations, such as the

cognitive-contextual model (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), hypothesize that efficacy expectations ultimately influence relationship quality because of their impact on conflict behavior. This suggests that efficacy beliefs should be associated with relationship quality. Consistent with this viewpoint, Egeci and Gencoz (2006) showed that high relationship efficacy was indeed associated with romantic relationship satisfaction in college student relationships, thereby replicating the robust relationship found between efficacy and marital quality (e.g., Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). However, the mediational model outlined here (efficacy → conflict → relationship quality) has not been empirically documented, a lacuna addressed in the present study.

In sum, it appears that relationship efficacy plays an important role in how an individual responds to conflict and that these responses, in turn, influence relationship satisfaction. Thus, one mechanism that may link parental divorce and interparental conflict to offspring romantic relationship behavior is efficacy beliefs. Moreover, both efficacy beliefs and offspring relationship behavior may serve as mechanisms linking parents' marriage to offspring romantic relationship quality in early adulthood.

The Present Study

Informed by a developmental perspective and based on the research reviewed earlier, we hypothesize that (a) parental divorce and marital conflict will be linked to offspring efficacy beliefs, conflict behavior, and romantic relationship quality; (b) efficacy beliefs will mediate the association between parental divorce and marital conflict and conflict in offspring romantic relationships; and (c) conflict in offspring romantic relationships will mediate the association between efficacy beliefs and relationship quality. These hypotheses were investigated in a short-term, three-wave longitudinal study. Because of the nature of the mediating tests and the inclusion of latent constructs, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate our hypotheses.

METHOD

Sample

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from an introductory family and child science course at a large southern U.S. university. Students received course credit for their participation. Of all 687 students in the original sample, 6 were dropped from this study of young adults because they were older than 30. Of the remaining 681 students, 362 answered "yes" to the question "Are you currently in a romantic relationship?"

and 319 answered “no.” Of the 362 students who answered “yes” to a romantic relationship, 358 identified themselves as being in a heterosexual relationship. As a result, there were 358 students in the final sample (M age = 19.80).

We compared the students who were currently in a romantic relationship (therefore were included in this sample) with the students who were not in a romantic relationship (therefore were not included in our sample) on variables of interests, such as parental divorce, parental conflict, relationship efficacy, age, gender, and ethnicity; the results showed no significant difference between the two groups in terms of these variables. This suggests that these variables do not influence whether young adults are in a relationship.

Procedures

During the 14 weeks over which the data collection took place, participants completed a battery of questionnaires that included assessment of their parents’ marital status, their beliefs and attitude toward relationships, their behavioral interactions with their romantic partner, and relationship quality. These data were collected in the context of a larger study that included additional measures that are not relevant in the present context. At Time 1, participants provided data on whether their parents had divorced, the degree of conflict in the parental relationship, the amount of conflict in their own romantic relationship, and the quality of their relationship. At Time 2 (7 weeks later) their relationship efficacy beliefs were assessed. At the final data collection (7 weeks later) the degree of conflict in their romantic relationship was again evaluated along with their relationship quality.

Measures

Parental divorce. A dichotomous variable was created to evaluate the status of parental divorce. The variable was coded as 0 = *intact* and 1 = *divorced*.

Parents’ marital conflict. Parents’ marital conflict was assessed at Time 1 using the Children’s Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). The CPIC has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity when used with college samples (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). The measure used in this study focused on the objective properties of interparental conflict and included 12 items assessing three dimensions of conflict behavior: frequency, intensity, and resolution. These three indicators have been shown to reflect a single latent construct of parental conflict (Bickham & Fiese, 1997; Grych et al., 1992). In the present study each indicator consisted of four items.

Sample items included “My parents hardly ever argued or disagreed” (frequency), “My parents tended to get really angry when they argued or disagreed” (intensity), and “When my parents argued, they usually worked things out” (resolution). Each item had three possible responses: 1 = *true*, 2 = *sort of true*, and 3 = *false*. Items were recoded when necessary so that a high score indicated a higher level of conflict. The alpha coefficients for frequency, intensity, and resolution were .85, .89, and .87, respectively.

Relationship efficacy. A measure devised by Bradbury (1989) was used to assess the extent to which a partner believes he or she has the ability to resolve conflict with his or her partner (Fincham et al., 2000). The measure required respondents to rate the extent to which they agree, on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with seven statements. Some items were reverse coded so that higher scores reflect lower level of relationship efficacy. Factor analyses indicated there were two factors among the seven items, with one that emphasized the positive aspects of efficacy (original items 3 and 6, e.g., “I am able to do things needed to settle our conflicts”; reverse coded) and one that emphasized the negative aspects (original items 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7; e.g., “There is little I can do to resolve many of the important conflicts between my partner and I”). The alpha coefficients were .71 for the positive aspect indicator and .88 for the negative aspect indicator.

Young adult conflict with partners. Young adult conflict behavior with partners was assessed using the corresponding items adapted from the CPIC (Grych et al., 1992) that were used to assess parents’ marital conflict. The same three indicators were formed, and the items were recoded when necessary so that a high score indicated a high level of conflict between the partners. The alpha coefficients for frequency, intensity, and resolution were .84, .82, and .63, respectively. This measure was also assessed at Time 1 as a control variable.

Relationship quality. Following Fincham and Bradbury (1987b), assessment of relationship quality was restricted to subjective evaluations of the relationship. Specifically, four indicators derived from an item response theory analysis of 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007) were used. The items inquired about satisfaction (from 1 = *worse than all others/extremely bad* to 6 = *better than all others/extremely good*), reward (from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much or extremely*), warmth and comfort (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*), and happiness (from 1 = *extremely unhappy* to 7 = *perfect*). Higher scores indicated greater relationship quality.

RESULTS

Of the sample, 282 respondents had complete data at all three time points. Examination of students with incomplete data showed no indication of selective attrition. Therefore, rather than delete cases with any missing data, the present study used full information maximum likelihood (FIML) and SEM to test the predicted relationships among constructs.

FIML (Little & Rubin, 1987; Rubin, 1976; Schafer, 1997) computes maximum likelihood estimates and standard errors for SEM from data with missing values. It provides efficient estimation of statistical parameters from incomplete data and thus allows retention of the complete sample for all analyses. Parameter estimates from FIML provide less biased information than ad hoc procedures such as listwise deletion, pairwise deletion, or imputation of means (Schafer, 1997). For these reasons, FIML was used in this study; as a result, the analyses included all 358 young adults in the SEM analyses. Mplus 4 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2007) was used to estimate the model and test possible mediating and moderating effects.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the sample. Of the 358 respondents, approximately 28% ($n = 100$) came from families where the parents had divorced. The average age of the sample was 19.80 years. The average relationship duration was about 1 year. The majority were non-Hispanic Whites ($n = 233$) and were in an exclusive dating relationship ($n = 297$). Table 1 also provides the means, standard deviations, and ranges for all of the indicators for latent constructs (i.e., relationship efficacy, conflict behavior, and relationship quality).

Correlations

Table 2 provides the correlations among the study variables and latent constructs. From Table 2, we can see that there were significant associations between parents' marriage and offspring romantic relationship constructs. As hypothesized, parental divorce and interparental conflict were related to lower offspring efficacy beliefs and relationship quality and higher levels of conflict in offspring romantic relationships. Also, as anticipated, interparental conflict was related to parental divorce, providing empirical support for the need to examine them jointly to understand the relation of each to offspring romantic relationships. Finally, consistent with theoretical models and prior research, there were robust relationships among offspring efficacy beliefs, conflict behaviors, and relationship quality. Based on

TABLE 1: Descriptive Information With Demographic Characteristics ($N = 358$)

| Variable | M or n | SD | Range |
|--|--------|------|---------|
| Parental divorce (T1) | 100 | | |
| Parents' marital conflict (T1) | | | |
| Frequency | 6.95 | 2.63 | 4-12 |
| Intensity | 7.39 | 2.79 | 4-12 |
| Resolution | 6.75 | 2.52 | 4-12 |
| (Lack of) Relationship efficacy (T2) | | | |
| Negative aspect | 13.52 | 6.00 | 5-31 |
| Positive aspect | 5.95 | 2.60 | 2-14 |
| Youth conflict with partner (T3) | | | |
| Frequency | 6.10 | 1.87 | 4-12 |
| Intensity | 6.38 | 2.24 | 4-12 |
| Resolution | 5.66 | 1.67 | 4-12 |
| Relationship quality (T3) | | | |
| Satisfaction | 5.01 | 1.08 | 1-6 |
| Reward | 5.05 | 1.03 | 1-6 |
| Warmth and comfort | 5.22 | 1.01 | 1-6 |
| Happiness | 5.16 | 1.18 | 1-7 |
| Youth conflict with partner (T1) | | | |
| Frequency | 5.98 | 1.93 | 4-12 |
| Intensity | 6.31 | 2.21 | 4-12 |
| Resolution | 5.32 | 1.42 | 4-12 |
| Other demographic characteristics (T1) | | | |
| Young adult gender | | | |
| Male | 64 | | |
| Female | 293 | | |
| Youth relationship duration (months) | 12 | 6 | < 2-24+ |
| Youth relationship type | | | |
| Dating exclusively | 297 | | |
| Dating nonexclusively | 27 | | |
| Engaged | 23 | | |
| Married | 4 | | |
| Youth age | 19.80 | 1.62 | 18-28 |
| Youth ethnicity | | | |
| Non-Hispanic White | 233 | | |
| African American | 56 | | |
| Hispanic | 36 | | |
| Asian, Pacific Islander | 7 | | |
| Others | 26 | | |

these promising findings, we estimated the SEM to test our mediational hypothesis.

SEM

Before presenting the final model, we conducted a series of preliminary analyses. First, we added youth gender and tested the main effect of gender. None of the paths from gender to outcome variables were significant; therefore, we did not add gender to the final model. Second, we tested the model controlling for relationship quality in addition to conflict behavior at Time 1, and the results showed the same pattern. Considering the modest sample size, we did not add relationship quality at Time 1 in the final model. Finally, we tested possible interaction effects among parental divorce,

TABLE 2: Correlations Among Variables in the Structural Equation Models

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|------|------|
| 1. Parental divorce (T1) | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| 2. Parental conflict (T1) | .35** | 1.00 | | | | | |
| 3. (Lack of) Relationship efficacy (T2) | .14* | .24** | 1.00 | | | | |
| 4. Offspring conflict (T3) | .21** | .31** | .39** | 1.00 | | | |
| 5. Relationship quality (T3) | -.22** | -.26** | -.30** | -.55** | 1.00 | | |
| 6. Offspring conflict (T1) | .13* | .28** | .24** | .64** | -.30** | 1.00 | |
| 7. Offspring gender (T1) | .09 | .13* | .11 | .02 | -.02 | .02 | 1.00 |

NOTE: Parental divorce: 0 = not divorced, 1 = divorced. Youth gender: 1 = male, 2 = female. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

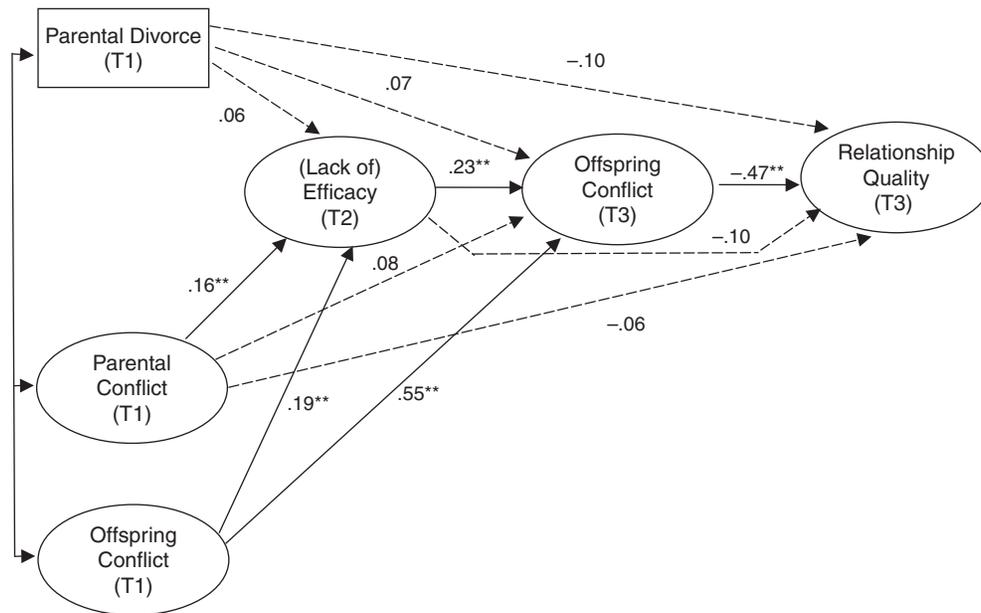


Figure 1 The mediating effects of relationship efficacy on the impact of parental divorce and conflict on youth conflict and relationship quality. NOTE: Standardized coefficients. Solid lines indicate significant paths, dashed lines indicate nonsignificant paths. $\chi^2(df = 87) = 155.92$, comparative fit index = .98, root mean square error of approximation = .05, p close = .65. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2; T3 = Time 3. ** $p < .01$, two-tailed test.

parental conflict, relationship efficacy, and offspring conflict. No significant interactions were found. Figure 1 shows the results of our SEM analysis. Several error terms were correlated. The chi-square is 155.92 with 87 *df*. The comparative fit index (CFI) is .98, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is .05, and p close (Pc) is .65. These fit indexes all indicated a reasonable fit of the model to the data (Kline, 2005).

Figure 1 illustrates several findings. First, parental conflict was significantly related to offspring relationship efficacy ($b = .16, p < .01$). Second, parental divorce was not significantly related to offspring relationship efficacy ($b = .06, ns$). Third, relationship efficacy was significantly related to offspring conflict with romantic

partners ($b = .23, p < .01$). Offspring conflict, in turn, was associated with relationship quality ($b = -.47, p < .01$). There were no significant direct paths from parental divorce and parental conflict to later offspring conflict or relationship quality. Similarly, the direct path from relationship efficacy to relationship quality was not significant. These effects were tested controlling for the level of offspring conflict behavior at Time 1.

With regard to effects relating to parents, the indirect effect from parents' marital conflict to offspring conflict through relationship efficacy ($.03 =$ products of the corresponding unstandardized coefficients) was reliably different from zero using the recommended procedure of evaluating statistical significance with bootstrapped

standard error (95% confidence interval based on 1,000 resamples: .01 to .07; see Dearing & Hamilton, 2006; Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). However, the indirect effect from parental divorce to offspring conflict through relationship efficacy (.05) did not differ significantly from zero (95% confidence interval based on 1,000 resamples: $-.05$ to $.20$). The indirect effects of parental conflict and divorce on relationship quality through relationship efficacy and offspring conflict revealed similar patterns.

DISCUSSION

Motivated by the need to gain a more complete understanding of parental marital problems and romantic relationships in early adulthood, we examined jointly the role of parental divorce and interparental conflict in premarital romantic relationships. Consistent with our earlier arguments and prior research, we showed that parental divorce and interparental conflict were strongly related to each other. The existence of this relationship raises the question of whether effects attributed to divorce more appropriately reflect interparental conflict or even shared variance between the two constructs. Similarly, it is possible that previous findings relating to interparental conflict and offspring relationships may not be accurate where studies are silent on the issue of parental divorce. Simple bivariate correlations emphasized the importance of these questions as both parental characteristics investigated—parental divorce and interparental conflict—were reliably related to offspring relationship constructs. These findings again replicate the results of prior research.

The current findings not only emphasize the need for joint investigation of parental divorce and marital conflict, they also prompt questions about why divorce and marital conflict are related to offspring relationship characteristics. However, the widespread call for research on mechanisms that might relate them has been honored more in the breach than in the observance. Drawing on social-cognitive models of relationship functioning in which efficacy beliefs and conflict behavior play a central role, we therefore tested whether these two variables mediate the association between parental divorce and marital conflict and offspring relationship quality. We hypothesized that parental divorce and parental conflict would be linked to young adults' relationship conflict and quality through their relationship efficacy. Our results showed that when jointly considered it was marital conflict, rather than divorce, that was related to offspring lack of relationship efficacy. In turn, low efficacy expectations were associated with more conflictual interaction between the partners and decreased relationship happiness and satisfaction.

The results underline the likely impact of marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships. Because many children may live in intact families marked by a high degree of marital discord, the impact of parents' marital conflict, in addition to parental divorce, on children should be a central focus of inquiry. This study indicates that interparental conflict was strongly related to young adult's conflicts with their partner, which in turn were linked to decreased relationship quality. Such findings point to the possible intergenerational transmission of conflict behaviors in romantic relationships.

Our findings also demonstrate the importance of considering interparental conflict when studying the documented link between parental divorce and child outcomes. The findings in the present study indicated that once parental conflict is considered, the association between parental divorce and offspring relationship difficulties is significantly reduced and is no longer significant (compare the corresponding path coefficient in Figure 1 and zero-order correlation in Table 2). The significance of the indirect effects was tested by bootstrapping the mediated effect rather than using the Sobel test because the sample size is moderate ($n < 400$; see Bollen & Stine, 1990; MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004; Preacher & Hayes, in press; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). The mediating tests suggested that the indirect path from parental divorce to youth conflict through relationship efficacy was not statistically significant. Similarly, the indirect path from parental divorce to youth relationship quality was not significant. Taken together, the results from the present study provided some support for earlier research that suggests parental conflict is the primary factor linked to offspring relationships and that the effect of parental conflict might be stronger than that of parental divorce.

Another important finding to emerge from the present study is the mediational effect of relationship efficacy. The intergenerational transmission of divorce and marital quality has long been a topic of empirical inquiry, no doubt motivated in part by its important practical implications. Although the link between parents' marital problems and offspring relational outcomes has been replicated in several studies, data on the mechanisms that might account for this link are limited. This underlines the importance of our study as it examined a mechanism through which parents' marital problems might have an impact on young adult's romantic ties. Once relationship efficacy was included in the model, the originally significant zero-order associations between parental conflict and youth conflict and relationship quality were no longer statistically significant. Bootstrapping the mediated effect suggested that efficacy beliefs mediated the association between marital conflict and youth conflict and relationship quality.

In addition, and as predicted by social-cognitive models of relationship function (Doherty, 1981; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987a), offspring conflict mediated the relation between efficacy beliefs and offspring relationship quality. In this regard, however, a plausible argument could be made that relationship quality affects conflict behavior. However, when we tested a model in which relationship quality served as a mediator between efficacy beliefs and conflict behavior (i.e., efficacy \rightarrow relationship quality \rightarrow conflict) the direct path between efficacy and conflict was significant. In contrast, in the model tested (efficacy \rightarrow conflict \rightarrow relationship quality) the analogous direct path between efficacy and relationship quality was not significant, suggesting that conflict seems to be a better mediator between efficacy and relationship quality than relationship quality as a mediator between efficacy and conflict. In any event, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that relationship efficacy mediates the impact of parents' marital problems on offspring conflict and the quality of young adults' romantic relationships.

In addition to addressing important theoretical issues, the present study also improved on several methodological shortcomings of earlier research. First, the study used three waves of data collection. The availability of multiple data collection points provided the opportunity to demonstrate the hypothesized process across more than one period, an improvement over the cross-sectional studies that dominate this area of research (for notable exceptions, see Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Conger et al., 2000). Second, in studying the impact of parental problems on offspring conflict and relationship quality, the present study controlled for youth earlier conflict (and relationship quality). This allowed us to examine the longitudinal relation between parents' marital problems and youth relationship outcomes beyond the stability of conflict behavior and relationship quality. Finally, the present study used FIML to handle missing data. FIML has been shown to provide less biased estimations than ad hoc procedures such as listwise deletion (e.g., Little & Rubin, 1987; Schafer, 1997).

The present findings should, however, be viewed in the light of several limitations. First, the data analyzed are correlational and therefore do not speak directly to causal inference. To be sure, a short-term passive longitudinal study does not rival an experiment in terms of drawing causal inference. However, there are ethical and practical constraints on the feasibility of true experimental manipulations of the underlying processes we investigated. Even so, the ability to control temporal ordering of some variables in the analysis is a decided improvement over cross-sectional research designs and provides stronger data for examining whether the pattern of findings is consistent with causal inferences

implied by the mechanism we hypothesized to link parents' marital problems and youth relationship outcomes.

Second, our sample comprised undergraduate students from a southern U.S. university, the majority of whom were non-Hispanic Whites in a dating relationship. Future research is needed to test the generalizability of the findings to other ethnic groups, developmental stages, and geographic locations. Some studies have suggested that there are no racial differences in relationship quality, relationship efficacy, and conflict patterns (Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006), but this issue is far from being settled.

Third, the measures used in this study were all from target youth's self report, which may inflate the associations among the constructs (Bank, Dishion, Skinner, & Patterson, 1990). For example, participants' experiences in their romantic relationships might have colored their perceptions of the parental relationship. Future studies are needed to assess whether the association found is replicated when using partner or observer reports. However, Rogge and Bradbury's (1999) finding—that self-reported marital interaction was as strong a predictor of marital quality as observed behavior—increases our confidence in the current findings.

Finally, the present findings are open to possible alternative interpretations. For example, offspring problems could influence both parental conflict and their romantic relationships. Several recent studies (e.g., Cui, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007; Jenkins, Simpson, Dunn, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2005) have suggested that children's problems (e.g., depression, delinquency) could cause parental conflict, and parental conflict could cause child problems. This suggests that it is possible for offspring problems to influence parental conflict, which in turn affects their relationship difficulties. Alternatively, parental conflict could influence offspring problems, which in turn affect their relationship difficulties. In either case, future studies are needed to further explore the mechanisms explaining this association between parental conflict and offspring romantic relationships and to provide a better understanding of this process.

Despite these limitations, the present study addressed important theoretical issues with regard to parental divorce and interparental conflict and young adult relationship outcomes. The findings suggest that both parental divorce and conflict are negatively related to youth romantic relationships, with conflict appearing to have a stronger association than parental divorce, and that the association is mediated through relationship efficacy. These results help pinpoint specific psychological processes linking parental divorce and conflict and young adult relationship quality. This is important information, as it can be used to inform where preventive intervention efforts might be focused to reduce the

adverse impact of parental divorce and conflict on romantic relationship development in young adults. However, the value of the present data is not limited to their potential practical utility. In evaluating the status of research on relationships in young adulthood, Collins and Madsen (2006) concluded, "The agenda for filling gaps in research on relationships during early adulthood is a lengthy one" (p. 202). The present data take us a step closer to completing this important agenda.

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