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Effects of Parental Divorce on Marital Commitment and Confidence

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Abstract

Research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has demonstrated that, compared to offspring of non-divorced parents, those of divorced parents generally have more negative attitudes towards marriage as an institution and are less optimistic about the feasibility of a long-lasting, healthy marriage. It is also possible that, when entering marriage themselves, adults whose parents divorced have less personal relationship commitment to their own marriages and less confidence in their own ability to maintain a happy marriage with their spouse. However, this prediction has not been tested. In the current study, we assessed relationship commitment and relationship confidence, as well as parental divorce and retrospectively-reported interparental conflict, in a sample of 265 engaged couples prior to their first marriage. Results demonstrated that women's but not men's parental divorce was associated with lower relationship commitment and lower relationship confidence. These effects persisted when controlling for the influence of recalled interparental conflict and premarital relationship adjustment. The current findings suggest that women whose parents divorced are more likely to enter marriage with relatively lower commitment to, and confidence in, the future of those marriages, potentially raising their risk for divorce.

There is a strong research base supporting the intergenerational transmission of divorce (e.g., D'Onofrio et al., 2007). It has been suggested that both reduced commitment to marriage as an institution and lower confidence that marriages can remain stable and happy may partially account for the heightened risk for divorce among adults from divorced families (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Glenn & Kramer, 1987). By observing their parents separate and divorce, children may learn that marriage is impermanent. Compared to adults from non-divorced families, those whose parents divorced disagree more with the notion that marriage is a lifelong, permanent relationship (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Amato and Rogers (1999) suggest that this "weak commitment to the general norm of lifelong marriage may ultimately undermine people's commitments to particular relationships." Given that low *relationship commitment*, defined as the personal desire and intent to maintain a specific relationship for the long-term (e.g., Stanley & Markman, 1992), predicts later couple dissatisfaction (Rusbult, 1983) and divorce (Impett, Beals, & Peplau, 2001), this could partially explain the higher divorce rates among those whose parents divorced. However, the influence of parental divorce on adults' relationship commitment to their own marriages has not been studied.

Parental divorce may also undermine offspring's perceived ability to attain a happy, lasting marriage. Many young adults from divorced families report a general belief that couples do not have the ability to overcome marital conflicts, as well as apprehension about repeating their

parents' mistakes and a belief that their hypothetical future relationships are likely to fail (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). However, it is not clear whether offspring of divorce tend to have diminished confidence in the marriages that they eventually begin. Relationship confidence, defined as the belief that one's relationship will be successful into the future, which encompasses perceived couple-level efficacy to successfully manage conflicts and an expectancy for a future as a happy couple, has shown strong associations with relationship adjustment (Kaplan & Maddux, 2002), constructive conflict resolution (Whitton et al., 2007) and marital stability (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, in press). Therefore, if offspring of divorce generally have lower relationship confidence as they begin marriage, they are likely to be at greater risk for poor marital outcomes. However, to our knowledge, no studies have explored potential influences of parental divorce on relationship confidence.

Using a sample of couples engaged to be married for the first time, we tested the hypotheses that parental divorce would be associated with lower relationship commitment and lower relationship confidence at the outset of marriage. Because parental divorce has shown a negative effect on global marital adjustment (Amato & Keith, 1991), we controlled for relationship adjustment in our analyses to be sure that we were measuring constructs separate from general adjustment. Also, given that divorce and conflict often co-occur, we assessed the possibility that any observed effects of parental divorce might be accounted for by parental conflict. Based on previous evidence that parental divorce may more strongly impact daughters' than sons' relationship behaviors (Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) and risk for divorce (Amato, 1996), we explored potential gender differences in associations between parental divorce and marital commitment and confidence. Lastly, we assessed potential effects of partner parental divorce on one's own commitment and confidence. Because couples in which both partners come from divorced families may be at the highest risk for marital problems (Amato, 1996), we were particularly interested in whether partner parental divorce and own parental divorce would interact to predict low levels of relationship commitment and confidence.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We used data from the first assessment in a longitudinal study on relationship education (see Markman et al., 2004; Stanley et al., 2001). Briefly, engaged couples were recruited from the religious organizations that would perform their marriage ceremonies. Those who were already married ($n = 14$ couples), did not speak English ($n = 1$), had been married previously ($n = 20$), or who were missing data on parental divorce status ($n = 6$) were excluded, leaving 265 couples. This sample was 83.1% White, 2.4% African American, 1.1% Asian American, and 11.1% Hispanic or Latino; 2.3% identified themselves as "multicultural" or as some "other" race or ethnicity. Participants were 17 to 46 years old ($M = 26.24$, $SD = 4.65$), had a median education level of 16 years, and a median annual income of \$20,000-29,999. Couples had been dating, on average, 3.04 years ($SD = 2.12$); 171 were cohabiting. Participants completed the assessment before receiving relationship education and were paid \$40. Procedures were approved by an Institutional Review Board. Each person provided informed consent.

For our measure of parental conflict, participants reported the presence (1) or absence (0) of five conflict behaviors between their parents (e.g., arguing/yelling). Item responses were summed. Internal consistency was acceptable: $\alpha(\text{women}) = .76$, $\alpha(\text{men}) = .73$. Relationship commitment was measured using the 14-item Dedication Scale from the revised Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Each item (e.g., My relationship with my partner is clearly part of my future life plans) was rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Scores reflect the mean response, with $\alpha(\text{men}) = .70$ and $\alpha(\text{women}) = .53$. To measure relationship confidence, we used the 10-item Confidence Scale (Stanley, Hoyer & Trathen,

1994; Whitton et al., 2007). Items (e.g., I feel good about our prospects to make this relationship work for a lifetime) are rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Scores reflect the mean response, with $\alpha(\text{men}) = .77$ and $\alpha(\text{women}) = .84$. The Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) assessed overall relationship adjustment. Internal consistency was somewhat low in this sample $\alpha(\text{men}) = .57$ and $\alpha(\text{women}) = .59$. The sample was on average highly satisfied, but scores showed variability (female *range* = 75.0-158.0; male *range* = 87.0-156.0) and were distributed normally. Means and standard deviations of all variables, and simple correlations among variables, are presented in Table 1. Because the commitment and confidence variables were negatively skewed, analyses were run with and without outliers. Because all analyses yielded highly similar results, analyses using original data are presented.

Results

Preliminary analyses showed no differences between individuals from divorced (104 women, 94 men) and non-divorced families (161 women, 171 men) in terms of age, length of relationship, income, education level, religiosity, or cohabitation status (all $ps > .10$). Therefore, we did not control for these demographic variables in the primary analyses. According to zero-order correlations (Table 1), parental divorce was associated with lower relationship commitment and confidence for women, as hypothesized. For men, however, there were no effects of parental divorce, but parental conflict was linked with lower relationship confidence.

We used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM: Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992) to assess the simultaneous effects of parental divorce, parental conflict, and current relationship adjustment on relationship commitment and confidence. Equations took the following form:

$$Y = \beta_{m0} (\text{male participant}) + \beta_{f0} (\text{female participant}) + \beta_{m1} (\text{male parental divorce}) + \beta_{f1} (\text{female parental divorce}) + \beta_{m2} (\text{male parental conflict}) + \beta_{f2} (\text{female parental conflict}) + \beta_{m3} (\text{male relationship adjustment}) + \beta_{f3} (\text{female relationship adjustment}) + r_{ij}$$

For ease of interpretation, all predictors were standardized prior to analysis. Results (Table 2) show that for women, parental divorce retained its small but significant negative effect on relationship commitment and confidence when controlling for parental conflict and relationship adjustment. For men, there were no significant effects of parental divorce or conflict, controlling for relationship adjustment. Chi-square tests were used to test whether the effects of parental divorce on outcome variables were significantly different between women and men. The effect of parental divorce on relationship commitment was marginally stronger for women than men, $\chi^2(1, N = 492) = 3.03, p = .07$. The effect of parental divorce on relationship confidence was significantly stronger for women than men, $\chi^2(1, N = 492) = 4.95, p < .05$.

Finally, to assess potential effects of partners' parental divorce on participants' relationship commitment and confidence, we conducted additional HLM analyses predicting each outcome variable with the following predictor variables: gender, self-reports of parental divorce, partners' parental divorce, and all two-way interactions (i.e., parental divorce \times partner parental divorce, gender \times parental divorce, gender \times partner parental divorce). Results were consistent with those from previously presented analyses; significant gender \times parental divorce interactions indicated an effect of one's own parental divorce on relationship commitment and relationship confidence for women but not for men. In no case was partner parental divorce or the interaction between self- and partner- parental divorce significant, suggesting that couples in which both partners have divorced parents are no less committed or confident than those in which only the woman experienced parental divorce.

Discussion

The current findings show that, at the outset of their first marriages, women whose parents had divorced reported lower relationship commitment and less confidence in the future of their marriages than did women from non-divorced families. These results add to previous evidence that adults with divorced parents have lower commitment to marriage *as an institution* (e.g., Amato, 1996) by showing that women have less commitment to, and confidence in, their *own* marriages. Daughters of divorced parents appear to be more ambivalent about committing to a particular partner, not merely to the notion that marriage, in general, should be forever. Further, they report less perceived confidence in being able to make their own upcoming marriage last. The effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence were small to moderate, as has been found for general attitudes toward divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996).

During engagement, there appears to be little variation among couples in their levels of relationship commitment and confidence, with mean levels above 6 on a 7-point scale. Nevertheless, parental divorce is predictive of who will score relatively lower on the commitment and confidence measures, which may be important given the evidence that even small variations in marital commitment and confidence can have meaningful consequences to couple and individual outcomes. Variance within a similarly restricted range of commitment has predicted marital stability over 18 months (Impett et al., 2001). In a large, community based sample, minor variation in confidence that one's marriage will last was strongly associated with marital disruption (Nock et al., in press), and in the larger study from which the current sample was drawn, relationship confidence predicted change in women's depressive symptoms over the first years of marriage (Whitton et al., 2007). Also, the effect of parental divorce on commitment and confidence could not be explained by its effect on general relationship adjustment, suggesting the effect is robust and highlighting support for the theory that low levels of relationship commitment and confidence may serve as specific mechanisms through which divorce is transmitted from one generation to the next.

Controlling for interparental conflict did not reduce the effect of parental divorce on women's relationship commitment or confidence. This finding is consistent with previous evidence that parental divorce, but not parental conflict, is linked with lower commitment to the institution of marriage (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). The present results do not diminish the likelihood that parental conflict increases offspring risk for poor marital outcomes through other mechanisms, such as the development of poor relationship skills (Amato, 1996; Sanders et al., 1999); however, it appears to be parental divorce, rather than heightened conflict preceding the divorce, that affects women's appraisals of their own marriages.

Despite the robust associations observed in women, parental divorce was not associated with men's relationship commitment and confidence. Experiencing a parental divorce appears to have a stronger impact on women's than men's desires and beliefs about the future of their own marriages. Furthermore, the experience of parental divorce by both partners did not predict any lower commitment or confidence than did the woman's parental divorce alone. These findings echo those of previous studies showing a stronger impact of parental divorce on daughters' than sons' risk for divorce (e.g., Amato, 1996). It is possible that because women are socialized to be more relationship-oriented than men (e.g., Gilligan, 1982), they may be more attuned to their parents' marital dissolution and its lessons regarding the (im)permanence of marriage. In addition, women generally suffer more negative consequences from divorce than do men, especially economically (Hetherington, 2003). Therefore, being primed to be conscious of the fragility of marriage by observing parental divorce may lead women, more than men, to suppress levels of marital confidence and to hold back on their commitment to their marriages.

There are limitations to the present research. Foremost, the sample was not representative. Most participants were White and moderately well educated, and all were married through a religious organization. Findings may not generalize to couples from other ethnic or educational backgrounds or to those who do not marry in a religious organization (although over 75% of U.S. couples do; Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). The small effect size of female parental divorce on commitment and confidence suggests that these premarital variables are also influenced by other factors, and that the influence of parental divorce on marital outcomes is likely mediated by other factors as well, such as communication patterns (e.g., Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004). The data were cross-sectional, prohibiting confident statements about directionality or causal effects. The measures of parental divorce and conflict were retrospective, introducing the potential for distortion by current mood or relationship adjustment. The somewhat restricted range on the measures of relationship commitment and confidence, typical of a premarital sample, may have limited power to detect effects of parental divorce for men. Also, internal consistency of the relationship commitment scale was lower than desired for women. Finally, we did not assess whether the lower levels of relationship commitment and confidence observed in daughters of divorced parents eventually result in higher rates of marital distress and dissolution; future work is needed to test this hypothesis.

Despite these limitations, this research highlights the negative effect parental divorce may have on marital commitment and confidence, particularly for women. As such, these findings suggest that it may be important for relationship education programs to include specific strategies to help women from divorced families develop higher levels of relationship commitment and confidence by learning skills that promote healthy, happy, and long-lasting marriages.

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Zero-order Correlations among all Variables

Table 1

	1	2	3	4	5
M	39%	1.13	129.23	6.37	6.72
SD		1.35	15.14	0.56	0.46
M					
SD					
1. Parental divorce	35%				
2. Parental conflict	1.09	.27**	-.04	-.01	-.03
3. Relationship adjustment	127.10	.00	-.12*	-.09	-.14*
4. Relationship commitment	6.31	.05	.29**	.49**	.51**
5. Relationship confidence	6.69	.00	.48**	.25**	.54**

Notes: Female correlations below diagonal; male above. *N*s vary from 254 to 258, depending on missing data on individual variables.

**
 $p < .01$

*
 $p < .05$

Table 2

The Prediction of Relationship Commitment and Confidence from Parental Divorce, Parental Conflict, and Concurrent Relationship Adjustment

<i>Predictors</i>	Relationship Commitment	
	Women	Men
Parental divorce	-.12* (.06)	-.01 (.04)
Parental conflict	.09 (.06)	.00 (.04)
Relationship adjustment	.09* (.04)	.33** (.04)

<i>Predictors</i>	Relationship Confidence	
	Women	Men
Parental divorce	-.14* (.05)	.02 (.04)
Parental conflict	.06 (.04)	-.06 (.05)
Relationship adjustment	.26** (.07)	.26** (.05)

Note. Values in parentheses are standard errors.

**
 $p < .01$

*
 $p < .05$