Parental marital conflict and divorce, parent-child relationships, social support, and relationship anxiety in young adulthood

HEIDI R. RIGGIO
Claremont McKenna College

Abstract
Based on research documenting harmful long-term consequences of parental conflict and divorce for offspring, relations between recollections of parental conflict, parental divorce, and social outcomes in young adulthood were examined. A total sample of 566 young adults from divorced and intact families completed measures of parental conflict, quality of parent–adult child relationships, anxiety in relationships with others, and perceptions of social support from others. As hypothesized, divorce and conflict had significant independent effects on outcomes in young adulthood. Effects of conflict were uniformly negative for quality of parent-child relationships, perceived social support from others, and anxiety in personal relationships. Parental divorce was associated with lower quality father-child relationships, yet divorce was associated with significant positive outcomes for quality of mother-child relationships, social support, independence facilitated by both parents, and reduced anxiety in relationships. Importantly, these effects occurred regardless of participant sex, parental remarriage, and parental socioeconomic status.

Many studies have documented short- and long-term negative effects of parental marital conflict and divorce for offspring, including poorer academic, social, and psychological outcomes (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Keith, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990). Parental conflict negatively affects children’s attachment to parents and subsequent feelings of security in relationships (Davies & Cummings, 1994), and studies of children and adults suggest that both experiencing parental divorce and growing up in a high-conflict family are associated with long-term decrements in well-being (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). Because of the importance of parent-child relationships to social and psychological functioning across the life span, studying the effects of parental conflict and divorce on parent-child relationships and other social outcomes is particularly important. The aim of the present study, then, was to examine relations between parental marital conflict and divorce and social outcomes in young adulthood, including quality of parent-child relationships, perceptions of social support received from others, and anxiety about participating in personal relationships.

Thank you to William D. Crano, Dale Berger, Jeff Lewis, and Kathy Brown for their support on this project. Correspondence should be addressed to Heidi R. Riggio, Department of Psychology, Berger Institute for Work, Family, and Children, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA 91711; e-mail: heidi.riggio@claremontmckenna.edu.

Effects of conflict and divorce on parent-child relationships
Considerable research shows that marital conflict is associated with harsh, inconsistent, volatile parenting, decreased emotional availability of parents, and less effective
use of discipline (Caspi & Elder, 1988; Simons, Whitbeck, Melby, & Wu, 1994). Moreover, marital unhappiness is associated with a lack of cohesive relationships within the family environment, and chronic conflict between parents who remain married may result in psychological and relationship difficulties for offspring in adulthood (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990).

Despite the associations between marital conflict and negative outcomes for offspring, however, some research indicates that parental divorce is problematic for parent-child relationships, beyond the negative effects of parental conflict. First, divorce frequently leads to greatly diminished contact between children and the noncustodial parent—which, in approximately 90% of divorces, is the father (Seltzer, 1991)—resulting in disruption of a primary relationship for children as well as losses in emotional and practical support. Second, some research on children suggests that divorced custodial parents are less communicative and affectionate, more punitive, and more inconsistent in use of discipline than married parents (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). Third, some researchers (e.g., Kissman & Allen, 1993) have argued that children may experience “role disturbance” through their mothers’ post-divorce adjustment difficulties and increasing needs for emotional and practical support (household duties, etc.). These role shifts are said to involve decreases in parental guidance and support, and are generally viewed as harmful for offspring (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Two explanations have been offered for the social and relationship difficulties experienced by adults from high-conflict and divorced families. First, offspring exposed to high-conflict parental relationships may acquire the negative or dysfunctional behavioral strategies used by parents during conflict (Booth & Edwards, 1990; Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999). Children exposed to consistent, intense conflict between parents are likely to develop lasting behaviors and cognitions, including expectations of conflict, that increase the likelihood of conflict in their own personal relationships, including as adults. Consequently, young adults exposed to poor parental models of interpersonal behavior may experience greater anxiety about participating in relationships, and may have difficulty forming stable, satisfying relationships (Amato, 2000).

An explanation of the unique negative effect of parental divorce, independent of parental conflict, on relationship functioning in adulthood focuses on transmission of relationship commitment norms to offspring. By separating and divorcing, parents demonstrate to children that marriages can be voluntarily ended. Children from divorced families learn firsthand that marriages do not last a lifetime, that dissatisfying personal relationships should be ended, and that divorce allows pursuit of more satisfying relationships with other partners (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Research indicates that adult offspring of divorce are more pessimistic about experiencing lifelong marriage and evaluate divorce less negatively than do young adults from intact families (Amato & Booth, 1991), attitudes reflective of low relationship commitment. Lack of relationship commitment and a personal view of dissolution as a viable alternative to dissatisfying relationships may affect behaviors and attitudes within all types of personal relationships, and may be particularly important for feelings of anxiety about participating in personal relationships and development of social support in young adulthood.

Several studies have examined relations between parental divorce and quality of relationships between parents and adult children, although many have examined only young adults from divorced families, without including those from intact families (e.g., Aquilino, 1994; Arditti, 1999; Cooney, Hutchinson, & Leather, 1995; Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986). Results are somewhat inconsistent. Some studies have found significant negative effects of
Parent-child relationships in young adulthood

Divorce on adult children’s relationships with both parents (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Other studies have reported negative effects of divorce only for father–adult child relationships, with mother-child relationships not significantly affected by divorce (Aquillino, 1994; Burns & Dunlop, 1998; Cooney, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Cooney et al., 1995). Further inconsistency is provided by results suggesting a possible increase in closeness between mothers and adult children following divorce (Arditti, 1999; Cooney et al., 1986).

The results of the relatively few studies that include both respondents from divorced families and respondents from intact families have also been inconsistent. Amato and Booth (1991) found that both divorce and recollections of parental marital unhappiness are associated with decreased contact with both parents, particularly with fathers. Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that parents’ marital unhappiness negatively affects ratings of father-child affection by offspring, with divorce having little effect on either parent-child relationship. Using parental reports of marital conflict obtained 12 years earlier, Booth and Amato (1994) documented significant independent negative effects of divorce and conflict on mother–adult child and father–adult child relationships, again particularly for relationships with fathers. These results are consistent with studies of children and adolescents that have indicated stronger negative effects of conflict and divorce on relations with fathers (Amato, 1986; Peterson & Zill, 1986).

The associations between parental conflict, divorce, and quality of parent–adult child relationships are further complicated by variations in findings based on the sex of the adult child. For example, Booth and Amato (1994) found that parental conflict and divorce most negatively affects relationships in opposite-sex parent-child dyads (i.e., mother-son, father-daughter), with relationships in same-sex dyads relatively unaffected. Other studies have reported no sex differences in effects of divorce on relationships with mothers (Aquillino, 1994), and still others have reported the most negative effects of divorce for father–adult son relationships (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998). Although it seems that relationships with fathers are likely to be negatively affected by divorce, a thorough understanding of the effects of conflict and divorce on parent-child relationships in young adulthood is lacking.

Given the growing social acceptance of divorce (Amato, 2001; Cherlin, 1992), continuing research is important in investigating possible increases in positive outcomes of divorce for successive generations of offspring. Further, given the dynamic nature of parent-child relationships over the life span (Arditti, 1999), it is important to investigate potential differences in effects of conflict and divorce on offspring at different points in the life span (Amato, 2000). Finally, how parental conflict, divorce, and relationships with parents are related to other social outcomes in young adulthood, including perceptions of social support provided by others and anxiety in personal relationships with others, has not been thoroughly examined.

Present research

The overall aim of this study was to further explore the consequences of parental conflict on psychological and social adjustment in young adults, independent of and in conjunction with divorce, through a comparison of individuals from divorced and intact families. A secondary aim was to clarify the associations between parental conflict and divorce and relationship outcomes with fathers and mothers. Based on theoretical explanations focusing on transmission of poor relationship behavior and lack of relationship commitment, it was expected that parental conflict and divorce would have unique effects on outcomes; interactions between parental divorce and conflict were not expected.
The following hypotheses were proposed.

**H1:** Compared to individuals reporting lower levels of parental conflict, individuals reporting high levels of parental conflict are expected to report significantly lower quality relationships with fathers and mothers, fewer numbers of and lower satisfaction with available social supports, and significantly stronger feelings of anxiety in personal relationships with others.

This hypothesis was based on research documenting negative effects of parental conflict on relationships with parents and other social outcomes in young adulthood (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Amato, 1994).

**H2:** Compared to individuals from intact families, individuals from divorced families are expected to report significantly more negative outcomes in relationships with fathers, and fewer numbers of and lower satisfaction with available social supports.

This hypothesis was based on research documenting negative effects of parental divorce on anxiety in personal relationships with fathers and other social outcomes in young adulthood (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cooney et al., 1995).

**H3:** Individuals from divorced families are expected to report significantly more positive relationships with mothers than are individuals from intact families.

This hypothesis was based on research documenting especially close relationships between mothers and young adult children in divorced families (Arditti, 1999).

**H4:** Individuals from divorced families are expected to report significantly less anxiety about personal relationships, given their less negative view of relationship failure, than are individuals from intact families.

Although no research has examined effects of parental divorce on anxiety in personal relationships, this hypothesis was based on research suggesting that offspring from divorced families evaluate relationship dissolution less negatively than those from intact families (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

**H5:** For individuals from intact and divorced families, high quality relationships with parents are expected to be positively related to number of and satisfaction with available social supports, and negatively related to feelings of anxiety in personal relationships.

This hypothesis was based on previous research documenting the importance of parent–adult child relationships to social functioning in adulthood (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample consisted of 566 participants (208 men, 358 women), with ages ranging from 18 to 32 years ($M = 21.4$ years). Four hundred and one participants were from intact families (biological parents married) and 165 were from divorced families (biological parents divorced). Mean age at parental divorce was 9.4 years ($SD = 6.3$). Participants were undergraduate (90%) and graduate (10%) students, distributed among a large state university (70%), one of two junior colleges (15%), or one of three liberal arts colleges (15%). Students participated for extra or research participation credit. Approximately 62% of participants reported living with one or both parents. Of participants from divorced families, 9% reported being raised by fathers, 64% by mothers, 26% by both parents, and 3% by neither parent; 49% reported that mothers...
remarried, and 52% reported that fathers remarried (both parents/neither parent remarried = 32% each). None of the participants were from adoptive families.

Measures

Participants completed the following measures in the order presented here (see the Appendix for sample items):

1. **The Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983)**, a 27-item measure of the perceived number of social supports and satisfaction with available social support. Using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = very dissatisfied; 6 = very satisfied), respondents indicated the number of people on whom they can rely for social support in a variety of situations (SSQ-N), as well as degree of satisfaction with social support (SSQ-S). Reliability analysis yielded an alpha of .96 for SSQ-N and .94 for SSQ-S for the current sample.

2. **The Anxiety Subscale of the Relationship Awareness Scale (RAS-A; Snell, 1998)**, a 9-item measure of relational anxiety, defined as the tendency to experience anxiety and discomfort in close relationships, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = not at all to 4 = very characteristic of me). Reliability analysis yielded an alpha of .88 for the current sample.

3. **The Parental Attachment Questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987)**, a 48-item measure used to assess affective quality of relationships with each parent (27 items), parents as sources of emotional support (7 items), and degree to which parents facilitated independence (14 items), using 5-point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 5 = very much). Participants described relationships with biological parents; responses concerning stepparents were not included. Reliability analysis yielded alphas ranging from .70 to .95 for the six PAQ scales.

4. **Demographic information**, including sex, age, parental marital status, and, if from a divorced family, age at divorce. Annual household income of parents or primary parent was assessed using a 5-point scale (1 = less than $20,000; 3 = $40–60,000; 5 = more than $80,000). Educational attainment of each parent was assessed using a five-point scale (0 = less than high school; 1 = high school; 2 = some college; 3 = college degree; 4 = graduate degree). Responses to annual income and parents’ educational attainment were summed to obtain an overall indicator of socioeconomic status, with scores ranging from 1 to 13 in the current sample (M = 7.5). Reliability analysis indicated internal consistency reliability yielded an alpha (Cronbach’s alpha) of .65 for the current sample.

5. **The Parental Conflict Scale (PCS; Peterson & Zill, 1986)**, a 9-item measure of the nature, duration, and severity of parental marital conflict. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often, 4 = frequently), respondents indicated how often biological parents argued with each other about such issues as finances, household duties, drinking/drug use, and so on, as well as how often arguments became physically violent. Participants with divorced parents were instructed to answer items in terms of what their biological parents’ relationship was like “when they were together, still married or living together.” Participants with married parents were instructed to describe the overall level of conflict in their parents’ marriage. Although retrospective reports are affected by memory lapses and current moods (Amato, 1991; Lewinsohn & Rosenbaum, 1987), a number of researchers have argued that assessments of subjective appraisals or interpretations of life events are vital to understanding individuals’ current experiences and examining relationships from a life-span perspective (Arditti, 1999; Kurdek, 1993). In addition, researchers have suggested that direct reports from offspring may be particularly valuable in understanding relationships between family members (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997).
Reliability analysis indicated an alpha of .77 for the current sample.

Procedure

All participants completed measures in a fixed order: SSQ, RAS-A, PAQ, demographic information, and PCS. They were instructed orally and in writing to report on their relationships with biological parents on the PAQ, and to describe relationships between biological parents on “the last set of questions” (the PCS). Parental conflict was assessed last to prevent participant reactivity, and to obtain descriptions of parent-child relationships without prior questioning about parental conflict and marital status. Sessions lasted 45–60 minutes.

Results

Scores on the parental marital conflict scale for all 566 participants ranged from 9 to 33 (\(M = 14.2\)), with a median of 13 and an upper quartile of 16. For analysis purposes, three conflict groups were formed: low conflict for participants reporting conflict at the median or lower (\(n = 307\)); moderate conflict for those reporting conflict of 14, 15, or 16 (\(n = 125\)); and high conflict for those reporting conflict of 17 or higher (\(n = 134\)).

Three variables were used as covariates in analyses to examine as clearly as possible direct effects of divorce and conflict. First, because of associations between family socioeconomic status (SES), parental conflict, and divorce (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985), and because economic hardship is associated with lower quality family relationships (Lorenz, Conger, Simons, Whitbeck, & Elder, 1991), SES was controlled as a covariate in all analyses. Second, because research indicates both positive and negative consequences of parental remarriage for offspring (Amato, 1994; Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Parish, 1995), parental remarriage was also controlled as a covariate in all analyses. A third covariate was participant sex. An initial \(2 \times 2 \times 3\) (Divorced vs. Intact Family \(\times\) Participant Sex \(\times\) Low, Moderate, and High Conflict) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to detect relations between parental divorce, conflict, and participant sex in affecting offspring outcomes. Multivariate tests indicated a main effect of participant sex, \(F(9, 541) = 2.46, p < .01\). Univariate tests indicated that women reported significantly higher numbers of available social supports, \(F(1, 549) = 8.41, p < .01\), and significantly higher satisfaction with social support than did men, \(F(1, 549) = 8.62, p < .01\). These results are consistent with previous studies indicating higher levels of social support reported by women compared to men (Riggio, 2000; Woodward, Rosenfeld, & May, 1996). No other univariate tests for sex were significant, and multivariate tests for two- and three-way interactions between sex, conflict, and divorce were not significant (all \(Fs < 1.5\)). Because other variations by

1. With a minimum PCS score of 9, a median score of 13 represented only a few “sometimes” responses and fell below the mean of 14.3, suggesting rather low parental conflict. Further, other breakdowns of parental conflict into low, moderate, and high groups resulted in some \(n\)’s that were quite small, particularly in low-conflict, divorced groups. Results did not vary significantly when other breakdowns of parental conflict were used.

2. Parental remarriage (yes/no) as a covariate for all participants included a category for “parents married.” The \(2 \times 3\) MANOVA indicated significant effects of mothers’ remarriage as a covariate on all three aspects of the mother–adult child relationship. Given the lack of hypotheses about these findings, these results were not explored further. Significant effects of father remarriage as a covariate were not indicated.

3. Assessment of custody arrangements in the current study was problematic. First, frequency of visitation by noncustodial parents was not assessed; second, many young adults from intact families reported being raised by mothers only (18%), affecting the meaning of the custody variable when all participants were compared. Also, it is unclear how primary physical custody for young adults from divorced families was represented by the “both parents” response. Multivariate results of divorce and conflict did not differ from the current results when primary custody was used as a covariate.
sex and interactions were not indicated, participant sex was controlled as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

**Main Analyses**

A $2 \times 3$ (Parents Married vs. Divorced × Low, Moderate, High Conflict) MANOVA was conducted to examine relations between divorce, conflict, and quality of parent-child relationships, perceptions of social support, and anxiety in relationships. SES, participant sex, and remarriage of each parent were controlled as covariates. Multivariate results indicated significant main effects of divorce, $F(9, 548) = 10.80$, and conflict, $F(18, 1096) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, on young adulthood outcomes, but no significant interaction between divorce and conflict, $F(18, 1096) = 1.04$. These results are consistent with previous research documenting a lack of interaction between divorce and conflict in affecting offspring outcomes (Booth & Amato, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

**Effects of parental conflict.** Hypothesis 1, which predicted negative effects of parental conflict for social outcomes, was partially supported. Univariate tests provided by MANOVA indicated that young adults from high-conflict families reported significantly lower affective quality, $F(2, 556) = 35.39$, independence, $F(2, 556) = 16.45$, and emotional support, $F(2, 556) = 15.80$, all $p < .001$, in relationships with fathers compared to those from lower-conflict families (see Table 1). Pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction indicated that individuals from high-conflict families reported lower affective quality, emotional support, and independence by fathers compared to those from low- and moderate-conflict families (all $p$'s < .01); and that individuals from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>Low $(n = 307)$</th>
<th>Moderate $(n = 125)$</th>
<th>High $(n = 134)$</th>
<th>$F$-value</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PAQ</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father affect</td>
<td>102.1$^{a}$</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>94.5$^{a,b}$</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>35.39***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father support</td>
<td>22.6$^a$</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>20.9$^b$</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>15.80***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father independence</td>
<td>52.7$^a$</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>51.3$^b$</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>16.45***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother affect</td>
<td>108.1$^{a,b}$</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>103.0$^a$</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>16.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother support</td>
<td>24.0$^a$</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.99*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother independence</td>
<td>52.7$^{a,b}$</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>50.7$^a$</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>11.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAS–Anxiety</td>
<td>10.9$^a$</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.36*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSQ–Number</td>
<td>89.8$^a$</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>93.2$^b$</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>5.73**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSQ–Satisfaction</td>
<td>143.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>143.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Degrees of freedom for all $F$-values are 2, 555. PAQ = Parental Attachment Questionnaire; RAS-A = Relationship Awareness Scale–Anxiety; SSQ = Social Support Questionnaire. Total error rate for significant univariate tests = .089; without RAS-A and mother support, $\alpha = .003$.

$^{a,b}$Means with the same superscript are significantly different based on pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni correction (all $p$'s < .05); total $\alpha$ for all comparisons except RAS-A and mother support = .044.

***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$. **
low-conflict families reported greater affective quality in father relationships compared to those from moderate-conflict families \((p < .02)\).

Univariate tests also indicated that young adults from high-conflict families reported significantly lower affective quality, \(F(2, 556) = 16.11, p < .001\), independence, \(F(2, 556) = 11.63, p < .001\), and emotional support in relationships with mothers, \(F(2, 556) = 2.99, p = .05\); significantly lower numbers of available social supports, \(F(2, 556) = 5.73, p < .01\); and significantly greater anxiety in personal relationships, \(F(2, 556) = 3.36, p < .05\), compared to those from lower-conflict families (see Table 1). Pairwise comparisons indicated that young adults from low-conflict families reported higher affective quality and independence compared to moderate- and high-conflict groups (all \(ps < .01\)), and that individuals from high-conflict families reported significantly lower emotional support than individuals from low-conflict families \((p < .05)\). Additional pairwise comparisons indicated that individuals from high-conflict families reported significantly lower numbers of social supports compared to those from low- and moderate-conflict groups \((ps < .02)\), and that individuals from high-conflict families reported significantly greater anxiety in relationships than did those from low-conflict families \((p < .05)\). Results for satisfaction with social support were not significant.

**Effects of parental divorce.** Consistent with Hypothesis 2, which predicted negative effects of parental divorce on relationships with fathers and perceptions of social support, univariate tests indicated that individuals from divorced families reported significantly lower affective quality, \(F(1, 556) = 7.45, p < .01\), and emotional support, \(F(1, 556) = 27.65, p < .001\), in relationships with fathers compared to individuals from intact families (see Table 2). Contrary to Hypothesis 2, univariate results indicated that individuals from divorced families reported significantly greater numbers of available social supports, \(F(1, 556) = 8.40, p < .01\), and marginally

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Mean PAQ, RAS-A, and SSQ scores of individuals from intact and divorced families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intact family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 401)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PAQ</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RAS–Anxiety</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SSQ–Number</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SSQ–Satisfaction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F-value</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\eta^2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Degrees of freedom for all F-values are 1, 556. PAQ = Parental Attachment Questionnaire; RAS-A = Relationship Awareness Scale–Anxiety; SSQ = Social Support Questionnaire. Total error rate for significant univariate tests = .022.  
***\(p < .001\), **\(p < .01\), *\(p < .05\), \(\dagger\)\(p < .10\).
significantly greater independence facilitated by fathers, $F(1, 556) = 2.78, p < .10$, compared to individuals from intact families.

Hypothesis 3, which predicted positive effects of parental divorce on relationships with mothers, and Hypothesis 4, which predicted less anxiety in relationships for individuals from divorced families, were supported. Univariate tests indicated that individuals from divorced families reported significantly greater affective quality, $F(1, 556) = 8.16, p < .01$, greater independence, $F(1, 556) = 23.27, p < .001$, and marginally significantly greater emotional support in relationships with mothers, $F(1, 556) = 3.46, p < .07$, than did individuals from intact families (see Table 2). Results also indicated that individuals from divorced families reported significantly lower anxiety in personal relationships compared to individuals from intact families, $F(1, 556) = 7.21, p < .01$.

Relations between parent-child relationships and social outcomes. Hypothesis 5, which predicted positive associations between quality of parent-child relationships and perceptions of social support, and negative associations between parent-child relationships and relationship anxiety, was partially supported. For young adults from intact families, results indicated significant positive correlations between quality of both parent–adult child relationships and satisfaction with and number of perceived available social supports ($r$s ranging from .17 to .27, all $ps < .001$; see Table 3). For young adults from divorced families, results indicated significant and marginally significant positive

### Table 3. Correlations between parental conflict, SSQ scores, RAS-A scores, and the quality of parent-adult child relationships: Individuals from intact and divorced families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conflict</th>
<th>SSQ-N</th>
<th>SSQ-S</th>
<th>RAS-A</th>
<th>Age at divorce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PAQ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father affect</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
<td>.27***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father support</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father independence</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother affect</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother support</td>
<td>-.15†</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother independence</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>.19***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAS–Anxiety</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>-.09†</td>
<td>-.18***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSQ–Number</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.15†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSQ–Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aEntries for individuals from intact families are italicized; $n = 397$.

*b$n = 155$.

Note. PAQ = Parental Attachment Questionnaire; SSQ-N = Social Support Questionnaire–Number; SSQ-S = Social Support Questionnaire–Satisfaction; RAS-A = Relationship Awareness Scale–Anxiety. Table entries are partial correlations controlling for socioeconomic status, participant sex, and (for divorced participants only) parental remarriage.

***$p < .001$. **$p < .01$. *$p < .05$. †$p < .10$. 
correlations between quality of both parent-child relationships and numbers of available social supports (rs ranging from .14 to .19), and significant positive correlations between satisfaction with social support and qualities of mother-child relationships and emotional support from fathers (rs ranging from .20 to .35, all ps < .01). Results also indicated significant negative correlations between qualities of father-child relationships and anxiety in relationships for both groups (rs ranging from -.13 to -.26, all ps < .05), but no significant correlations between quality of mother relationships and relationship anxiety for either group. Satisfaction with social support was significantly negatively related to anxiety in relationships for individuals from intact families (r = -.18, p < .001) but not for individuals from divorced families, and number of available social supports was marginally negatively related to anxiety in relationships for both groups. Frequency analyses indicated that individuals from both intact and divorced families were less likely to indicate being raised by both parents with greater reports of parental conflict (χ² = 9.74 and 10.56, ps < .05, respectively). Age at divorce was not significantly related to any outcomes for individuals from divorced families.4

Discussion

Understanding the long-term effects of parental divorce and conflict on outcomes for offspring in young adulthood is important, both because developmental consequences for offspring are not clearly understood and because outcomes for offspring may change as social acceptance of divorce increases (Amato, 2001; Cherlin, 1992). Current results are consistent with previous studies indicating independent effects of parental divorce and conflict on young adulthood outcomes (Booth & Amato, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). In contrast to some previous research (Booth & Amato, 1994; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998), the current study did not indicate sex differences in long-term effects of parental divorce and conflict. Independent effects of divorce and conflict were found with sex, socioeconomic status, and parental remarriage used as covariates, findings that are important for clarifying consequences of parental conflict and divorce.

Parental conflict and young adulthood outcomes

In support of Hypothesis 1, independent effects of recalled parental conflict on the quality of both parent-adult child relationships were uniformly negative, with small to moderate negative effects of conflict on affective quality and emotional support in relationships with parents, and independence facilitated by parents. There may be several reasons for this. Parents engaged in continuous conflict have less time for effective parenting and they are harsh and conflict-prone in interactions with children (Caspi & Elder, 1988; Simons et al., 1994). As children observe extensive conflict between parents, they may develop conflict-prone and dysfunctional relationship behaviors through modeling. In addition, conflict between parents may spread to other family members, with offspring perhaps becoming participants in conflict episodes (Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989). The current study indicates that the experience of poor quality relationships with parents lasts into young adulthood, even when young adult offspring are no longer residing with parents and/or no longer directly exposed to parental conflict.

In the current study, young adults from high-conflict families also reported fewer available social supports and greater anxiety in personal relationships compared to those from lower conflict families. These results are consistent with previous research demonstrating predispositions toward psychological and relationship difficulties in adulthood for offspring from high-conflict families.
families (Amato & Booth, 1991; Booth & Edwards, 1990), and they suggest that young adults from high-conflict families may develop expectations of low support, high conflict, and poor outcomes in their personal relationships.

**Parental divorce and young adulthood outcomes**

**Negative outcomes.** In support of Hypothesis 2 and consistent with previous research (Aquilino, 1994; Burns & Dunlop, 1998; Cooney et al., 1995), parental divorce was found to be associated with lower affective quality and emotional support in relationships with fathers. When divorce occurs, the vast majority of children (over 90%) remain in the primary physical custody of their mother (Seltzer, 1991). Contact between fathers and children, which occurs daily in intact families, is greatly diminished when parents separate (Cooney, 1994). Additional analyses in the present study indicated that, with greater parental conflict, young adults from divorced families are more likely to report being raised by mothers only, suggesting that fathers are more likely to be completely separated from the family upon divorce. As children grow into young adulthood, their relationships with fathers are of low quality.

**Positive outcomes.** Uniquely, and in support of Hypothesis 3, the current results indicated that in comparison to those from intact families, young adults in divorced families may experience particularly close and satisfying relationships with their mothers. In contrast to some previous research on children indicating that divorced custodial parents are less affectionate and more punitive than married parents (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Thomson et al., 1992), and although previous research has not documented statistically significant positive effects of divorce on mother-child relationships, the current results are consistent with some previous research documenting close, intimate relationships between mothers and young adult children in divorced families (Arditti, 1999). Previous research indicates that children in divorced families express appreciation for mothers’ hard work and concern for mothers’ well-being (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989); that mothers in divorced families engage in more frequent interaction, more discussion, and greater companionship with children compared to mothers in intact families (Guttman, 1993); and that divorced mothers are more likely to see their children as sources of emotional support (Arditti & Madden-Derdich, 1995). Although these effects have sometimes been interpreted as harmful, resulting in children’s “role disturbance” or less support and guidance from mothers (Jacobvitz & Bush, 1996; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), the current results support the contention that divorce results in a particular closeness between mothers and children as they struggle to adapt to changes accompanying divorce. Over time, this closeness results in more satisfying relationships with mothers in young adulthood compared to individuals raised in intact families.

Another apparently positive effect of divorce on offspring is a marked independence in young adulthood. Young adults from divorced families reported significantly greater independence facilitated by both parents. Children in divorced families are often faced with additional household chores and caretaking responsibilities for younger siblings, and are thus likely to become more independent at an earlier age (Weiss, 1979). As mothers become more involved in financially supporting the family, and as fathers are less available, children are expected to be more self-reliant. Although such role shifts are sometimes interpreted as detrimental for offspring (Hewlitt, 1991; Thurer, 1994), other research indicates that young adults from divorced families understand the necessity of increasing self-reliance and report enjoying benefits of greater independence and decision making (Arditti, 1999). The current results indicate that both parents in divorced families rely on children’s independence to a higher degree than do married parents, resulting in more independent young adult children.
Another interesting finding in contrast to previous research documenting negative effects of divorce on social functioning in adulthood (Amato & Keith, 1991; Bolgar et al., 1995; Booth & Edwards, 1990) is that young adults from divorced families reported significantly greater numbers of perceived available (although not more satisfying) social supports than young adults from intact families. Perhaps young adults with divorced parents adapt to less parental availability and other changes within the divorced family by becoming more reliant on social support outside the family. Research also suggests that young adults from divorced families are likely to cohabit and marry earlier than young adults from married families (Booth & Edwards, 1990), perhaps resulting in increased reliance on lovers, spouses, and in-laws as sources of social support at an earlier age.

A final unique contribution of the current study is the finding that young adults from divorced families reported significantly lower anxiety about participating in personal relationships than those from intact families. These results are perhaps most clearly understood in terms of divorce as a demonstration of relationship commitment (or lack thereof) by parents (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Children who experience parents’ divorce learn that marriages do not necessarily last forever, and they may interpret divorce as an indication that parents were unwilling to work out problems or maintain the marriage through difficult times. Young adults who experienced divorce feel less anxiety about participating in relationships because they have survived relationship dissolution, and perhaps have seen their parents become happier after divorce. Although less anxiety in relationships may be positive for young adults of divorce, it may also reflect their willingness to terminate dissatisfying relationships, including their own marriages (Amato, 1996; Booth & Edwards, 1990).

Social support and parent-child relationships. The current results clearly demonstrate the continuing importance of parent-child relationships to social functioning in adulthood. Perceptions of available social support and satisfaction with support were positively related to all aspects of both parent-child relationships for young adults from intact families, suggesting that high quality relationships with parents are associated with broader, more satisfying social support networks that are likely adaptive for young adults. Although perceptions of social support were also positively related to mother-child relationships for individuals from divorced families, social support was less strongly associated with father-child relationships, suggesting that relationships with fathers are less relevant to perceptions of social support for young adults from divorced families. Interestingly, for both young adults from intact and divorced families, feelings of anxiety in personal relationships were significantly negatively related to quality of father-child relationships. In contrast, quality of relationships with mothers was not significantly related to relationship anxiety. Perhaps relationships with fathers are viewed as more voluntary by young adults than relationships with mothers, with high quality, positive relationships with fathers indicative of individual competence and desirability in relationships, and low quality relationships indicative of fathers’ rejection or unwillingness to form close relationships with offspring. As such, young adults with poor relationships with fathers experience greater anxiety in relationships because a primary parental relationship is insecure or dissatisfying. Relationships with mothers, in contrast, are perhaps viewed as more involuntary or expected, such that individual performance or competency in the relationship is less important to quality of interactions with mothers. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that difficult relationships with fathers are associated with anxious attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Although a complete explanation depends on future research, the current results suggest that parent-child relationships are important to the quality and individual experience of other personal relationships in young adulthood.
Study limitations and future research

There are limitations to the present study. First, custody arrangements and frequency of contact with fathers were not specifically assessed for individuals from divorced families. Assessment of custody and visitation factors may allow examinations of how consistent visitation with fathers may potentially ameliorate the negative effects of divorce on father-child relationships. Although research indicates that frequency of contact with noncustodial fathers is not consistently related to children’s well-being (Amato, 1993), studies in the 1990s of noncustodial fathers are more likely to report positive effects of contact with fathers (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Research also indicates that frequent visitations with fathers who engage in high-quality parenting are likely to lead to improved outcomes for offspring in adulthood (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Given the complexity of custody arrangements, including variations in frequency of visitation, changes in physical custody over time, joint/primary legal custody, and so on, future research should explore effects of specific custody arrangements on outcomes for offspring, particularly the quality of father–adult child relationships.

Another potential limitation concerns the measurement of parental conflict. The current study directly assessed young adults’ recollections of the overall frequency of conflict between parents, including conflict about various specific issues (e.g., finances, drinking/drug use, etc.) and physical conflict. Research indicates that retrospective accounts may be affected by memory lapses and current attitudes (Lewinsohn & Rosenbaum, 1987). Previous studies have also relied on recollections of parental conflict in examining young adulthood outcomes (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1991), and others have used reports of marital conflict from parents when respondents were children (Booth & Amato, 1994). Whether reports by parents describing marital conflict at one point in time differ substantially from young adults’ experience of and perceptions of overall conflict throughout their parents’ marriage is unclear. Clearly, there may be problems with the validity of conflict reports from parents due to social desirability biases, especially concerning effects of conflict on children. From a life span developmental perspective, the perceptions of young adults of the events and qualities of their parents’ relationship are important to a variety of aspects of well-being, including relationships with parents (Amato & Booth, 1991; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). A basic premise of social cognition theory is that individuals build cognitive representations of critical events, objects, and people (including themselves) that are heavily relied on as the bases of perception, interpretation, and subsequent behavior (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The current results suggest that young adults’ perceptions and understanding of parental conflict are meaningfully related to a variety of important social outcomes in young adulthood.

A final potential limitation of the current study concerns the college student population used to make up the current sample. It is possible that young adults from divorced families in the current sample could be classified as “survivors” of divorce, considering that they were undergraduate or graduate students, and considering the fact that in general, individuals from divorced families are likely to complete less formal education than those from intact families (McLanahan, 1988). Although most current participants were students at a large, socioeconomically and ethnically diverse state university, young adults in the current sample may show more overall positive, adaptive responses to divorce compared to young adults from divorced families in the general population. Some researchers have concluded that a “substantial minority” of children cope constructively with divorce, adapting in positive ways as a result of the experience (Hetherington, 1989). Future research may focus more closely on the adaptive responses of divorce “survivors” over the life span, including
broader examinations of positive outcomes for young adult children of divorce.

In conclusion, as the current population of children from divorced families moves into adulthood, positive outcomes associated with divorce may become increasingly evident. However, whether outcomes for offspring are positive or negative, the family system clearly serves as the primary model of personal relationships, with social interaction patterns and relationship expectations learned within the family serving as the bases of behaviors and cognitions within other personal relationships. As the family system continues to influence the quality of personal relationships across the life span, the experience of parental marital conflict and divorce result in long-term consequences for social outcomes and personal relationship functioning in young adulthood. Understanding the influence of parents and their relationship on individual expectations, beliefs, and behaviors in personal relationships remains an important area of focus for future research.

References


Appendix: Sample Items from Measures Used

Social Support Questionnaire
(1 = very dissatisfied; 6 = very satisfied)

SSQ-N (Number)
Who can you really count on to listen to when you need to talk?
Whose lives do you feel that you are an important part of?
Who can you talk to with frankly, without having to watch what you say?

SSQ-S (Satisfaction)
How satisfied you are with the overall support you have in terms of the situation in the item?

Relationship Awareness Scale—Anxiety
(0 = not at all characteristic of me; 4 = very characteristic of me)

RAS-A
I usually feel quite anxious about my close relationships.
It takes me time to get over my shyness in a new close relationship.
I am somewhat awkward and tense in close relationships.

Parental Attachment Questionnaire
(1 = not at all; 5 = very much)

PAQ Affect
My mother/father understands my problems and concerns.
My mother/father is sensitive to my feelings and needs.
My mother/father has no idea what I am thinking or feeling.†

PAQ Independence
My mother/father respects my privacy.
My mother/father likes me to make my own decisions.
My mother/father limits my independence.†

PAQ Support
My mother/father gives me advice when I ask for it.
My mother/father protects me from danger and difficulty.
My mother/father sees the world differently than I do.†

Parental Conflict Scale
(1 = rarely; 2 = sometimes; 3 = often; 4 = frequently)

PCS
How often did your parents argue about chores and responsibilities?
How often did your parents argue about money?
How often did the arguments between your parents become physical?

† Item is reverse-scored.
Copyright of Personal Relationships is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.