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IMPACT OF INTER-PARENTAL CHARACTER ASSASSINATION ON CHILDREN POST-DIVORCE

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IMPACT OF INTER-PARENTAL CHARACTER ASSASSINATION ON

CHILDREN POST-DIVORCE

A Thesis

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By

Holly Keller

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ABSTRACT

IMPACT OF INTER-PARENTAL CHARACTER ASSASSINATION ON

CHILDREN POST-DIVORCE

By

Holly Keller

Summer 2017

Divorce is a common phenomenon in the United States that constitutes as a crisis

for many families (Esmaeili & Yaacob, 2011; Heatherington, 1979). Kelly (2003)

estimates that about 8 to 15 percent of parents continue high conflict anywhere

from 2 to 3 years post-divorce. Post-divorce parental conflict has been found to be

more important in influencing the functioning of adolescents than parental divorce

(Amato, 2001). The purpose of this study is to investigate if adult children will

generally tend to join in coalition with a same sex primary custodial parent

regardless of their parent's role in character assassination. Eastern Washington

University undergraduate students were recruited from the Psychology

department to complete a survey made available to them through SONA Systems

Department Recruiting system. Data was analyzed using a paired-sample t-test

and an independent-sample t-test. The results indicated that female adult children

from divorced families tended to assign significantly more positive attributes to

their mothers and more negative attributes to their fathers even though they

reported witnessing their mothers engaging in character assassination more often.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Divorce Statistics

Past research has identified divorce as a common phenomenon in the

United States that results in significant individual emotional distress for all parties

involved (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Esmaeili & Yaacob, 2011; Heatherington,

1979). A study by Spainer and Thompson (1984) indicated that almost 30 percent

of 100 divorced men and women reported feeling divorce was the most tragic

thing to ever happen to them. In America, half of all first marriages end in

divorce, resulting in about 2,400 divorces per day, and one divorce every 36

seconds (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Therefore, nearly 1 million children witness

the dissolution of their parent's marriage per year (Fagan & Rector, 2000).

Conflict Associated with Divorce

Marital discord is most likely to occur right before parental separation due

to overt/covert mistrust (Albrecht, 1980; DeFrain & Elrick, 1981), often resulting

in physical conflict (Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991). Frustenberg and Cherlin

(1991) discovered that 56 percent of parents post-separation indicated frequent

fighting while another 29 percent indicated they fought at least occasionally and

of those parents more than a third said that the fights became physical.

Approximately 20 percent of parents who engaged in physical altercations were

seriously injured (Frustenber & Cherlin (1991).

There is also considerable evidence that most children experience high

conflict in the form of verbal and physical violence during parents' divorce and

are present about 67 percent of the time during the conflicts (Amato, 2001; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Kelly & Emery, 2003). Children may witness acts of violence between their parents ranging from pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, spitting, and throwing objects up to dangerous physical altercations that include threats and weapons being brandished (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). The most common type of disputes that occur between feuding parents is verbal abuse: insulting, belittling, and demeaning exchanges that occur on average 1 time per week (Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

Inter-parental conflict post-divorce is defined as parents' inability to politely communicate, continued battles, and hostility (Neff & Cooper, 2004 as cited in Esmaeili, & Yaccob, 2011). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985) reported that two months post-divorce about two-thirds of the exchanges between couples involved conflict. Some underlying issues that contribute to legal conflict uncovered by Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) involved both the father's and mother's concern over the child's wellbeing in a household, father's hostility towards the mother, and discrepancies pertaining to pre-separation child rearing roles. Essentially their findings suggest that pre-existence of overt conflict and angry communication diminishes the probability that parents will be able to co-parent collaboratively in the future (Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).

Another study by Kressel and colleagues (1980) supports that couples who didn't seek mediation to assist with the process of divorce tended to experience greater dissatisfaction and engage in more conflicts post-divorce. Post-divorce (generally after the first year or two), there is a decrease in conflict and an

increase in disengagement between ex-spouses (Frustenberg & Cherlin, 1991) which function to limit conflict between them. However, a small percent of parents continues to experience high conflict after divorce (Kelly, 2003; Kressel, Jaffe, Tuchman, Watson, & Deutsch, 1980). Kelly (2003) estimates that about 8 to 15 percent of parents continue high conflict anywhere from 2 to 3 years post-divorce. Spainer and Thompson (1984) as well as Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) previously estimated that the minority of parents that continue high conflict after divorce is as high as 10 to 25 percent.

Even though couples may continue to engage in conflict post-divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Kelly, 2003) many parents try to avoid conflict (Ahrons, 1981). In fact, divorced parents tend to be more likely than married spouses to use avoidance in response to conflict (Camara & Resnick, 1989). Conflict between parents post-divorce is more common in the form of hostility or ongoing negative attitudes towards one another (Forehand & McCombs, 1990). When overt conflicts do occur between divorced parents, it is more likely to involve verbal attacks and less likely to involve compromise (Camara & Resnick, 1989).

Character Assassination

One form of verbal attack is character assassination (CA), which, when successfully used, discredits the opposing party's argument, shows them to be weak, damages their character, often demonizes them, and in some cases, even dehumanizes them (Character Assassination, n.d.). Character assassination is a purposeful attempt to critically damage another's reputation, character, social

standing, and successes of the other person and involves two individuals where one is the victim and the other is the assassin (Shiraev, n.d.). The victim is generally the one who is the target of the attack and the assassin is generally the one using a specific means of attack such as media, a written statement, or dissemination of disinformation through rumors (Shiraev. n.d.). CA attacks usually targets the victim's personality or character (Shiraev, n.d.). An example of how character assassination may occur within a family system that is going through divorce is by one spouse sharing information with significant others, family, or friends which functions to draw them in to participate in constructing negative views of the ex-spouse by blaming him or her for most of the problems (Johnston & Campbell, 1988).

Parents engaged in high conflict disputes may even involve their children in the assassination of the other parent's character by telling them lies (Turkat, 1995). The example Turkat (1995) provided is a situation where a mother had her child hand her father unpaid bills when he visited after the mother had first told her daughter that her father had not provided any financial support to the family. Other ways in which children are used by parents to engage in character assassination is by asking them to collect information, spy on the other parent, communicate threats, and engage in harassment (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). In other cases, parents engage in character assassination by making false claims of abuse against the other parent (Turkat, 1995). Character assassination is also likely to occur during the legal process of a divorce within the court room by attorney's advising one spouse to collect information that would substantiate

claims of neglect, abuse, physical violence, emotional or mental incompetence to help their client win their case (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Nye, 1957).

Impact of Post-Divorce Conflict on Children

Past research has provided evidence in support of divorce being a significant stressor for children (Leupintz, 1979). High inter-parental conflict following divorce can be experienced as traumatic and extremely stressful for both children and adolescents (Arnett, 2007; Emery, Otto, & Donohue, 2005). Research has provided support for parent divorce being a significant risk factor for child adjustment problems (Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Heatherington, 1979) especially internalizing problems such as depression, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance (Amato, 2001; Margolin & Gordis, 2004). When it comes to internalizing problems, marital conflict is more likely to predict internalizing issues among preadolescent females compared to males (Buchanan et al., 1996; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991). Cui and colleagues (2007) studied the relationship between marital functioning and adolescent maladjustment by interviewing 451 early adolescents and their families concluding parental conflict related to child rearing predicted adolescent depressive symptoms and delinquency.

Children caught in the middle of their parent's distressed marriage are likely to display behavior that include submissive distress responses by becoming highly anxious, starring hopelessly, or freezing while others cry (Johnston &Campbell, 1988). Some common coping techniques to combat the stressors of inter-parental conflict engaged in by children across varying developmental stages

include avoidance, mirroring parent's needs to get theirs met, deflection by distracting their parents from their conflict, and getting involved by telling parents to stop fighting.

Behavioral difficulties may more often be seen among males that are school-aged compared to females that are school-aged (Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Evidence in support of increased observed behavioral difficulties among school-aged males also supports that inter-parental conflict is more likely to be a predecessor of behavior problems among males prior to adolescence than for females prior to adolescence (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox 1985). Other research has indicated that both male and female children do tend to show increases in aggression when they are from families of divorce (Tuckman & Regan, 1966). Tuckman and Regan (1966) discovered that both sexes displayed an increase in aggression post-divorce but males tend to be more aggressive than females at all ages and the increase in girls goes unnoticed because it generally doesn't exceed acceptable limits compared to the level of aggression engaged in by males.

Child Relationship with Parent

Much of the past research has investigated the impact inter-parental conflict has on children, providing support for the spill-over hypothesis (Esmaeili & Yaccob, 2011). The spill over hypothesis is best described as problems that arise between parents spilling over and contaminate the interactions between parent and child (Cox, Paley, & Harter (n.d.); Melete, 2007). For example, inter-parental conflict has a tendency to negatively affect the parent child relationship

in some ways including parents becoming more hostile, aggressive, or withdrawn from their child resulting in inconsistent parental control and discipline of their child (Esmaeili & Yaacob, 2011).

Children whom frequently become enmeshed in their parents' discord by witnessing mutual belittling and criticism are often pressured by one or both parents to choose between the opposing sides to form a hostile alliance against the other parent (Hetherington, 1979). Children's witnessing of these conflict tactics often experience contention, questioning, changes of perception, and de-idealization of their parents (Heatherington, 1972). Heatherington's (1972) study explored the effects of father absence by interviewing 24 girls 13 to 17 years old using measures with ratings based on a 7-point scale that assessed quality of relationship, closeness, positive attitude and level of conflict they had with each parent. The researcher concluded that girls of divorcees reported having more negative attitudes, towards their father, experienced more conflict with their father, and perceived him as less competent.

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) created a longitudinal study that followed 63 girls from divorced families for 10 years to examine the parent child relationship by asking them questions pertaining to their mother and father about their perceived quality of relationship which included: mutual affection, firm but flexible limits, age-appropriate support, and clarity of generational boundaries by using clinical observation and inferences with formal statistical analysis immediately after the divorce, 18 months, five years, and 10 years. They found post-divorce relationships were generally better with the mothers than the fathers.

Specifically, 80 percent of the girls had good relationships with their mother while less than 50 percent had good relationships with their father when they were in the custody of their mother. After 10 years close to two-thirds had good relationships with their mothers and only one-quarter had good relationships with their father.

In summary, past research has found that negative interactions between parents tends to spill over and damage the parent's relationship with their child. The dynamics conflict creates between parents often results in children becoming absorbed due to pressure from one or both parents to get involved changing the child's perceptions. Important conclusions that can be drawn from Heatherington (1972) and Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) studies is that female children tend to side with their mother and have poor relationships with their father due to perceiving him as less competent.

Current Study

Even when parents hold negative views of one another and don't actively engage in character assassination, children's relationship with the opposing parent is negatively impacted due to the nature of conflict dynamics which generally places them in a position that requires a side to be chosen (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989). The current study is expanding the literature by investigating how the dynamics of severe conflict post-divorce impacts the child's perspective of their parents. This study will also help explore how the child's perception of both parents effects who they tend to side with after witnessing their parents engage in verbal conflict. To more accurately measure verbal conflict

defined as character assassination, this study has added supplemental questions to the Post-Divorce Conflict Scale.

Another asset of the study is the reliability of the measures used to assess the child's perspective compared to those used in Heatherington's (1972) study and Wallerstein and Corbin's (1989) study which only had a moderate level of reliability based on the measures included in the study and face validity. Wallerstein and Corbin's (1989) study has face validity due to creating their own measures that appeared to assess their construct quality of relationship with both parents which included: mutual affection, firm but flexible limits, age-appropriate support, and clarity of generational boundaries by conducting semi-structured interviews with each family. Moderate reliability of .82 for Hetherington's study was established for the constructs perceived warmth of mother, conflict with mother closeness to mother, similarity to mother and father, positive attitude to father, warmth of father, and competence of father by comparing how consistently the two judges gave similar ratings using a 7-point scale. The current study uses one task and a subscale that both have good reliability.

Based on the severity of the impact a parent's negative view of the other has on the parent child relationship, it is imperative for more research on verbal violence in the form of inter-parental character assassination to be conducted to gain a better understanding on the full extent of the harmful effects it can potentially have on children. The purpose of this study is to further investigate the correlational relationship between inter-parental conflict related to character assassination. I hypothesize that children will primarily join in coalition with a

same sex primary custodial parent regardless of their parent's role in character assassination based on past literature indicating children tend to align with the same sex parent (Hetherington, 1972; Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989).

Method

Participants

We recruited 139 participants from the undergraduate courses at Eastern Washington University. However, 2 participants were eliminated due to incomplete answers. Participants were recruited through SONA Systems Department Recruiting system in exchange for partial course credit. Participants under the age of 18 were excluded from the study. Of the participants 114 were female and 20 were male. The mean age of participants was 21.

Materials

Demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire was comprised of items pertaining to personal characteristics and description of living arrangements in childhood. Questions about personal characteristics asked about the participants age, gender, and marital status. Questions about the participants living arrangements in childhood included items about who participants primarily lived with, if their parents were married, if their parents got divorced, and how old they were if their parents did get divorced.

Word Valence Task. In the current study participants were asked to select as many descriptive words as they wanted from a list of 10 positive and 10 negative words to describe each parent. Words were selected from Anderson's (1968) work on adjective ratings. Reliability for Anderson's study was established

by comparing participants ratings of likableness to the ratings assigned by other participants from three different studies.

The list of positive words and valence scores include: trusting (1.2), forgiving (1.03), optimistic (1.30), dependable (0.66), easy-going (1.20), calm (0.84), good-tempered (1.02) attentive (0.84), gracious (1.04), and positive (1.28) (Anderson, 1968). The average valence score for the positive word list is equal to 1.04. The list of negative words and valence scores include: deceptive (1.01), domineering (1.52), intolerant (0.97), angry (0.90), cold (0.94), hot-headed (1.09), critical (1.46), pessimistic (1.06), neglectful (0.59), and immature (0.88) (Anderson, 1968). The average valence score for the negative word list is equal to 1.04. Respondents were instructed to select as many words from either list that he or she thought best described the mother or the father. The purpose of the Word Valence Task is to further assess which parent the child primarily aligns with based on their selection of positive or negative words. Moreover, the totals of positive and negative words selected indicate the adult child's perception of the parent.

Post-Divorce Parental Conflict Scale. The Post-Divorce Parental Conflict Scale is an 82 item self-report questionnaire with two main subscales, Mother and Father, designed by Sonnenblick and Schwarz (1992). It is the only available instrument created to assess post-divorce conflict from the perspective of the child (Morris & West, 2000). The scale was created to measure type and level of parental conflict post-divorce from the child's perspective in response to Sonnenblick and Schwarz (1992) wanting to investigate the long-term impact of

divorce upon children separating, the effects of divorce from the effect of parental conflict. Reliability was established by using rational factor analytic, and internal consistency methods for all three of the subscales. The patterns of correlations between each subscale and other measures support the validity of each of the subscales constructs verbal, physical, and indirect hostility.

The original measure requires participants to think about the past 12 months and previous year to rate each parent's behavior towards one another using a 5 point Likert scale with, 1 being "The event has never happened," to 5 being "This happened every day" (Morris & West, 2000). For the purposes of this study, the instructions were modified to indicate the frequency at which both parents engaged in behaviors with each other and particularly think whether the interactions occurred in front of them or their siblings or in ear shot. Participants responded to items indicating it they happened never, seldom (1 x per year), occasionally (1 x per month), frequently (1 x per week), or constantly (every day).

Items are then divided into 3 sub scales for type of conflict which includes, Verbal Hostility, Physical Hostility, and Indirect Hostility. The items of the scale progress in intensity from low hostility to intense hostility (Morris & West, 2000). Examples of questions pertaining to verbal conflict are: my mother disagreed with my father, my father brought in old issues from the past during arguments, and my mother challenged my father about how he spent money. (Morris & West, 2000). Coefficient alphas for Mother and Father subscales have been found to range from .80 to .92.

For the current study only the Verbal Hostility subscale was used and it was modified to include 10 questions specifically addressing character assassination. For character assassination questions, participants were informed that some of the questions will ask them about comments their mother or father made about the other directly to them or in front of their sibling. Participants also used the same rating scale to indicate frequency previously mentioned. Examples of questions about character assassination are: My father told me my mother did illegal things, my mother told me my father didn't want me, and my father told me my mother abused drugs or alcohol.

Procedure

Participants responded to an online measure through SONA's recruiting system at their leisure. The online survey consisted of the above questionnaire with the demographic questionnaire first, followed by the Post-Divorce Parental Conflict Scale. Before beginning the online survey, participants were informed through SONA System Department recruiting system that the study primarily concerns childhood experiences and characteristics. The participants were also ensured their identity and responses would remain anonymous. They were then instructed to read the instructions before completing the questionnaires. All procedures were approved by the university's Internal Review Board and were in accordance with the American Psychological Association ethical guidelines.

Results

Additional Demographic Details

Of the 135 participants 53.53 percent were from intact families and 20

percent were from divorced families. Of the divorced families 22 of the

respondents were female while only 5 were male. Of the divorced family

respondents, 24.1 percent lived mostly with their mother while 7.3 percent lived

mostly with their father. 29.9 percent of participants said their mother was the

primary custodial parent while 7.3 percent of participants said their father was the

primary custodial parent. Participants were on average less than 1 to 5 years old at

the time of their parents divorce.

Analyses on Adult Children from Divorced Families

Word Valence Task. The Word Valence Task was scored by totaling the

number of positive and negative words for each the mother and the father for

female respondents from divorced families. The sample did not contain enough

males from divorced families to include them in the analysis. Two paired-sample

t-tests were performed to test for positive/negative word differences for both the

mother and the father. Two independent-sample t-tests were also conducted to test

for differences in positive words comparing mother vs. father and differences in

negative words comparing mother vs. father.

The mean number of negative adjectives participants chose to describe

their biological mother (m = 1.59; sd = 1.869) differed from the mean number of

positive adjectives chosen (m = 4.55; sd = 2.97) with the test results of $t(21)$ =

3.156, p = .005). In contrast, the mean of negative adjectives selected to describe

their biological father 2.64 (*sd* = 2.13) was not significantly different compared to the mean of positive adjectives 3.64 (*sd* = 3.30) with a *t*(21) = .89, *p* = .381). These two findings were expected and is congruent with the hypothesis that children will tend to align with the same sex parent since these analyses were conducted only on female respondents to the survey.

Verbal Conflict and Character Assassination. The Post-Divorce Parental Conflict Scale was calculated by adding the ratings participants gave using the 5-point scale. A Character Assassination (CA) subscale was also created by totaling the responses on the ten created character assassination questions. Using a paired sample t-tests, results indicated that respondents felt their mothers engaged in both more verbal conflict and character assassination than did their fathers. Specifically, the mean from participants who reported witnessing their mother engage in verbal conflict (m = 37.36; *sd* = 14.60) was significantly higher than the mean of participants who reported their father engage in the same behavior (m = 33.58; *sd* = 13.37) and a *t*(114) = 3.11, *p* = .002). Participants also reported that their mothers engaged in more CA with a mean of 11.41; *sd* = 5.23 compared to participants who reported their father engaged in CA with a mean of 10.06; *sd* = 3.67 where *t*(122) = 3.63 *p* <.001). These results were not expected and no hypothesis was constructed regarding which parent was more likely to engage in CA.

Feelings about Parents and Parental Contact. The mean of participants from divorced families who reported having contact with their mother was (m = 5.23; *sd* = .87) significantly higher than the mean of participants who had contact

with their father (m = 3.91, *sd* = 1.41) with *t*(21) = 3.47, *p* = .002). There was no significant difference between the means of participants from divorced families who respected their mother (m = 4.23; *sd* = 1.11) compared to father (m = 3.77; *sd* = 1.11) with a *t*(21) = 3.47, *p* = .188). There was also no significant difference between the means of participants from divorced families who wanted to model their mother (m = 3.36; *sd* = 1.26) compared to father (m = 2.86; *sd* = 1.39) where *t*(21) = 1.33, *p* = .198).

Adult Children from Divorced Families vs. Adult Children from Intact Married Families

Word Valence Task. Generally, participants from divorced families vs. married families tended to choose fewer positive adjectives to describe their mother. There was no difference in the number of negative adjectives participants chose to describe their mother when comparing participants whose parents were divorced vs. married. Participants from divorced families compared to married families also tended to choose significantly fewer positive adjectives and more negative adjectives to describe their father.

The mean of participants who chose positive adjectives to describe their mother (m = 4.07; *sd* = 2.93) was only mariginally different from the mean of participants from married families (m = 5.39; *sd* = 3.10) with a (*t*(97) = -1.91 *p* = .059). Interestingly, the mean of participants who chose negative words to describe their mother (m = 2.00; *sd* = 2.08) was not significantly different from participants with married families (m = 1.58; *sd* = 2.13) and a *t*(97) = .87, *p* = .385). Not surprisingly, the mean of participants from divorced families who

chose positive words to describe their father (m = 3.44; *sd* = 3.06) was significantly different from the mean of participants whose parents were married (m = 5.25; *sd* = 2.97) where *t*(97) = -2.67, *p* = .009). There was also a significant difference between the means of participants who chose negative words to describe their father from divorced families (m = 2.67; *sd* = 2.11) compared to participants from married families (m = 1.57; *sd* = 1.88) where (*t*(97) = 2.50, *p* = .014).

There was no hypothesis regarding which parent children would align with when comparing participants from divorced vs. married families. It was not surprising that participants from divorced families chose more negative adjectives to describe their mother compared to participants whose parents were married. It was very surprising that participants from divorced families vs. married families chose negative words at the same rate. It would be expected based on the means of participants from divorced vs. married families who reported witnessing their mothers engage in more verbal conflict and CA would also tend to select more negative adjectives to describe their mother. All the other results were expected based on the means comparing participants reporting of witnessing their mother and father from divorced vs. married families engage in more verbal conflict as well as CA.

Verbal Conflict and Character Assassination. The mean of participants from divorced families who witnessed their mother engage in verbal conflict (m = 2.54; *sd* = .89) was significantly higher than the mean of participants from married families who reported witnessing the same thing (m = 2.02; *sd* = .78)

where $t(88) = 2.75$, $p = .007$). The mean for participants from divorced families who reported witnessing their fathers engage in verbal conflict was also significantly higher (m = 35.85; sd = 10.24) than the mean for participants from married families who reported witnessing their dad engaging in the same behavior (m = 29.49; sd = 11.65) where $t(91) = 2.44$, $p = .017$).

The results from CA indicate, the mean from participants with divorced parents who reported witnessing their mother engage in CA (m = 12.85; sd = 4.95) differed significantly from the mean of participants with married parents who reported the same thing (m = 10.10; sd = 4.33) with a $t(92) = 2.64$, $p = .010$). Similarly, the mean from participants with divorced parents who reported witnessing their father engage in CA (m = 10.78; sd = 3.67) differed significantly from the mean number of participants with married parents (m = 9.19; sd = 3.20) and a $t(92) = 2.08$, $p = .041$). There was no hypothesis pertaining to comparing children from divorced families vs. married families and which children would report witnessing their parents engage in more verbal conflict as well as CA. It does make sense that divorced parents would tend to engage in more verbal conflict as well as CA compared to married parents.

Feelings about Parents and Parental Contact. The mean from participants who reported having contact with their mother from divorced families (m= 5.15; sd = .82) did not differ significantly from participants from married families (m = 5.19; sd = 1.27) where $t(95) = -.14$, $p = .887$). Vastly different was the mean from participants from divorced families who reported having contact

with their father (m = 3.89; *sd* = 1.48) compared to the mean of participants from

married families (m = 4.87; *sd* = 1.44) and *t*(95) = -2.96, *p* = .004)

Noticeably different was the mean of participants from divorced families

who reported having respect for their father (m = 3.78; *sd* = 1.09) compared to

participants from married families (m = 4.49; *sd* = .94) with a *t*(95) = -3.17, *p* =

.002. In contrast, the mean of participants from divorced families who had respect

for their mother (m = 4.04; *sd* = 1.26) was not different compared to participants

from married families (m = 3.54; *sd* = 1.27) with (*t*(95) = -.948, *p* = .345). There

was a significant difference in the mean of participants from divorced families

who reported wanting to model their father (m = 2.78; *sd* = 1.34) compared to

participants from married families (m = 3.79; *sd* = 1.20) where (*t*(95) = -3.58, *p* =

.001). Lastly, the mean of participants from divorced families that wanted to

model their mother (m = 3.15; *sd* = 1.32) did not differ significantly compared to

participants from married families (m = 3.54; *sd* = 1.27) where *t*(95) = -1.36), *p* =

.178).

Discussion

Congruent with the hypothesis female children aligned with their mother

even though they reported witnessing their mother engaged in more character

assassination post-divorced more often than their father. This is consistent with

past literature on which parent children tend to align with (Heatherington, 1972;

Wallerstein &Corbin, 1989). One possible explanation for why female children

tend to report witnessing their mother engage in character assassination more

often than their father is because they also report having more contact with their

mother. Adult children having more contact with their mother compared to father may function to increase interactions they have with their mother including positive and cultivate the expectation that their mother is dependable. The pattern of dependability created through increased contact is also likely to play a role in the child developing a positive view of their mother and result in their alignment with her.

It was puzzling that adult female participants aligned with their mother while also reporting no difference in the amount of respect or wanting to model their mother vs. their father. A possible explanation for these findings is that both respect and modeling are vastly different and unrelated constructs when compared to alignment. This could mean that an adult child aligning with one parent vs. the other is not influenced by their respect for either. Alignment may also not translate into adult children wanting to model one parent vs. the other but instead is a byproduct of increased contact. These findings are invaluable information because it provides direction for an area where more support can be provided to cultivate healthier relationships with both parents. The finding also provides support for the necessity of early intervention and support for the whole family because of the negative impact parents engaging in occasional character assassination has on the father's relationship with the child.

Other notable findings from the current study was divorced parents engaged in more verbal conflict and CA when compared to married parents. Divorced parents engaging in more verbal conflict and CA could have had an impact on how adult children tend to view their mother and father. Adult children

from divorced vs. married families tended to view their father more poorly indicated by choosing fewer positive and more negative words to describe him. Similarly, adult children from divorced vs. married families tended to view their mother less positively and no more negatively based on the fewer number of positive words and increase no difference in the amount of negative words participants chose to describe her.

It is also likely that children from divorced vs. married families having less contact with their father influenced how they viewed him. Adult children from divorced vs. married families had less respect for their father and wanted to model him less. It is very surprising that adult children from divorced vs. married families reported no difference in the amount of contact they had with their mother while they also reported wanting to model her less. Just has shocking was adult children from divorced vs. married families indicating that they respected their mother no less.

The contrasting results could be related to the child's perspective and who they blame for the divorce or align with during conflict. These findings suggest that it is imperative for families to have easy access to support to remediate the negative effects verbal conflict and CA can have on the family unit and the importance of each parent having contact with their child. However, the current study also suggest that much more research is needed to continue to better understand the full impact inter-parental conflict in the form of CA has on children and find best fit interventions to stave off damage to child parent relationships.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the population, sample, and design. Limitations pertaining to the population is related to participants consisting of college students. College students are generally not a good reflection of the general population therefore limiting the generalizability of this study. The specific sample of college students include participants from the university's psychology department and have a significant deficit in male participants compared to female participants. This deficit is likely to negatively impact the accurateness of the analysis of the dependent variable. In fact, the number of male participants was so low that the sample size was not large enough to analyze their responses.

Another limitation related to the sample that also negatively impacts the accurateness of the analysis of the independent variable is that males are generally not awarded custody of their children. Issues with males not being awarded custody of their children contributes to problems of generalizability with the general population further restricting the sample size for the dependent variable. Lastly limitations related to the design are due to the authors creating their own measure and altering the other therefore validity and reliability has not yet been established.

Future Directions

More research is desperately needed in general on the child's perspective when it comes to divorce and inter-parental conflict. Additional research is needed to explore if male children also tend to align with the same sex custodial

parent. It would be interesting to investigate if the child's alignment with one parent vs. the other is stable over time. The current study provides an opportunity for future studies looking at if witnessing inter-parental character assassination impacts the child's perspective of which parent is at fault for the divorce. It would also be important to investigate the long-term impact witnessing inter-parental character assassination has on adult children's own intimate relationships with others.

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Appendix

Experiences with Parents and Relationships

Demographic questions

The first set of questions ask you about some of your personal characteristics and descriptions of living arrangements in childhood.

1. What was your age at your last birthday? (please answer in a whole number such as 18, 19 and so on).

2. What is your gender?
   Male

   Female

   Transgender

   Other

3. Which of the following best describes your current marital status?
   Never married - Single not dating

   Never married - Single but dating

   Married

   Separated

   Divorced

   Widowed

4. Which of the following best represent your family living situation as you were growing up (in other words, before you left home for college or work)?
   lived with both my biological parents

   lived mostly with my mother

   lived mostly with my father

   lived with adoptive parent(s)

   lived with other relatives

   lived in a foster home or other similar situation

other

5. Were your biological parents married to one another?

   Yes

   No

6. Did your biological parents divorce one another?

   Yes

   No

7. How old were you when your parents divorced?

   less than 1 year to 5 Years-old

   6-10 Years-old

   11-15 Years-old

   16-20 Years-old

   20-30 Years-old

   30-40 Years-old

   over 40 years old

8. If under the age of 18 when your parents divorced, who was/is your primary custodial parent?

   Mother

   Father

   Other

9. Although your biological parents weren't married, did they live with one another?

   Yes

   No

10. Did your biological parents break up with one another on a permanent basis at any point?

    Yes

    No

11. How old were you when your biological parents broke up with one another?

less than 1 year to 5 Years-old

6-10 Years-old

11-15 Years-old

16-20 Years-old

20-30 Years-old

30-40 Years-old

over 40 years old

Mother's behavior toward father

For each of the following possible types of interactions, please indicate the frequency that your biological mother did the following to your biological father. Please think particularly of whether these interactions occurred in front of you or your siblings or with your earshot. Some of the questions will ask about comments that your mother made about your father directly to you or your siblings (whether he was present or not).

Frequency of Occurrence: Never, seldom (1 x per year), occasionally (1 x per month), frequently (1 x per week), or constantly (every day).

My Mother......

1. disagreed with things my father said.

2. brought in old issues from the past during arguments.

3. raised her voice while discussing issues with my father.

4. told my father he does not support his children.

5. challenged my father about how he spends money.

6. argued with my father about decisions related to me or my siblings.

7. nagged my father.

8. told my father how he makes her suffer.

9. said negative things about my father's relatives.

10. told my father things just to make him angry.

11. said that she can look after children better than he can.

12. said things to spite my mother.

13. insulted my mother.

14. shouted and screamed while discussing issues with my father.

15. called my father names.

16. told my father that she wished he would drop dead.

17. accused my father of not caring about me.

18. gave me messages to tell my father.

19. told me that my father didn't love me.

20. told me that my father was a "loser".

For the following question, please click and drag the characteristics from the provided list (on the left) that you feel best represent your mother. Please select as many characteristics from the list as you feel apply.

My Mother's Characteristics

Items

Trusting
Intolerant
Calm
Deceptive
Forgiving
Domineering
Optimistic
Angry
Dependable
Cold
Easy-going
Hot-headed
Good-tempered
Critical
Attentive
Pessimistic
Gracious
Neglectful
Positive
Immature

Father's behavior toward mother

For each of the following possible types of interactions, please indicate the frequency that your biological father did the following to your biological mother. Please think particularly of whether these interactions occurred in front of you or your siblings or with your earshot. Some of the questions will ask about comments that your father made about your mother directly to you or your siblings (whether he was present or not).

Frequency of Occurrence: Never, seldom (1 x per year), occasionally (1 x per month), frequently (1 x per week), or constantly (every day).

My father......

1. disagreed with things my mother said.

2. brought in old issues from the past during arguments.

3. raised his voice while discussing issues with my mother.

4. told my mother she does not support his children.

5. challenged my mother about how she spends money.

6. argued with my mother about decisions related to me or my siblings.

7. nagged my mother.

8. told my mother how she makes him suffer.

9. said negative things about my mother's relatives.

10. told my mother things just to make her angry.

11. said that he can look after children better than she can.

12. said things to spite my mother.

13. insulted my mother.

14. shouted and screamed while discussing issues with my mother.

15. called my mother names.

16. told my mother that he wished she would drop dead.

17. accused my mother of not caring about me.

18. gave me messages to tell my mother.

19. told me that my mother didn't love me.

20. told me that my mother was a "loser".

For the following question, please click and drag the characteristics from the provided list (on the left) that you feel best represent your father. Please select as many characteristics from the list as you feel apply.

My father's Characteristics

Items

Trusting
Intolerant
Calm
Deceptive
Forgiving
Domineering
Optimistic
Angry
Dependable
Cold
Easy-going
Hot-headed
Good-tempered
Critical
Attentive
Pessimistic
Gracious
Neglectful
Positive
Immature

Figure 1

Adult Children of Divorced Families - Evaluations of Mother/Father

(NOTE: DV = number of adjectives selected)

Error Bars: 95% CI
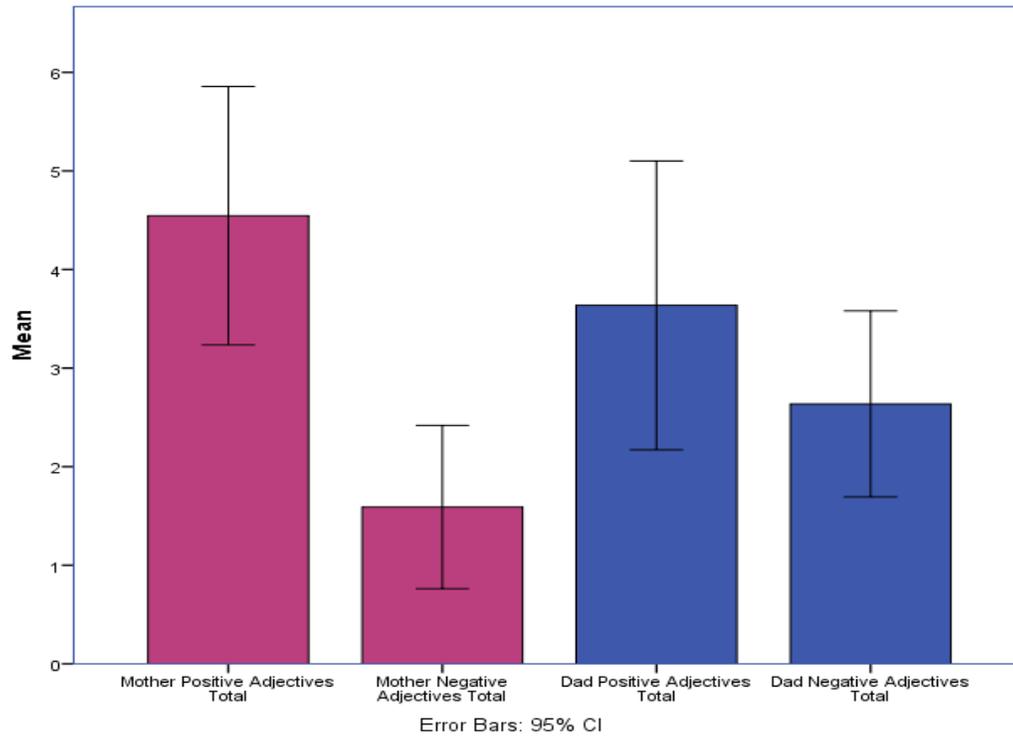
Figure 2

Adult Children from Divorced Families Witnessing of Mother vs. Father engage

in Verbal Conflict and CA
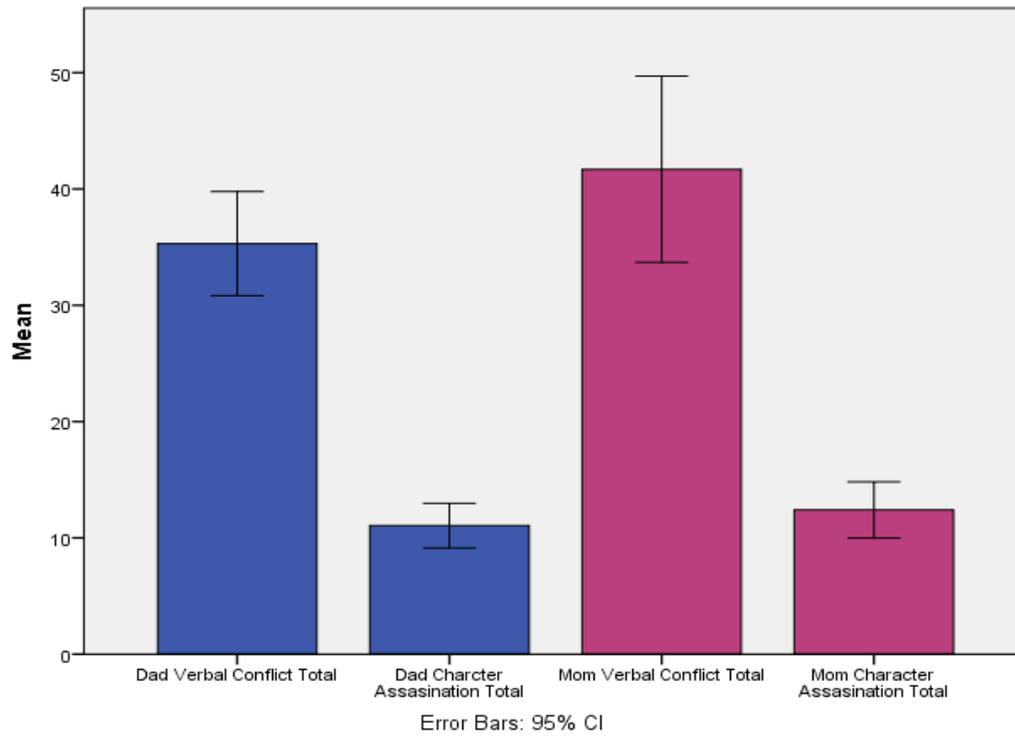
Figure 3

Adult Children of Divorced Families – Contact, Respect and Modeling of
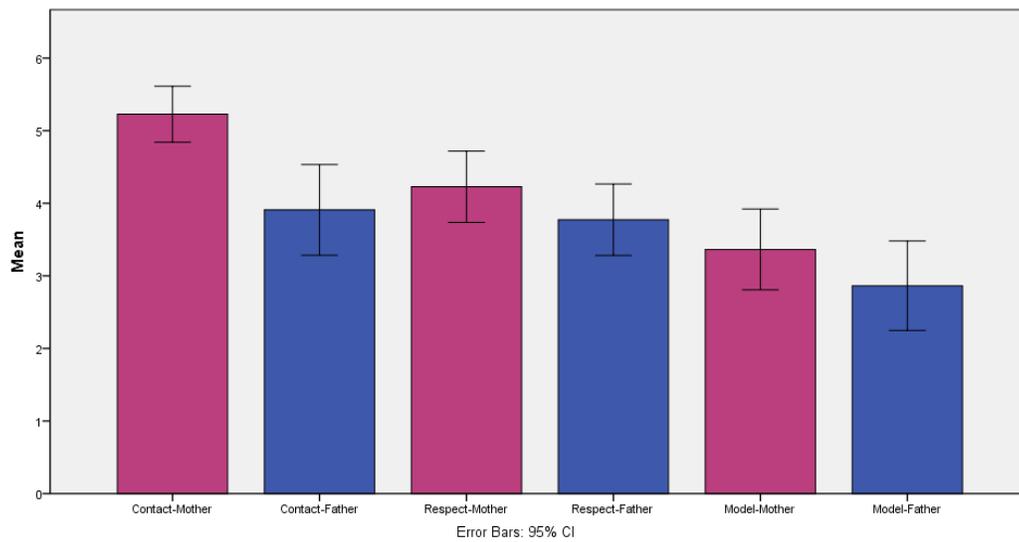
Mother/Father

(NOTE: 0=never and 6=constantly)

Error Bars: 95% CI

Figure 4

Adult Children of Divorced vs. Married Families - Evaluations of Mother/Father
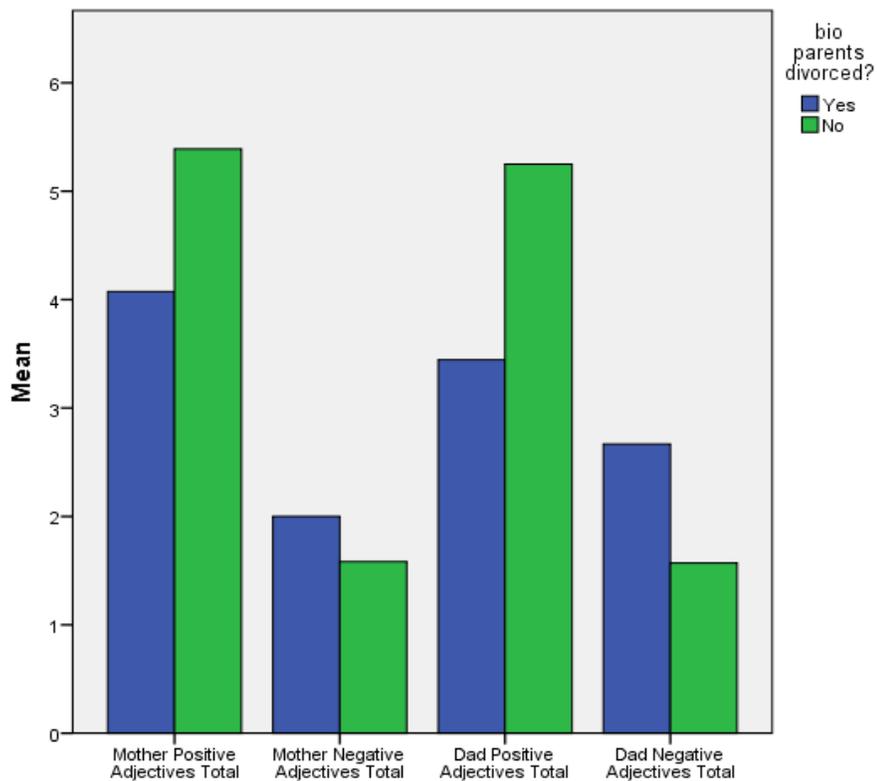
(NOTE: DV = number of adjectives selected)

Figure 5

Adult Children from Divorced vs. Married Families Witnessing of Mother vs.

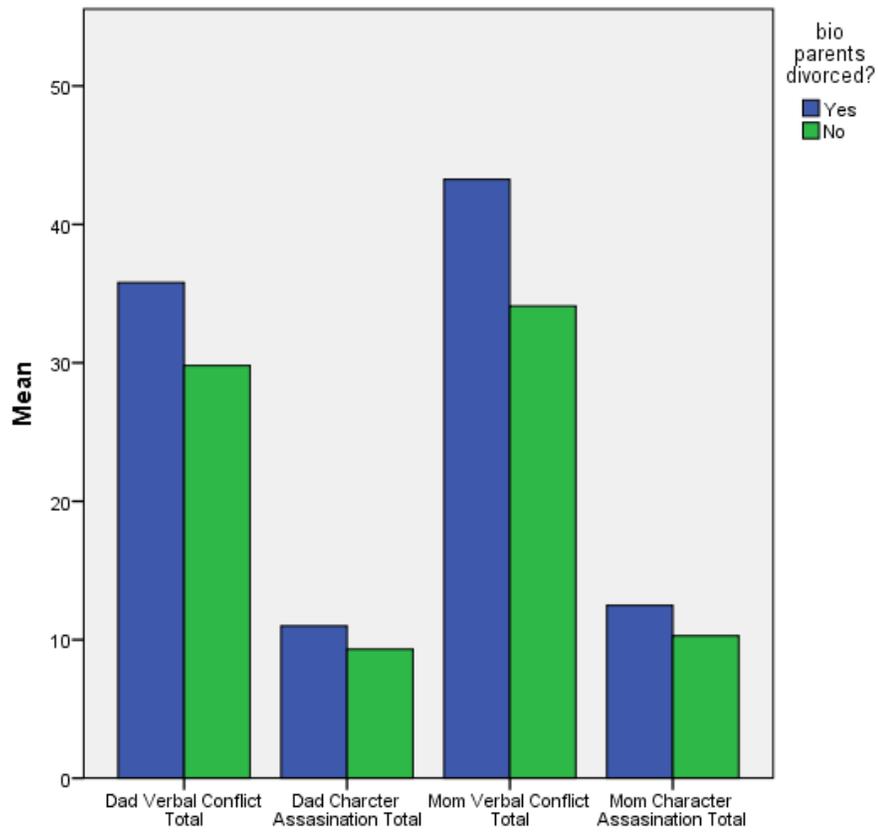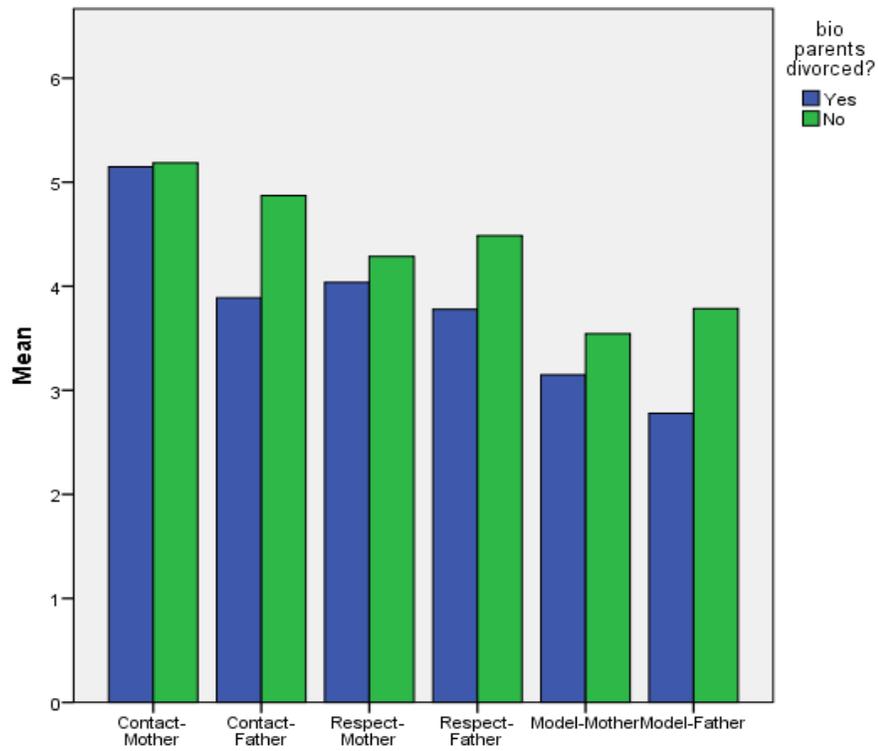*Father engage in Verbal Conflict and CA*

Figure 6

Adult Children of Divorced vs. Married Families – Contact, Respect and

Modeling of Mother/Father

(NOTE: 0=never and 6=constantly)

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