Conflict or Divorce?: Does Parental Conflict and/or Divorce Increase the Likelihood of Adult Children's Cohabiting and Marital Dissolution?

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Abstract

Previous research documents that children of divorce are more prone to divorce themselves. More recent work has argued, however, that it may not be the divorce per se that leads to increased divorce, but rather the conflict that preceded the divorce. Previous research has been plagued by many data problems – reliance on small samples derived from one therapy clinic, retrospective reports, and cross sectional data. In this paper we examine the effect of parental conflict and divorce on adult children's relationship outcomes. Specifically, we examine whether children who experience parental conflict and or divorce are more likely to experience a cohabiting break-up or divorce as adults compared to children from low conflict and/or intact families. Our examination improves upon past research by using a three wave longitudinal data set. Thus we can measure how the tenor of parental relationships prior to a divorce, as well as divorce are related to adult children's relationship outcomes. We extend previous research on the effect of parental discord and divorce on adult children's likelihood of divorce by also examining the likelihood of a cohabiting dissolution.

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Introduction

The consequence of divorce for children's outcomes has received much research and media attention. Most of the research has focused on the consequences of divorce on children's short-term outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, 2002), while valid findings on the long-term effects of childhood divorce, especially on adult child outcomes, have been constrained, until recently, by a lack of longitudinal data from nationally representative data sets (Amato, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Wallerstein, 1984). The most established finding in this literature is that children of divorce are more prone to divorce themselves (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & DeBoer, 2001, Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991). In addition, most of this research compares children who experienced a divorce to those who remained in an intact family. Thus, less research has examined a broader range of marital circumstances within intact marriages (Peterson & Zill, 1986), or compared these families to the relationship outcomes of children from single parent families in one study. In this research, we aim to address data shortcoming and extend the research on the intergenerational transmission of relationship conflict and family from parents to their adult children.

The current study aims to extend previous studies by examining parental reports of conflict level prior to divorce and the interaction between conflict and divorce on adult children's relational outcomes. Specifically, we will examine the effect of growing up in high- versus low-conflict families as well as parental divorce on the likelihood that adult children experience a cohabiting or marital dissolution. We use longitudinal data from the three waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). These data include several distinct measures of the level of conflict for parents and their adult children's report of their relationship history. By illuminating how parental conflict affects adult children, the proposed research will help

disentangle the effect of divorce versus parental conflict on adult children's relationship outcomes.

We will first ascertain whether adult children from high conflict families (at wave 1), who may have provided poor relationship models, are more likely to end a first cohabitation or first marriage compared with adult children whose parents provided positive relationship models. Next, we explore the interaction between level of parental conflict and parental marital status from wave 2 on adult children's relationship outcomes at wave 3. Further, we test the effect of two main intervening variables: 1) the age of the adult child at first cohabitation or marriage and 2) whether or not the first relationship is a cohabitation. Controlling for the age that an adult begins a relationship is important as young age at entry into cohabitation and marriage has been found to negatively effect relationship success (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Young adults may be less mature and unable to handle the stresses and strains of a serious committed relationship, especially if their parental models were poor. In addition, research has documented that cohabiting couples have higher break-up rates than married couples (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Yabiku & Gager, 2009) and that marriages preceded by cohabitation have higher rates of divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, &, Markman, 2006; Scott, Rhoades, Amato, Markman, & Johnson, 2010).

We will also assess whether the intergenerational transmission of parental marital conflict varies by child's gender. While research findings on the effects of sex on child outcomes are inconsistent, some empirical evidence suggests that a child's own gender influences his or her experience of and reaction to parental divorce (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Barber & Eccles, 1992; Cherlin, 1991; Cummings et al., 1994; Hetherington, et al., 1998). Thus, we will examine if the transmission of conflict varies by sex while controlling for parental family income, education,

age, sex, and race/ethnicity. In sum, we will extend previous research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce and discord by examining a broader range of adult child relationships and dimensions of relationship quality.

Theoretical perspectives

Do children who grow up in families with successful, positive relationships have better adult personal relationships, and conversely, does growing up in a family filled with discord translate into similar discordant relations as these children reach adulthood? What is the mechanism through which parental discord is transmitted to adult children's relational ability? Observational learning theory suggests that children learn a variety of behaviors by observing adult relationships, especially those of their parents with whom there is frequent opportunity to witness such relations (Bandura, 1986). Researchers find that children from intact families exposed to high, persistent conflict exhibit behavioral problems. Higher parental conflict also has been related to negative effects on children's social relationships (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Prior research supports the assumption that children exhibit similar conflict resolution and affective styles, as well anger levels, as their parents (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blum, & Lendich, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Katz & Gottman, 1994). Although limited by the use of cross-sectional and retrospective data, research links childhood exposure to marital violence, the most extreme form of marital conflict, to both a higher likelihood of perpetrating physical violence and to being victimized as adults. Thus, observational learning theory and empirical findings suggest a plausible avenue through which adult children may model the conflictual interpersonal style of their parents.

Observational learning theory suggests that children who grow up with parents who exhibited successful conflict-resolution strategies and displayed mutually supportive relations will likely have better conflict resolution and communication skills. In other words, they may

have a more highly developed relational "tool box," i.e. conflict resolution and communication skills, which leads to more successful, long-term interpersonal relationships. Conversely, children who observed more negative, conflictual parental relationships are more likely to reach adulthood with a poorly developed set of communication/resolution skills.

Socialization theory departs from observational learning theory by suggesting that while individuals are oriented by their childhood relationships, often modeling their parents' behaviors, childhood orientations are not fixed but rather are fluid, changing as people come into contact with new experiences, social institutions, or confront major social change. In other words, socialization is a lifelong process. For example, individuals who observed positive relations between their parents but later experience a deterioration of their parents' relationship or divorce could develop negative relationship skills. Conversely, children who observe conflict resolution among parents in the short or long term may learn better conflict resolution skills. For instance, when children observe their parents resolve conflict, children's negative distress response returns to baseline levels concurrent with reactions to positive interactions (Cummings & Davies, 1994a, b). Capturing the dynamic aspects of conflict and the resolution of conflict is important in an analysis of the intergenerational transmission of conflict. This dovetails with the view that the study of romantic relationships should take a developmental perspective by incorporating pre-relationship characteristics such as exposure to parental conflict (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). In addition, we need to take into account life-course transitions, such as a change in parent's marital status that may remove children from further exposure to daily parental discord. In sum, it is important to control for an adult child's parental relationship histories to disentangle the effect of divorce from conflict (Cherlin et al., 1991; Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993).

Demographic characteristics and intergenerational transmission. Observational learning theorists assert that children model the behaviors of their parents and are rewarded for gender appropriate behavior and punished for gender inappropriate behavior. For example, longitudinal studies find that adolescent girls report receiving more support for emotional expression than do boys (Bronstein, et al., 1996). With regard to the intergenerational transmission of conflict, we expect that girls and boys emulate the behavior or interaction styles of their parents, which are likely gendered. For example, therapists report that men complain that their wives are too expressive and emotional, while wives report that their husbands exhibit poor conflict resolution and avoid intimacy (Markman & Kraft, 1989). The proposed research will examine whether daughters and sons are similarly affected by parents' relationships.

Extending the socialization hypothesis to sex differences, some empirical evidence documents that a major change like divorce may affect boys and girls differently. Some research on post-divorce conflict shows adverse effects for child well-being and sex differences in those effects, with boys demonstrating more behavioral problems if they continue to see the noncustodial parent regularly, while no effect was found for girls (Amato & Rezac, 1994). Only a few studies to date have examined sex differences in the transmission of parental marital discord to offspring's reports of relational outcomes (Amato and Booth, 2001; Feng et al.1999). For example, Amato and Booth (2001) assess the relationship between parents' marital discord and adult children's marital happiness and psychological well-being and find that parents' conflict has similar effects on boys and girls, although parents' conflict has a slightly stronger effect for boys' psychological stress and self-esteem. The authors suggest that their mixed results certainly merit further research on this topic. It may be that boys and girls merely react to stress differently, with boys exhibiting more externalizing behavior problems, and girls more

internalizing problems (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). Thus we hypothesize that adult males may exhibit more problems in their adult relationships compared with their female peers.

Additional family, parental, and adult child characteristics measured may also influence the level of parent's relationship discord and status on their adult children's personal relationships. The adult child's age is also important, especially as younger age is associated with greater likelihood for relationship dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002).

In sum, the proposed research will take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the NSFH dataset, to address previous shortcomings in the research on intergenerational transmission of relationship dynamics. Specifically, we will examine whether the level of parents' conflict influences their adult child's cohabiting and marital outcomes and attempt to disentangle the adverse effects of divorce versus conflict on adult child relationship success. We will control for individual characteristics of adult children and parents shown to influence these associations. Similar to research documenting that children of divorce are more likely to experience a divorce themselves, we expect that growing up in a family with discordant parental relations will increase the likelihood that children will be more likely to experience relationship dissolution when they reach adulthood. Thus, we extend previous research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce by examining a broader range of parental relationship characteristics within intact marriages, including measures of parental disagreement on their adult children's relationship outcomes.

Data and Methods

We test our hypotheses with three waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is nationally representative study of households and several features make it ideal for our research questions. Most importantly, the adult children who are

the focus of our study were designated as "focal children" by the NSFH in earlier waves. The parents of these adult children were extensively surveyed in prior data collection waves when these adults were young children. Thus, the time ordering of measurement is ideal for using adult children's union disruption as a dependent variable with the parents' relationship characteristics as predictors.

Dependent variable: adult child's first relationship union dissolution rate. In the wave 3 NSFH survey (approximately 2001-2002), 1,952 adult children's complete union formation histories were measured (cohabitations and marriages). We model the rate of union disruption of the adult child's first union. Adult children who never had a marriage or cohabitation (n=672) were excluded, leaving a maximum of N=1,275 for analysis before removing cases with missing data. We use Cox proportional hazard models to predict the rate of first union dissolution. Adult children become at risk of dissolution when they begin a marriage or cohabitation. Dissolution events are the breakup of the cohabitation, or a divorce or separation of the marriage. Cohabitations that transition into marriages are considered still intact.

Independent variables: parents' relationship experiences. Our hypotheses predict that the adult child's rate of first union dissolution will depend on their parents' relationship experiences. We have two measures of parental relationship experience: frequency of arguments and union dissolution. For parents who were in a union, the NSFH at wave 1 (1987) measured their frequency of arguments over seven household issues. Identical measures were collected for marriages and cohabitations. Specifically, those who were currently cohabiting or married were asked questions about the frequency of disagreements: "How often have you had an open disagreement about: 1) household tasks, 2) money, 3) spending time together, 4) sex, 5) having another child, 6) your in-laws, and 7) the children. Would you say 1) never, 2) less than once a

month, 3) several times a month, 4) about once a week, 5) several times a week, or 6) almost every day?" The average of this scale, which ranges from 1 to 6, is our predictor of parental argument frequency.

Our second measure of parental relationship experiences is the disruption status of the parents' union. We create a measure that indicates of the union at wave 1 (1987) dissolved by the time of NSFH wave 2 (1992-1994). Because our hypotheses predict that the influence of parents' relationship dissolution will depend on their frequency of arguments, we allow an interaction between the two. Rather than create a linear interaction using a multiplicative terms, we create categories that divide parents into four categories: parents with high argument frequency who dissolve their union, parents with high argument frequency who remain intact, parents with low argument frequency who dissolve their union, and parents with low argument frequency who remain intact. There is another category for parents who are single in 1987, because the argument frequency variables do not apply to them (they were not asked of single parents).

Intervening variables. We propose that the effects of parents' relationship experience might be transmitted to adult children's union dissolution rates through two ways: age at time of first union, and whether the union started as a cohabitation or marriage. Unions begun at younger ages are at higher risk of disruption and unions that are cohabitations are more unstable than marriages (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). It is possible that parents' relationship experiences are related to these pathways of adult children's union formation.

Controls. We include several controls at the parents and child level to guard against spurious associations. At the parent level, we include parent age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, and family income. Prior research documents that parents who marry younger, who are African-American, who have lower levels of education, and lower family income are more

likely to divorce (Amato, 2010; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Teachman, 2002). At the child level, we control for gender for reasons discussed above.

Our modeling strategy is to predict the adult child's first union dissolution with the parental measures including disagreement levels and marital status and controls as predictors. We then add measures of our intervening mechanisms (age of adult child at entry into first union; first union as cohabitation or marriage) to test if the inclusion of these variables reduces the coefficients for the parental relationship measures.

Missing data. There were several adult children who could not be included due to missing data. We removed 28 cases because of missing, incomplete, or invalid first union histories. We also removed several cases because of missing parental variables. For missing family income in 1987 (n=138) and missing frequency of arguments in 1987 (n=73), we did simple mean imputation. The final manuscript will use multiple imputation, as the authors have used in previously published papers (Yabiku & Gager 2009).

Results

In Table 1, we present the descriptive statistics. We note that 44% of the adult children's first unions dissolved. In 1987 at NSFH wave 1, 55% of parents were in unions characterized by low argument frequency, 17% were in unions with high argument frequency, and 27% were single parents. We also considered the status of these unions at NSFH wave 2 in 1994: 48% of parents were in low argument frequency unions that remained intact, 6% were in low argument frequency unions that dissolved, 14% were in high argument frequency unions that remained intact, 3% were in high argument frequency unions that dissolved, and 29% had been single parents in 1987 and thus had no union to dissolve or remain intact.

(Table 1)

In Table 2, we present the multivariate analyses. The coefficients are presented as hazard ratios: coefficients greater than one are a positive effect that increases the rate of first union disruption; coefficients less than one are negative effects that slow the transition rate. Model 1 shows that adult children with parents in high frequency argument unions have higher rates of first union dissolution (p=.0535), as do those whose parents were single in 1987; parents in low frequency of arguments unions are the reference group. To Model 2 we add intervening mechanisms that try to explain these relationships. Age at the start of the adult child's first union has a significant negative relationship with dissolution. As expected, older age at the start of the union decreases the risk of dissolution. In addition, this variable explains some of the association between parental relationship experience and first union dissolution: the coefficients from model 1 are slightly reduced. Model 3 tests the status of young adult's first union (cohabitation or marriage) as a mechanism. First unions that started as cohabitations had significantly higher rates of dissolution. Furthermore, this measure reduced the parental measures, especially the single parent dummy. Lastly, model 4 adds both mechanisms. Age at the start of the union and whether the union was a cohabitation both remain significant, and the coefficient for single parent status is greatly reduced: the hazard ratio is 1.06 in model 4, compared to 1.23 in model 1.

Table 3 is similar to Table 2 but also considers change in the parents' wave 1 NSFH union. Note the sample size for Table 3 decreases slightly because some parents were not interviewed in NSFH wave 2, and thus we do not know if their unions remained intact or dissolved. Model 1 of Table 2 replicated Model 1 of Table 2, but parents in unions with low and high frequency of arguments are divided into categories representing whether or not their 1987 union was intact by the 1992-1994 NSFH wave 2 reinterview. Parents in low frequency of arguments unions that remained intact are the reference group for the models in Table 3.

Model 1 shows that parents in high frequency arguments who stayed together had children whose first unions dissolved at significantly higher rates. Single parents also had children whose first unions dissolved at higher rates. In model 2, age of the young adult at time of first union is entered as a mechanism. As before, older ages at first union are associated with significantly lower rates of dissolution. Coefficients for parental argument frequency are also reduced: coefficient for parents in high frequency unions that stayed together is no longer significant at the .05 level, nor is the single parent coefficient. The coefficients, however, are still borderline significance ($p<.10$). In model 3, the young adult child's first union as cohabitation or marriage is included, which has an expected positive effect. Most interesting, the coefficient for single parents is no longer significant. In model 4, both mechanisms are included. The hazard ratio coefficient for single parents is greatly reduced (from 1.28 in model 1 to only 1.07 in model 4), suggesting that these two mechanisms largely explain its pathway. The coefficient for parents in high frequency unions who stay together is not significant ($p=.12$) and has been reduced from 1.32 in model 1 to 1.23 in model 4, but it is still sizeable, suggesting that the effect has not been fully explained.

In Table 3, we also see the effects of the control variables. Our hypothesis that adult females will experience less adverse outcomes compared with males is supported. In models 1, 2, and 4 females have significantly lower rates of relationship dissolution. We also find that African Americans had higher relationship breakup rates, compared to whites in our sample. Older parents had children who experienced less relationship dissolution, while income had no significant effect. Last our results for education are surprisingly, parents with higher education had children with higher rates of relationship failure. However, this may be due to measuring

education as a linear variable, which may obscure or distort a non-linear association and the outcome variable. In future analyses we will substitute a categorical variable for education.

Conclusion

Our key findings are that children who had high conflict parents are less likely to have experienced a cohabiting or marital dissolution if their parents divorced compared to children from high conflict families whose parents remained together through wave 2. We also find that when age at marriage and cohabitation modify the effect and are important factors in relationship dissolution. In sum, our research suggests that for high conflict families "staying together for the sake of the children" may have more adverse consequences for adult children's relationship outcomes than parental divorce. Our research adds to the debate over whether it is the divorce *per se* or the conflict between parents that occurs prior to divorce that leads to adverse outcomes for children. Our results support previous research that conflict in families has negative and long lasting effects on children. In addition, our findings provide support for the argument that the long-term adverse effects of family conflict are attenuated when parents dissolve their marriage. We suggest that this attenuation occurs as children no longer have the opportunity to observe and model their parent's conflictual style. This finding has implications for recent policy initiatives that aim to promote marriage and reduce divorce. Our research suggests that "staying together for the sake of the children" may not be the best option for highly conflicted families. We do find that high conflict increases the likelihood that adult children face more relationship failure. We suggest that negative models may be transmitted intergenerationally compared with positive parental models. Future research needs to better understand the mechanisms

through which such a transfer takes place, and the family contexts that mediate or moderate this transmission.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics					
		Mean	Std.Dev.	Min	Max
Young Adult's First Union Dissolved		.44	.50	0	1
Parental Union in 1987					
Low Argument Union		.55	.50	0	1
High Argument Union		.17	.38	0	1
Single Parent		.27	.45	0	1
Parental Union through 1992-1994					
Low Argument Intact		.48	.50	0	1
Low Argument Dissolved		.06	.24	0	1
High Argument Intact		.14	.35	0	1
High Argument Dissolved		.03	.17	0	1
Was Single Parent in 1987		.29	.45	0	1
Young Adult First Union Characteristcis					
Age at first union		21.68	3.19	13.92	31.83
First Union was cohabitation		.76	.43	0	1
Controls					
Parent age		38.72	7.61	19	69
Parent female		.66	.47	0	1
Parent white		.85	.36	0	1
Parent black		.09	.29	0	1
Parent Hispanic		.05	.22	0	1
Parent other ethnicity		.01	.08	0	1
Parent Education		12.96	2.32	3	17
Family income (thousands)		31.97	42.18	0	737
Focal child female		.56	.50	0	1
N=1244					

Table 2: Predicting Rate of Young Adult's First Union Dissolution with Parental Argument Frequency					
	1	2	3	4	
Parental Union in 1987					
High Argument Union †	1.25+	1.23+	1.20	1.18	
	(1.93)	(1.81)	(1.55)	(1.41)	
Single Parent †	1.23*	1.18	1.11	1.06	
	(1.97)	(1.54)	(0.97)	(0.51)	
Young Adult First Union Characteristcis					
Age at first union		0.93***		0.94***	
		(-4.29)		(-3.80)	
First Union was cohabitation			2.83***	2.77***	
			(8.10)	(7.92)	
Controls					
Parent age	0.97***	0.98**	0.98***	0.98*	
	(-4.83)	(-3.08)	(-4.01)	(-2.41)	
Parent female	1.17	1.21+	1.16	1.20+	
	(1.57)	(1.91)	(1.55)	(1.87)	
Parent non-Hispanic black ‡	1.55***	1.57***	1.48**	1.50**	
	(3.33)	(3.44)	(2.98)	(3.09)	
Parent Hispanic ‡	0.82	0.84	0.82	0.83	
	(-0.87)	(-0.81)	(-0.90)	(-0.83)	
Parent other ethnicity ‡	1.28	1.24	1.37	1.26	
	(0.48)	(0.43)	(0.63)	(0.47)	
Parent Education	1.04+	1.05*	1.05*	1.06**	
	(1.66)	(2.35)	(2.25)	(2.84)	
Family income (thousands)	0.99	1.00	0.99	1.00	
	(-0.21)	(0.14)	(-0.31)	(-0.05)	
Focal child female	0.82*	0.76**	0.86+	0.80*	
	(-2.26)	(-3.11)	(-1.77)	(-2.51)	
N=1244					
Coefficients are hazard ratios, with z-statistics in parentheses					
+p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, two-tailed tests					
† Low Argument Union is reference					
‡ Non-Hispanic White is reference					

Table 3: Predicting Rate of Young Adult's First Union Dissolution with Parental Argument Frequency and Dissolution					
	1	2	3	4	
Parental Union from 1987 to 1992-1994					
Low Argument Dissolved †	1.19	1.15	1.08	1.05	
	(0.91)	(0.73)	(0.42)	(0.24)	
High Argument Dissolved †	1.48	1.46	1.26	1.25	
	(1.53)	(1.50)	(0.91)	(0.89)	
High Argument Intact †	1.32*	1.29+	1.26+	1.23	
	(2.10)	(1.92)	(1.77)	(1.57)	
Was Single Parent in 1987 †	1.28*	1.22+	1.13	1.07	
	(2.23)	(1.82)	(1.07)	(0.61)	
Young Adult First Union Characteristcis					
Age at first union		0.94***		0.94**	
		(-3.62)		(-3.26)	
First Union was cohabitation			2.78***	2.74***	
			(7.81)	(7.69)	
Controls					
Parent age	0.97***	0.98**	0.98***	0.98*	
	(-4.69)	(-3.07)	(-3.82)	(-2.29)	
Parent female	1.21+	1.25*	1.21+	1.24*	
	(1.84)	(2.12)	(1.85)	(2.12)	
Parent non-Hispanic black ‡	1.53**	1.55**	1.46**	1.49**	
	(3.12)	(3.22)	(2.77)	(2.89)	
Parent Hispanic ‡	0.91	0.92	0.91	0.92	
	(-0.40)	(-0.36)	(-0.45)	(-0.38)	
Parent other ethnicity ‡	0.96	0.95	1.04	0.97	
	(-0.07)	(-0.09)	(0.07)	(-0.05)	
Parent Education	1.04*	1.06*	1.06*	1.07**	
	(1.96)	(2.46)	(2.53)	(2.96)	
Family income (thousands)	0.98	1.00	0.98	0.99	
	(-0.47)	(-0.12)	(-0.62)	(-0.35)	
Focal child female	0.82*	0.76**	0.85+	0.80*	
	(-2.25)	(-2.94)	(-1.79)	(-2.38)	
N=1174					
Coefficients are hazard ratios, with z-statistics in parentheses					
+p<.10, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001, two-tailed tests					
† Low Argument Intact Union is reference					
‡ Non-Hispanic White is reference					