Assessing the Effect of Parental Marital Conflict on Adult Child Relationship Outcomes:

Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree?

Constance T. Gager, Ph.D.

Department of Family and Human Development

Arizona State University

&

Mary Holland Benin, Ph.D.

Department of Sociology

Arizona State University

Abstract

This research aims to better understand how parental relationship status and marital quality influence adult child relational outcomes. Specifically, we examine the effect of parent's level of conflict and marital satisfaction on adult children's current relationship with their own dating, cohabiting, or marital partner. We use waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to capture our main predictor variables: level of conflict between parents and parental marital satisfaction. We also use these two waves to construct a history of parent relationship transitions and family structure, which should have a large effect on adult relational outcomes. We use NSFH3 to capture our main outcome variables, adult child reports of their relationship satisfaction and the level of disagreement with their current partner. In sum, we will examine the effect of parental relationship quality and/or discord during childhood on adult children's relational outcomes.

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 by a lack of longitudinal data from nationally representative data sets (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; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988) although Wolfinger (1999) finds that the rate of this transmission has declined over time. In addition, most of this research compares children who experienced a divorce to those who remained in an intact family. Researchers have argued that it is not the divorce per se that causes many of the adverse outcomes for children of divorce, but rather conflict between parents that may have begun long before the divorce (Cherlin et al, 1991; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Thus, little research has examined a broader range of marital circumstances within intact marriages (Peterson & Zill, 1986). This research suggests we need to better understand the effect of growing up in an intact family characterized by discord, disagreement, or stress on adult children's relationship outcomes.

Research on post divorce conflict shows adverse effects for child well being and sex differences in those effects. Amato and Rezac (1994) find that when parents continue to fight after a separation or divorce, boys show more behavioral problems when they continue to see the non-custodial parent regularly than less often, while no effect was

3

found for girls. Thus, research is needed to understand adult child relational outcomes vary by sex. Specifically, we will focus on how adult children's current relationships with their dating, cohabiting partner, or their spouse are associated with their parents' relationship models.

Theory

How is marital discord transmitted to children?

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 mean children will experience similar discordant relations as adults? What is the mechanism through which parental discord is transmitted to children in a way that later affects children's adult relational ability? First, 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 for observing such relations Bandura, 1986). Researchers find that children from intact families who are exposed to high, persistent conflict exhibit behavioral problems. Higher parental conflict has also been related to negative effects on children's relationships with peers and siblings (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Recent 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 they are limited by the use of cross sectional data, research has linked childhood exposure to marital violence, to both higher likelihood to be physically violent or to be victimized as adults. Thus, observational learning theory and previous

empirical findings suggest a plausible avenue through which adult children may emulate the conflictual interpersonal style of their parents.

Observational learning theory suggests several hypotheses: First, children who grow up with parents who exhibited successful conflict-resolution strategies and displayed mutually supportive relations will likely have a more highly developed relational "tool box" which lead to more successful, long-term interpersonal relationships. Conversely, children who observed more negative, conflictual parent relationships are more likely to reach adulthood with a poorly developed set of relationship skills.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theorists posit that children's early experiences guide later perceptions, behaviors, and interactions via "internal working models" of attachment. In other words, children store knowledge or cognitive representations of relationships that guide future interactions, all of which are interpreted and processed according to these childhood representations. Most importantly, these internalized working models of close relationships are primarily based on their relationships with their parents (Bowlby, 1969) More recent research suggests that attachment is stable (Waters, Weinfeld, & Hamilton, 2000). Further, patterns developed during infancy are linked to the quality of relationships with other people in their lives. Thus, attachment theory suggests that children who form weak attachments to their parents may have impaired ability to form successful personal relationships with peers and adult partners. However, the process through which early attachment relationships lead to later disorders is not well understood or empirically tested.

We posit a potential association between parents who had high levels of conflict with their spouse and the likelihood that a parent may have a more negative emotional attitude toward their child. This, in turn, may lead to poor attachment, poor working models among their children, and therefore, a lower likelihood for those children to develop successful personal relationships as adults.

Socialization theory departs from observational learning and attachment theories by suggesting that while individuals are oriented by their childhood relationships, 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 lifetime process. For example, an individual who observed a positive relations between their parents when quite young, might later exhibit negative relationship skills if they experienced a deterioration of their parents' relationship or divorce. Thus, we need to take into account life course transitions, which are also correlated with adult relationship outcomes. These include whether or not their parents remained married, divorced, or remarried or cohabited following a divorce. Teachman (1982) argues that all these life course transitions are characterized by three dimensions, number, timing, and sequencing – all of which have important implications for the development of relationship skills. For example, the timing of divorce has important implications for children's relationship skill acquisition. On the one hand, some research shows younger children are more likely to have lasting effects of divorce compared to adolescents or adult children. On the other hand, if parents did divorce when children were young, children would have less time to observe negative relations between their parents as research shows conflict is higher in families that divorce compared to intact

families (Cherlin et al., 1991; Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993). Further, although divorced parents have a greater likelihood of finding a more satisfying partner and to provide a positive relational role model for their children, than those who remain in a conflictual intact marriage, they could also expose children to a second negative relationship or a repeated pattern of negative relations. For example, Peterson and Zill (1986) find that girls have more behavioral outcomes after their mother remarries. Thus, it is important to control for adult children's parent's relationship history.

Sex differences in intergenerational transmission

Family scholars provide empirical evidence documenting significant gender variation in the expectations, experiences, and implications of marriage among men and women (for a review, see Thompson & Walker, 1989). Therefore, we also plan to examine whether the effect of growing up in discordant families on adult relational outcomes varies by sex of the child. In other words, are daughters and sons equally affected by parental discord? Again, previous research on parental divorce may shed light on the relationship between parental discord and children's outcomes. Researchers find that parental divorce is negatively associated with parent-child relationship quality and has a greater adverse effect on father-child versus than mother-child relations. However, this finding is usually attributed to the fact that contact with noncustodial fathers declines over time (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985, Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988).

Only a few studies to date have examined sex differences in the transmission of parental marital discord to their offspring's relational reports. Du Feng et al. (1999) find a significant association between fathers' and mothers' positive reports of marital interaction with their sons' reports of their own marital quality 20 years later. However,

while father's positive reports are associated with sons more positive reports, mother's positive reports are associated with more negative reports of marital interaction by son. Furthermore, they find no relationship between mothers and daughters reports of marital interaction. However, the analysis is based on a sample of less than 70 respondents, thus the findings are not conclusive. Amato and Booth (2001) assess the relationship of parent's marital discord and adult children's marital happiness ad psychological well-being and find that parents' conflict has similar effect on boys and girls, although parents' conflict was slightly stronger for boys' psychological stress and self-esteem. The authors suggest that their mixed results certainly merit further research attention on this topic. Accordingly, more research is needed on this area using a larger nationally representative sample.

Sex differences may have important implications if as Hochschild (1989) argues, women do more of the emotion and caring work in marriage, and tend to be more expressive and intimate than their husbands (Chodorow, 1978; Marini, 1990; Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten 1996). Therefore, the question to be asked is are girls more disadvantaged by having poor relational tool boxes than men, as men are less likely to be the relational gatekeepers. In other words, adult men, although they may have poor relational skills, might be in a better position as adults because they can rely more on their female partners to make the partnership work, whereas women with poor skills may not be able to rely on their male partners to the same degree. Thus, we expect that growing up with poor role models will be more significant for poor relational outcomes in adult relationships for women than for men as women are still expected to be the "relational gatekeepers." While we expect that growing up in discordant families will

significantly affect male interpersonal relational success, we expect that the effect will be stronger for women. Consequently, because research shows women do more of the emotion work in personal relationships, we expect that having a female partner with less developed relational skills will be associated with more negative outcomes than if only the man has relational deficits associated with poor parental role models.

Certainly other life experiences also have an impact on the quality of personal relationships. For example successful adult marital and cohabiting relationships depends on a number of factors including 1) when did child leave parental home – which will affect the degree to which they were exposed to positive or discordant relationship of parents, and 2) whether or not the parents divorced, 3) socioeconomic status, measured as income and other independent factors such as age, race, and educational level.

Data

Until recently, examining the effect of parental discord/relationship success on adult children's own relational outcomes has been limited to two national longitudinal data sets (the NLSY and the Marital Instability over the Life Course). However, recently the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) has completed data collection of a third wave of data, which follows main respondents and a randomly selected focal child (who was age 3 to 18 at NSFH1) into adulthood. The design permits the detailed description of parents' relationship satisfaction, level of conflict, and relationship transitions at time 1 and time 2, as well as the characteristics and experiences of an adult focal child's including their current relationship status and quality, and their psychological well-being growing up and currently (Sweet & Bumpass, 1996; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

Outcome variables

We use the NSFH3 focal child data, to capture our main outcome variables: adult child reports of their level of global happiness and happiness with specific aspects of their current dating, cohabiting, or marital relationship and the frequency of open disagreements on several topics. Focal children were first asked the question:

"Now I'd like to ask you a few questions about your relationship.

Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means

really bad and 10 means absolutely perfect, how would you describe

your relationship/ marriage?

A second question is asked which measures global relationship happiness using a 7 point scale previous waves of the NSFH:

"On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is very unhappy and 7 is very

happy, taking things all together, how would you describe your

current relationship?"

We will use regression analysis to predict relationship quality and happiness if the responses to the questions involve the full range of values (0-10 and 1-7). If the data are highly skewed and clustered around only a few values, we will recode these variables into limited categories and use ordered logistic regression for these analyses.

Last, a set of questions are asked to assess happiness with specific aspects of the current relationship:

"Now I'd like to ask you how happy you are with the following aspects of your

relationship. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is very unhappy and 7 is very happy,

how happy are you with 1) the understanding you receive from your partner, 2)

love and affection you get from your, 3) the amount of time you spend with your

partner, 4) the demands your partner places on you, 5) the way your partner

spends money , 6) the time you spend with him or her, 7) your sexual relationship,

and 8) the work your partner does around the house.

We create an additive index and will predict level of happiness across these relationship

dimensions and assess the degree to which these reflect various dimensions of

relationship satisfaction. We will first conduct a reliability analysis to determine whether

or not all eight items load well on the same scale. We will use the standard Crohnbach

alpha's = .70 as a cut-off for acceptability.

Those who were currently cohabiting or married were asked the overall

relationship quality question as well as a 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, and 5) your in laws. 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?" We create an additive index using these 5 questions on

disagreements (see Sanchez & Gager, 2000). We will use OLS regression to predict

disagreement among married and cohabiting respondents.

Predictor Variables

Our main predictor variables report of the frequency of disagreement level of

conflict between parents and parental marital satisfaction -- will come from waves 1 and

2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). These are measured

similarly to the questions asked of focal children described above. We will also use these

two waves to construct a history of parent relationship transitions and family structure, as

well as the timing of children's home leaving, which should have a large effect on adult relational outcomes. In addition we will examine the effect of children's sex, race, age, education level as well as the socioeconomic status of the family of origin. Thus, the longitudinal nature of the NSFH is ideally suited to study the effect of parental relationship quality and/or discord during childhood on adult children's relational outcomes.

We will examine the effect of parents' relationship quality on children's relational outcomes with their current partner. 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 have discordant, less satisfying personal relationships when they reach adulthood. Thus, we extend previous research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce by examining a broader range of parental relationship characteristics in intact marriages, including marital satisfaction and level of conflict, on their adult children's relationship outcomes.

References

Allison, P. D., & Furstenberg, F. F. (1989). How marital dissolution affects children: Variations by age and sex. *Developmental Psychology, 25*, 540-549.

Amato, P. R., & Booth, A. (1991). Consequences of parental divorce and marital unhappiness for adult well-being. *Social Forces, 69*, 895-914.

Amato, P. R, & Booth, A. (2001). The legacy of parents' marital discord: Consequences for children's marital quality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*, 627-638.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991a). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 110*, 26-46.

Amato, P. R., & Keith, B. (1991b). Parental divorce and adult well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53*, 43-58.

Amato, P. R., & Rezac, S. J. (1994). Contact with nonresidential parents, interparental conflict, and children's behavior. *Journal of Family Issues, 15*, 191-207.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss, Vol. 1: Attachment*. New York: Basic.

Bumpass, L., Martin, T. C., & Sweet, J. A. (1991). The impact of family background and early marital factors on marital disruption. *Journal of Family Issues, 12*, 22-42.

Cherlin, A. J., Furstenberg, F. F., Chase-Lansdale, P. L., Keirnan, K. E., Robins, P. K., Morrison, D. R., & Tietler, J. O. (1991). Longitudinal studies of effects of divorce on children in Great Britain and the United States. *Science, 252*, 1386-1389.

Chodorow, N. (1978). The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Dadds, M. R., Atkinson, E., Turner, C., Blums, G. J., & Lendich, B. (1999). Family conflict and child adjustment: Evidence for a cognitive-contextual model of intergenerational transmission. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13*, 194-208.

Du Feng, R. G., Bengtson, V. L., & Frye, N. (1999). Intergenerational transmission of marital quality and marital instability. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*, 451-464.

Furstenberg, F. F., Jr., & Nord, C. (1985). Parenting apart: Patterns of childrearing after marital disruption. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 47*, 893-904.

Hetherington, E. M., & Stanley-Hagan, M. (2002). Parenting in divorced and remarried families. In M. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting, Vol 3: Being and becoming a parent* (pp. 287-316). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hetherington, E. M., Cox, M., & Cox, R. (1978). The aftermath of divorce. In J. H Stevens, Jr., & M. Matthews (Eds.), *Mother-child, father-child relations* (pp. 148-176). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Basic.

Jenkins, J. M. (2000). Marital conflict and children's emotions: The development of an anger orientation. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 723-736.

Katz, L. F., & Gottman, J. M. (1994). Patterns of marital interaction and children's emotional development. In R. D. Parke and S. G. Kellam (Eds.), *Exploring family relationships with other social contexts* (pp. 49-74). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Marini, M. M. (1990). Sex and gender: What do we know? *Sociological Forum, 5,* 95-120.

McLanahan, S., & Bumpass, L. (1988). Intergenerational consequences of family disruption. *American Journal of Sociology, 94*, 130-152.

Peterson, J. L. & Zill, N. (1986). Marital disruption, parent-child relationships, and behavior problems in children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48*, 295-307.

Sanchez, L. A., & Gager, C. T. (2000). Hard living, perceived entitlement to a great marriage, and marital dissolution. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 708-722.

Seltzer, J., & Bianchi, S. (1988). Children's contact with absent parents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*, 663-677.

Shaw, D. S., Emery, R. E., & Tuer, M. D. (1993). Parental functioning and children's adjustment in families of divorce: A prospective study. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 21,* 119-133.

Stocker, C., & Youngblade, L. (1999). Marital conflict and parental hostility: Links with children's sibling and peer relationships. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13*, 598-609.

Sweet & Bumpass (1996). The National Survey of Families and Households - Waves 1 and 2: Data Description and Documentation. Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison (http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/nsfh/home.htm).

Sweet, J., Bumpass, L., & Call, V. (1988). The Design and Content of The National Survey of Families and Households. Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, NSFH Working Paper #1, 1988.

Teachman, J. D. (1982). Methodological issues in the analysis of family formation and dissolution. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 44, 1037-1053.

Thompson, L., & Walker, A. J. (1989). Gender in families: Women and men in marriage, work and parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 51*, 845-871.

Umberson, D., Chen, M., House, J. S., Hopkins, K., & Slaten, E. (1996). Gender differences in relationship and psychological wellbeing. *American Sociological Review, 61*, 837-857.

Wallerstein, J. (1984). Children of divorce: Preliminary report of a ten year follow-up of young children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 54*, 444-458.

Waters, E., Weinfeld, N. S., & Hamilton, C. E. (2000). The stability of attachment security from infancy to adolescence and early adulthood: General discussion. *Child Development, 71*, 703-706.

Wolfinger, N. H. (1999). The intergenerational transmission of divorce. *Demography, 36,* 415-420.