

A Biopsychosocial Model of Outcomes in Young Adults from Divorced Families: The Roles of Parent Conflict and Time with Father

William V. Fabricius & Karina R. Sokol¹

Introduction

Individuals whose parents have divorced display behavioral differences when compared with individuals who grew up in an intact family (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). For example, children of divorce have been described as being more likely to have emotional and psychological adjustment difficulties (Amato, 2001; Amato & Booth, 2001; Thiessen, 1993) and self-concept deficits (Amato & Booth, 2001). These children also encounter relationship difficulties with family members, their own spouses, and significant others (Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato, 2001; Bolgar, Zweig-Frank & Paris, 1995; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Thiessen, 1993).

Until recently, research examining the relationship between divorce and children's emotional adjustment focused primarily on whether or not a divorce occurred. Increasingly, researchers have shifted their attention to other relevant variables. Many researchers examine parental conflict with regard to later early adult outcomes of parental divorce. In fact, research has found that parental conflict during divorce is a better predictor of an individual's adjustment than divorce itself (Brennan & Shaver, 1993). For example, conduct problems (Emery, 1982; Turner & Barrett, 1998), psychological and social well-being deficits (Turner & Barrett, 1998), and struggles with intimacy (Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998, Hayashi & Strickland, 1998; Lopez, 1991) have been found to result from parental conflict.

While the effects of parent conflict on children's well-being have been the focus of much empirical and theoretical study, we know less about the effects of time spent with the non-custodial parent, and little at all about how these two factors interact. The divorce literature contains contradictory and inconclusive findings regarding the importance of the time children spend with their nonresident fathers (e.g., Amato, 1993). This is unfortunate because an important contemporary issue facing courts and policy makers regarding child custody after divorce is whether increased amounts of visitation or shared residential custody can be beneficial to children when there is high parent conflict. At present, the research literature offers little guidance to courts and policy makers on this issue. In the present study, we tested the independent effects of both parent conflict and living arrangements with father on a range of child outcomes.

Importantly, in our models we specified that the effects of these two variables would be mediated by the quality of the child's relationship with each parent. Several theorists (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002; Troxel and Mathews, 2004) have proposed that stressful childhood experiences disturb the child's sense of emotional security. Emotional insecurity is hypothesized to disrupt emotional regulation processes and render children susceptible to stress-related health problems. One possible theoretical implication is that higher father involvement in conflicted divorced families could counteract effects of parent conflict by reassuring the child of the continued relationship with the father.

In this paper, we tested a biopsychosocial model to account for long-term stress-related outcomes in young adult children of divorce. Our research questions were the following:

1. Does time with father, indicated by living arrangements post- divorce affect relationship quality that young adults have with their fathers and in turn, outcomes?

¹William V. Fabricius, Department of Psychology, William.Fabricius@asu.edu; Karina R. Sokol, Department of Psychology; Both at Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1104, USA,

2. Do relationships with parents mediate the association between conflict and time with father and outcomes?
3. Does the same pattern of results apply to a wide range of outcomes for young adults who have experienced parental divorce?

Method

We sampled 530 college- aged students from Arizona State University. All students had experienced a divorce of their biological parents before they were 16 years of age. Students participated as a part of a Psychology course. All questions were completed utilizing an online survey. We tested a biopsychosocial model to account for long-term stress-related outcomes in young adult children of divorce. Outcomes included current physical health (somatic symptoms, days sick), personality traits (hostility, which is a risk for cardiovascular and other stress-related diseases, self esteem,(which may be a protective factor), romantic relationship functioning, and benefit finding from the divorce (a positive outcome following parental divorce). The exogenous variables were indications of disrupted parenting: (a) amount of parent conflict, and (b) amount of time with father post-divorce. The mediating variables were psychosocial manifestations of earlier stress: (c) the quality of young adults' current relationships with their fathers and (d) mothers.

Results

Structural equation models with observed variables, also known as path models, were conducted for each outcome separately. Results indicated that the model specified fits the data quite well. Living arrangements characterized by more time with father, compared to less time with father, were positively associated with father- child relationship quality. Furthermore, parental conflict was negatively associated with father-child relationship quality and mother- child relationship quality. Thus, in answer to the first research question, time with father does significantly impact the father- child relationship, independently of parental conflict.

Relationships with each parent were mediators between living arrangements and conflict and all outcomes. Relationship with each parent independently and positively predicted more benefit finding and self-esteem. Additionally, relationship with each parent independently and negatively predicted somatic symptoms, days sick per semester, hostility, and romantic relationship problems. Thus, in answer to the second research question, the two relationship variables do mediate the relationship between the exogenous and the outcome variables.

Lastly, no matter what outcome variable was placed in the path model, the same pattern of associations was observed. Thus, the young adults' relationships with each of their parents predicted a wide range of both positive and negative outcomes. Thus, in answer to the third research question, the same pattern of findings hold true no matter what outcome was used.

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