


THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AGE AT PARENTAL DIVORCE AND
INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS IN ADULTHOOD

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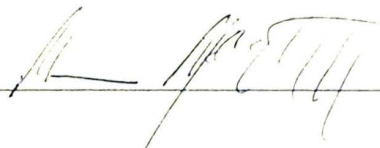
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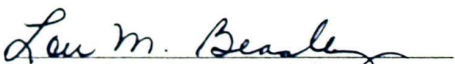
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first and foremost thank my committee for their ongoing support and understanding on so many levels. Their guidance and friendship have been more than essential to this process. I would also like to acknowledge my family and husband, Ryan, for their many words of encouragement when I truly felt like I could not go on. Finally, I feel that it would be negligent to not acknowledge the one thing that has seen me through this project. My faith has made all the difference as I have endured not only this paper, but also the last two years of my life. I have learned so much about research and myself that sometimes it still seems surreal. My life has been changed by my experiences in this program and while writing this paper. Thank you to all my friends and academic family for your support and friendship!

ABSTRACT

This study was intended to provide professionals with information regarding interpersonal problems that individuals may experience based on the age at which they experienced parental divorce. To rule out any unjust conclusions based solely on parental divorce, the interpersonal problems of those from intact families were also considered. A literature review was completed and to date, little information exists regarding the correlation between the age at the time of parental divorce and interpersonal problems that evolve as a result. A total of 106 participants were obtained and each completed the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems. Of this sample, 25 participants had parents who were divorced and 81 participants had parents that were still married. No relationship was found between marital status of parents during childhood and resulting interpersonal problems in adulthood. Likewise, no relationship was found between the age that parental divorce occurred and interpersonal problems in adulthood. Possible explanations and confounding factors of the study are discussed.

The Relationship Between Age at Parental Divorce and
Interpersonal Problems in Adulthood

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
Austin Peay State University

Stacie Scott Nicholson
August 2002

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The divorce of one's parents is a trying time that many will endure. Nielsen (1999) speculated that 40% of students on any given college campus has parents who are no longer married to each other. Research studies have found that 19-54% of participants report that they have experienced parental divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Bolgar, Zweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Grant, Smith, Sinclair, & Salts, 1993; Kalter & Rembar, 1981; McCabe, 1997; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). These estimates suggest that individuals dealing with the demise of their parents' marital relationship constitute an important group presence on college campuses. Therefore, counseling professionals must be equipped with empirical evidence that will enable them to adequately assist those that may seek out their aid.

A literature review is provided at the outset of this paper to provide the reader with an idea of what information exists regarding the effects of parental divorce, the effect of age at the time of parental divorce, and how age at the time of parental divorce shapes interpersonal problems in adulthood. There are two predominant bodies of research in these areas with the largest being studies that have a qualitative or theoretical base. The smaller, more useful entity to the counseling professional is those studies that are empirical in nature. However, as the reader will see, regardless of the studies' research designs, contradictory results and conclusions have not produced a consensus regarding the effects of parental divorce.

Due to the inconsistency of findings and unclear conclusions provided by the body of research available, it was determined that a meta-analysis would be a useful tool

in obtaining a clearer understanding of what research has been done and what conclusions have been drawn. Fortunately, such a meta-analysis had been conducted by Amato and Keith (1991). Over two-thirds of the studies they reviewed found lower levels of well-being in children of divorce compared to those from intact homes. However, they found that although a discrepancy between the two groups exists, it is a weak one. Further, they argue that the often drawn conclusion of children of divorce suffering significant, long-term negative consequences was not supported.

Amato and Keith (1991) drew three theoretical perspectives from the existing literature that have been used to provide explanations as to why children may be affected by divorce of their parents. Using their meta-analytic results, they consider support for each of the following perspectives: parental absence, economic disadvantage, and family conflict. Of the three perspectives, the one that the researchers found the most support for is the family conflict perspective, which implies that the level of conflict that a child observes prior to and during marital dissolution directly affects how well they will cope with the ensuing changes.

When considering the research regarding the effects of age at the time of parental divorce on well-being, conflict arises as to when the greatest impact occurs. Some researchers believe the earlier in a child's life that divorce occurs, the more negative effects the child will experience (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 1997; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). On the other hand, many believe that the earlier in a child's life that the divorce occurs, the better off they will be (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Grant, Smith, Sinclair, & Salts, 1993; McCabe, 1997; Pryor,

1999). Both groups of researchers have conducted studies that supported their beliefs so the reader is left with no clear understanding as to which is more accurate.

Related to the discussion of age at the time of parental divorce is the question as to what interpersonal problems will emerge as a result. This is not a widely researched area but again, conflicting information is presented. One qualitative researcher posits that children may find themselves in conflict regarding how they feel about their own relationships based on what they observed dynamically between their parents (Pryor, 1999). Another researcher found that the area of trusting themselves and others in forming long-lasting relationships was of concern to adult children of divorce (Duran-Aydintug, 1997). Finally, a quantitative study concluded that no relationship was present between the age at the time of parental divorce and later interpersonal problems, which again leaves the reader unclear as to which is more accurate (Bolgar et al., 1995).

This study served to examine the relationship between experiencing parental divorce and interpersonal problems that may evolve in adulthood as a result. Further, how age at the time of parental divorce may influence the emergence of specific types of interpersonal problems was investigated. To rule out any unjust conclusions, the interpersonal problems of those from intact families were also be considered in order to determine if parental divorce is the contributing factor to the prior group's occurrence of interpersonal problems. This study set out to enhance and add to the existing literature that is available to professionals today in the area of effects of divorce.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the purpose of this study, a literature review was conducted to examine existing data on the effects of parental divorce. The literature made it clear that the body of research that presently exists in the area of parental divorce is largely divided into two main bodies. The largest portion is represented by those authors who either conduct their research in a qualitative manner or simply offer theory related to their ideas regarding the effects of parental divorce based on the research of others (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Barber & Eccles, 1992; Burns & Dunlop, 1999; Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Neilsen, 1999; Wallerstein, 1991). To the professional seeking empirical support to guide therapeutic interactions, this literature is not as useful as methodologically strong empirical studies.

The smaller portion of the available literature today includes studies that were carried out in an empirical, more controlled manner. Perhaps the most useful of these studies follow a longitudinal format (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Hetherington, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1988) but as is typical, more researchers have chosen to conduct short-term, cross-sectional studies (Bolgar et al., 1995; Drapeau et al., 1999; Kalter & Rembar, 1981; McCabe, 1997; Pryor, 1999).

Effects of Divorce on Children's Personality

A classic study conducted by Hetherington (1972) investigated divorce's effect on children's personality. Specifically, Hetherington focused on the impact of father absence on the personality development of adolescent daughters. Three groups of 24 girls were followed. One group consisted of those who were from intact families with both parents

living in the same home. The second group consisted of those females whose fathers were absent from the home due to divorce and with whom the children had minimal contact. The third group consisted of those girls whose father was absent due to death. The groups involving paternal absence had not had any males living in the home since the divorce or death occurred.

The study included five sets of measures (Hetherington, 1972). These measures consisted of observational measures of behavior in a recreation center; nonverbal behavior when interacting with a male or female interviewer; ratings based on interviews; ratings based on interviews with the mother; and scores on the California Personality Inventory Femininity Scale (Gough, 1957), Internal-External Control Scale (Rotter, 1966), short form of the Manifest Anxiety Scale (Bendig, 1956), and the Draw-a-Person Test for mothers and daughters (Machover, 1957).

Results

Results of the study demonstrated that females who experienced father absence did in fact suffer from negative effects (Hetherington, 1972). Specifically, the girls' exhibited less appropriate interaction with males, though relationships with other females did not appear to be as dramatically affected. Overall, dependency seemed to be increased due to the absence of a father figure. However, Hetherington notes that this is often viewed to be a feminine trait and therefore, is a result that is likely to be termed trivial.

Divorce and the Well-being of Children: A Meta-analysis

Although Hetherington's (1972) study was empirical and yielded conclusive results, regardless of the studies' designs, inconsistent findings are presented across the

existing body of research regarding the effects of divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Duran-Aydintug, 1997). As a result, it can become complicated for the reader to digest large numbers of contradictory studies when trying to achieve common ideas to apply in a clinical setting. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, a meta-analysis by Amato and Keith will be reviewed to help the reader obtain a comprehensive view of what quality research has been conducted regarding the effects of parental divorce on children and what implications have emerged.

Amato and Keith (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 92 studies involving 13,000 children that compared the well-being of children living in single-parent homes following a divorce to those living in continuously intact families. Amato and Keith's project had three guiding purposes: to examine and estimate the effects of parental divorce on children across all available studies, to determine what study characteristics in the past have yielded the various effect sizes, and to speculate as to how cumulative evidence from all available studies support three common theoretical perspectives regarding the effects of divorce on children.

Amato and Keith (1991) initially discuss these three theoretical perspectives regarding why divorce may have negative effects on the well-being of children. The three perspectives are based on common themes that they found to pervade the body of research in this area. The three perspectives are: parental absence, economic disadvantage, and family conflict. The parental absence perspective posits that the absence of a parent that the child has been seeing on a regular basis is detrimental to child well-being. The economic disadvantage perspective offers that the change in economic status that often results after divorce occurs is an important determinant of any decline in

children's well-being. Lastly, the family conflict perspective argues that conflict that is present prior to and during the marital demise may lead to the problems in child well-being. After reporting the results of their meta-analysis Amato and Keith examine the support for these three perspectives based on their meta-analytic findings.

Meta-analysis Methodology

Amato and Keith (1991) provide extensive information regarding their methodology. The studies that were included in the meta-analysis were discovered through manual searches of three main databases: *Psychological Abstracts*, *Sociological Abstracts*, and *Social Sciences Index*. Further, computer databases and reference sections of review articles were utilized. Four criteria were implemented to determine whether or not a study would be included in the meta-analysis. First, the study had to include a sample of children living in a single parent home as a result of divorce as well as a separate sample of children who were living in a continuously intact family. Second, the study had to include at least one quantitative measure of well-being. Third, data had to be presented in such a way that at least one effect size could be calculated. Last, the study had to involve children. Studies involving adult children of divorce other than college students were reserved for a future meta-analysis.

Amato and Keith (1991) also provide an extensive discussion of the way in which they calculated effect sizes for each study included in the meta-analysis. A separate effect size was calculated for each "independent sample" within a study (p. 28). The independent samples are defined as any sample that was considered apart from another. Reportedly, 113 independent samples were represented within the 92 total studies. To attempt greater clarity in their conclusions, they calculated effect sizes separately based

on the presence or absence of control over the variables when adjusted and unadjusted results were provided in a study. However, due to a small number of studies using controlled variables and because many mixed pre- and post-divorce controls existed in many analyses, they grouped all effect sizes based on any type of control in one group. Therefore, the reader is advised to use discretion when interpreting the resulting effect sizes for the controlled variables.

The variables of the meta-analysis were determined to fall into the following categories: outcome measures, characteristics of the various studies, substantive characteristics of the samples from chosen studies, and race of the studies' samples (Amato & Keith, 1991). Outcome measures were coded into eight categories. The first category was that of academic achievement. This was measured using standardized test scores, grades, and/or teachers' reports. Secondly, conduct was considered through misbehaviors, aggression, or delinquency. The third outcome measure was psychological adjustment. This aspect was operationalized as depression, anxiety, or happiness. The fourth outcome measure was self-concept and was considered to be observed through self-esteem, perceived competence, or internal locus of control. The fifth measure was social adjustment and was examined through popularity, loneliness, or cooperativeness. Sixth was the outcome measure of mother-child relations. This was thought to be evident through help, affection, or quality of interaction. Likewise, the seventh measure was considered in the same way for father- child relations. The final measure to be considered was titled other and was made available for any other outcomes that may be observed in a study. It is important to consider that although Amato and Keith created these categories

of outcome measures, all final results were lumped into a generalized term of well-being for conclusions. They do not explain in the article why they decided to use this approach.

Observing the characteristics of the studies' samples included looking at aspects such as participant gender, age, time elapsed since divorce occurred, the year during which the study took place, and finally, in what country the study was conducted (Amato & Keith, 1991). The authors determined the importance of considering many of the above-mentioned characteristics based on the results of two landmark longitudinal studies conducted by Hetherington (1993) and Wallerstein (1991).

Once variables were coded, it became clear to Amato and Keith (1991) that the classification of outcomes left room for disagreement. As a result, reliability checks were conducted. A Cohen's kappa value of .84 was calculated and was considered to be a moderately high level of agreement. Further, a reliability check was also conducted for the effect-size calculations. Again, a product-moment correlation of .98 was calculated and considered to be a high level of agreement.

Meta-analysis Findings

The findings related to divorce and the effects on children's well-being were first examined through overall effect sizes across the studies (Amato & Keith, 1991). Initially, effect sizes across all measures of well-being were considered. This technique yielded the conclusion that over two thirds of the studies detected lower levels of well-being in children of divorce compared to children from intact homes. Further, when effect sizes were examined more closely, it became clear to Amato and Keith that when control variables were utilized, effect sizes were weaker than when control variables were absent.

Amato and Keith's (1991) close examination of effect sizes across the studies yielded an important conclusion related to divorce and its effect on children's well-being. The findings verified that children of divorce do experience lower levels of well-being than their peers from continuously intact families. Further, based on an extensive literature review on adult children of divorce, Amato and Keith maintained the opinion that children of divorce do exhibit long-term negative consequences as a result of the dissolution.

Although at first glance the above findings seem to offer long awaited conclusions, Amato and Keith (1991) explain that the effect sizes that support the evidence are weak rather than strong. This suggests that although the findings are statistically significant, many may judge them to be trivial. Further, the authors go on to state that their findings cannot support previous researchers' claims that divorce has "profound detrimental effects on children" (p. 30). They speculate that researchers in the past have spent more time discussing areas of significance regardless of how minimal rather than those that revealed no significance. Thus the generalized notion of detrimental effects on children has pervaded the research and public information.

Theoretical Perspectives

Amato and Keith (1991) examined the earlier mentioned theoretical perspectives to see what support has been gained or lost for each as a result of the meta-analysis. The first perspective is the parental absence perspective. This view holds that both parents are integral to a child's ability to develop socially and emotionally. When this family system is disrupted and the child loses one of the parents, stability is shaken and the child's worldview is tainted. This idea was investigated by examining studies that included

children who had lost a parent to death. These children also demonstrated a lower level of well-being than their peers with intact two-parent families. This concurs with the findings related to children of divorce. However, further analysis showed that children of divorce had even lower levels of well-being than their peers who had experienced the loss of a parent to death. This finding suggests that there is an additional, unrecognized force operating in divorced families that further lowers the children's level of well-being.

Another hypothesis related to the parental absence perspective is that of the child's level of well-being if a parent remarries. No support was found for the idea that the presence of a stepparent solves a child's problems related to well-being. In fact, there was some support that the children living in a home with a stepparent were worse off than their peers not living with a stepparent.

Finally, Amato and Keith (1991) found conflicting findings regarding whether the level of contact and quality of the relationship with the noncustodial parent is positively associated with the children's well-being. Gender of both the child in question and the noncustodial parent seemed to play some role in whether or not this idea holds true. The authors do not expound on this role, they simply mention that it exists.

The economic disadvantage perspective offers that any difficulties exhibited by children of divorced parents can be traced back to economic struggles that the family is facing as a result of the divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991). Across the 92 studies examined, no credible support could be found for the notion of economic disadvantage. To further investigate the matter, Amato and Keith considered those children whose divorced parents chose to remarry either each other or new partners. Given the idea behind the

economic disadvantage perspective, the simple remarriage of the parents should remedy the child's problems. Again, little to no support for this hypothesis was found.

Finally, the family conflict perspective argues that if parents are involved in marital discord at such a level that children are exposed the children suffer. This exposure is thought to raise the children's anxiety levels and put them on edge. According to this theory, it is likely that children will worry that they will be forced to take a side or choose where they want to live.

The first hypothesis related to this perspective that Amato and Keith (1991) examined is that children from intact families with high levels of discord exhibit problems similar to those from divorced parents. Indeed, analysis of the available studies supported this hypothesis in that not only did the children from intact families with high levels of discord suffer from lower levels of well-being than their peers from intact families with low conflict, but they also had lower levels than their peers from divorced parents.

The second hypothesis is that if marital discord accounts for a child's problems related to well-being, upon marital dissolution the problems should dissolve (Amato & Keith, 1991). Longitudinal studies included in the analysis supported this idea. However, cross sectional studies did not yield such support. As a result, Amato and Keith argue that the longitudinal studies' designs are more powerful at detecting differences than are those of between-subject designs of the cross-sectional studies. Therefore, they have chosen to agree that the hypothesis is supported. In summary, the perspective that is best supported by the evidence obtained through the meta-analysis is the family conflict perspective.

Conclusions

Amato and Keith (1991) draw several generalized conclusions from their work. They determined that parental divorce does lower the level of well-being for children. However, the effects are generally weak and therefore, do not seem to be as profound as they are often portrayed in current literature. Amato and Keith think that the weak effect sizes can be interpreted in two ways. First, the divorce of one's parents may be a life stressor that over the course of a life span does not have any major effects. Secondly, there may be serious effects but to date, they have not been clearly revealed statistically. The authors speculate as to why this may be so.

First, the reason that serious effects of divorce, if they exist, may not have been revealed is related to the measurement of dependent variables. Often when "crude" measurement of dependent variables occurs, random measurement errors occur as well. As a result, the true effect size may be underestimated. Second, negative effects of divorce may also remain undetected due to many researchers investigating a number of outcomes that are not necessarily linked theoretically to divorce. In these cases, Amato and Keith's (1991) effect sizes become difficult to interpret as they were meant to relate solely to issues surrounding divorce. Finally, Amato and Keith offer that perhaps negative effects have not been strongly detected due to researchers looking in the "wrong place" (p. 40). They suggest that perhaps a more appropriate place to investigate effects of divorce on well-being is in the adult children of divorced parents. This opinion stemmed from a review of literature on adult children of divorce that implied that divorce has lasting implications for children's life chances into adulthood.

The strength of Amato and Keith's (1991) overall conclusions relies on the quality of the methodological review they provide. The manner in which they carried out their analysis of the studies' methods was quantitative in nature and extremely thorough. Another aspect of the study that is noteworthy is that overall, results of the meta-analysis suggest "that the implications of parental divorce for children's well-being have become less pronounced since the 1950's and 1960's" (p. 34). Amato and Keith offer a number of ideas about why this trend is so. First, divorce became a more common occurrence during the 60's and 70's and surveys of attitudes show that it is now more accepted than in earlier decades. Further, the increased show of public concern regarding the effects of divorce on children may be leading parents to take a more active role in reducing the impact the dissolution has on their children.

Age at the Time of Divorce

When considering the effects that divorce has on children, it is important to examine the age at which the divorce occurred. This concept is supported in the literature but conflict arises when one posits as to when the greatest impact is observed. For example, some believe that the earlier in a child's life that divorce occurs, the more negative effects the child will experience. Pagani et al. (1997) belong to this group and they conducted a retrospective study that yielded such results. The study took place within the context of a larger longitudinal study of development that involved 6397 children. For the purpose of their study, 1316 children from a variety of family situations were selected from the pool of participants and their data from the end of kindergarten to early adolescence was examined. At the time of the first wave of the study, 117 of the 1316 children were from divorced families. Pagani et al. considered the children's results

from a behavior questionnaire that had been completed by the respective teachers over the years. During the time that lapsed, many of the children experienced change in the home environment related to marital status of their parents.

Five types of behavior were of particular interest to Pagani et al. (1997) including anxious behavior, hyperactive behavior, physically aggressive behavior, oppositional behavior, and prosocial behavior. In regards to anxiety, they found that children whose parents divorced before they were eight years of age displayed more anxious behavior at age twelve than did their peers from intact families. Similarly, hyperactive behavior seemed to be differentially impacted by age at the time of parental divorce. When the divorce occurred before the age of eight, more hyperactivity was reported whereas if the divorce occurred after the age of eight, no discernable difference was found.

Pagani et al. (1997) found that if a child's parents divorced before the age of eight, there seemed to be an increased frequency of aggression and oppositional behavior at school. For those children whose parents divorced before the age of six, more disobedience and defiance was observed than in their peers from non-divorced families. The area of prosocial behavior did not appear to be affected by life events such as divorce but the researchers plan to follow the same children into early adulthood to determine any future developments.

Zill et al. (1993) also found that the earlier parental divorce occurred in a child's life, the more negatively he or she was affected. Their study was retrospective in that they utilized data from a three-wave longitudinal study that had already been conducted. A total of 2301 children participated in the original study and Zill et al. used 240 that had participated in all three waves and whose parents divorced prior to the youths reaching 16

years of age. The authors are unclear about how these 240 cases were drawn and they report conflicting information about the number of participants used in the analysis. The researchers broke their participants into three groups on the basis of age at the time of parental divorce (i.e. divorce before the age of six, between six and sixteen, and remarried parents). The operational definition of remarriage is unclear. Upon conducting a multiple classification analysis using the data already available from the original study, those whose parents divorced earlier were found to experience more behavior problems in adolescence and adulthood than those who divorced later. Zill et al. did not elaborate as to what behavior problems were found which leaves one puzzled when looking for more concrete information to work from.

Allison and Furstenberg (1989) conducted a qualitative study that yielded results that supported Zill et al. (1993). It should be noted that this could be related to the fact that both of these studies drew their data from the same original longitudinal study. The participants of this study were taking part in a national survey of children and interviews had been conducted in two waves. The interviews took place with both the children and the adult living with them who claimed to know them the best. In addition, questionnaires were originally sent out to the children's teachers. Behavior was assessed through both the interviews and teacher reports in the areas of problem behavior, psychological distress, and academic performance. Allison and Furstenberg's retrospective study compared data across these three measures for children from intact families with those who had experienced marital dissolution. As mentioned above, this study supported that children whose parents divorced, and especially those whose parents divorced while the child was a younger age, were affected more negatively than their peers from intact

families. Allison and Furstenberg suggest that this may be due to younger children's vulnerability because they rely more on their parents and are not as able to seek out extra familial support systems such as friends or other adults. Further, the authors believe that younger children are more vulnerable due to being in a "more formative stage of development and are therefore less resilient when faced with a traumatic event" (p. 545). Although the conclusions seem to be supported by the study, one may question the solidarity of the findings since it was not these researchers who conducted the interviews.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those that have found that the earlier a divorce occurs in child's life the less they are affected. Grant et al. (1993) considered the impact of parental divorce on the ability to adjust to the college environment. The researchers mailed out 1000 questionnaires designed to measure adjustment to college to a randomly selected portion of the registered freshmen students on campus. A total of 387 students returned the completed questionnaire, 341 respondents were eligible to participate in the study, and only 65 had parents who were divorced. It was found that the student whose parents divorced during the preschool years adjusted to college easier than did those whose parents divorced when they were school age. However, it is also noted that there were no significant differences between those whose parents remained married and those who had divorced regarding adjustment to life in college. It is important to verify these between group differences before drawing conclusions within the group of those whose parents are divorced.

Duran-Aydintug (1997) found that children whose parents divorced early in their childhood were better able to overcome trust and commitment issues than were those whose parents divorced later in their lives. The qualitative study was conducted in the

format of in-depth interviews with 60 volunteer participants all of whom had experienced parental divorce. Only three students had experienced parental divorce prior to age five whereas 27 had the experience between the ages of six and eleven, and 24 participants between the ages of twelve and eighteen. It is a concern that any conclusions regarding age were drawn among the groups when their sizes were so discrepant. Further, there is no clear explanation as to what information was collected during the interviews leaving the reader confused as to how the author drew her conclusions.

McCabe (1997) found that for the male participants in her study, the age at which parental divorce occurred did make a difference later in life with respect to the quality of relationships they experienced when compared to their peers from intact families. Seventy-one participants, 38 of which were from divorced parents, took part in the study and they were administered a relationship questionnaire and the Beck Depression Inventory. Females from divorced families reported higher levels of depression than did their peers from intact families and those whose parents divorced while they were at a younger age had healthier relationships. The study involved both male and female participants but females did not seem to be as affected by their age at the time of parental divorce.

Pryor (1999) specifically addressed the self-reported issues that children of divorce may face when the dissolution occurs during young adulthood. Sixteen men and women whose parents divorced when they were 18 or older were interviewed for the study but no mention is made as to where they were obtained. Participants in the study (a number is not given) claimed that their doubts about the successes of their own relationships were based on the failure they observed in their parents' relationship. Pryor

claims “adult children of separation do not experience the stresses of a reduction in household income, changes of homes and schools, or the re-partnering of parents, which usually accompany parental separation in childhood” (p. 57). Pryor points out that instead these young adults are affected by experiencing a lack of parental support due to the need of the parents to focus on their own problems. Further, Pryor posits that these children of divorce are left with a great sense of responsibility to take on the care of any younger siblings while the parents are sorting out their differences. The study has strong implications that unfortunately lack credibility due to an unclear explanation of its methodology and confusion regarding whether all of the participants reported the above feelings or just a portion of them.

Conclusions

Existing research regarding age at the time of parental divorce and resulting effects is conflicting. One group of researchers believes that the earlier a child experiences the divorce of their parents the more negatively affected he or she will be. A second group of researchers believes the opposite is true. Again, this leaves the reader with no clear consensus regarding problems a client may be facing as they relate to the time in their lives when their parents divorced. It is also interesting to note that of the above mentioned studies, three are retrospective in nature, two are cross-sectional empirical studies with weak methodology, and two are qualitative with no standardized or clearly explained method of obtaining data. This again leads readers to question the solidarity of what they have been presented.

Interpersonal Problems and Parental Divorce

Another theme that appears in the current literature regarding the effects of divorce on children is how interpersonal issues are affected in relation to when the divorce occurs in their lives. This is an idea that Hetherington (1972) introduced in her study. However, before considering how this relationship is portrayed in the literature, it is first necessary to define what interpersonal issues and problems mean. By definition, the word interpersonal describes the interaction between two or more people. Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, and Pincus (2000) stated, “all people, from birth onward, engage in interactions with others, and each person’s salient interpersonal experiences are represented cognitively and emotionally” (p. 2). Further, they posit that these representations serve as guides for how each person in an interaction perceives, thinks, and feels about the current interactive situation. Therefore, interpersonal problems can be defined as the areas in which breakdown occurs in this interaction due to experiences that each individual has experienced in his/her past.

Pryor (1999) believes that children who experience parental divorce find themselves in conflict regarding how they feel about their own personal relationships based on what they observed happen between their parents. As a result, the children may either enter into relationships prematurely or not at all out of fear of not handling it in a way that is likely to ensure the bond’s success.

A study that looked at the effect of age of parental divorce and later interpersonal problems was one by Duran-Aydintug (1997). This study found through in-depth interviews that for some of the six respondents whose parents divorced after the age of eighteen, trust and fear of commitment were issues of concern. Further, several

participants shared that they were troubled by the thought of trusting someone enough to form a long-lasting bond which often resulted in them ending relationships prematurely to protect themselves from what they feared most, failure.

Bolgar et al. (1995) conducted a study specifically to address interpersonal problems that may occur in adult children of divorce. The study took place in a university setting with 125 participants from divorced families and 467 from intact families. Participants were contacted at a Health Service Center where they were waiting to be examined. Each participant was asked to complete the short version of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP), a standardized, self-report inventory as well as a second questionnaire that was devised by the authors. The IIP investigated the following areas of interpersonal problems: intimacy, sociability, assertiveness, submissiveness, responsibility, and control. The author's questionnaire obtained information about the following through categorical questions: age at the time of parental separation, ordinal position of the child, custody granted upon divorce, paternal remarriage or stable long-term living arrangement, and maternal remarriage or stable long-term living arrangement. Further, the participants were also asked to rate the following on a 5-point Likert scale: level of pre-separation hostility between the parents, level of postseparation maternal interference in the relationship with the father, level of post-separation paternal interference in the relationship with the mother, and frequency of contact with the non-custodial parent.

The study yielded that age at the time of divorce did not play a role in later interpersonal problems based on the results taken from the IIP. The areas of interpersonal problems where young adult children of divorce differed from young adults from intact

families were over control and submission. Bolgar et al. went on to speculate that the need for control might stem from feelings of lack of control during the marital dissolution. Further, the authors speculate that the difficulty with submission is largely for the same reason. Bolgar et al. also state that some antecedents that seemed to cause an increase in interpersonal problems for the participants were the mother's relationship history after the divorce and high levels of parental discord both before and after the divorce. The reader must again consider that the information from which this conclusion was drawn came from the non-standardized questionnaire created by the authors for the purpose of the study.

Although it has been considered briefly in the existing literature, more research is needed in the area of how age at the time of parental divorce and later interpersonal difficulties correlate with one another. Current research presents conflicting information regarding the effect of a child's age when parental divorce occurs and therefore, cannot provide an adequate framework from which to work. Bolgar et al.'s (1995) study approached the question of how the age at the time of parental divorce and subsequent interpersonal problems are related; however, childhood antecedents as they relate to interpersonal problems were their primary interest, not age at the time dissolution occurred. In addition, the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems has since become a copyrighted instrument with eight subscales and was used in the long form for this study. Finally, the diversity of age in the present study's available participant population is an advantage over Bolgar et al.'s in providing a more comprehensive look at the effects of divorce as they relate to interpersonal problems in adult life based on the age at which the divorce occurred.

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between the two issues of interpersonal problems and the age at the time of parental divorce with the intention of obtaining more conclusive results than is currently available. It was hypothesized that adult children from divorced families would differ in their types of interpersonal problems than their peers from intact families. Further, it was also hypothesized that if those adult children whose parents divorced while they were younger exhibit interpersonal problems, they were likely to be of different types than those whose parents divorced when they were older. Results from this study were hoped to provide professionals with information to help them adequately serve the adult children of divorce who will choose to render their services.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Participants

Participants were Austin Peay State University students. A sign-up sheet was posted soliciting volunteers in the Psychology Department. Students were informed that they would be asked to complete a demographic data sheet and a short survey regarding interpersonal problems. The sign-up sheet also stated that the approximate time involved would be twenty minutes. Potential participants were not told the true purpose of the study at this time.

An estimated minimum sample for a medium effect size and .80 power was 81 participants (Cohen, 1988). Attempts were made to reach a minimum of 81 participants who came from families with divorced parents. For the purpose of an additional analysis, an equal number of participants from intact families were also required for this study.

Instrument

The Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz et al., 2000) was available in two forms consisting of either 64 or 32 items. The 32-item inventory is intended for screening purposes only. The longer version provides a more complete set of information about interpersonal problems; therefore, it was selected for use in this study. Participants were presented with 64 statements that describe commonly encountered interpersonal problems. Specifically, half of the items began "The following are things you find hard to do with other people" and the other half of the items began with "The following are things that you do too much." Participants were then asked to respond using a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely."

The purpose of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP) is to “identify a person’s most salient interpersonal difficulties” (Horowitz et al., 2000, p. 1). The authors began developing the instrument using information they gathered during intake interviews at a large medical facility. Horowitz et al. noticed that many people expressed interpersonal problems as part of the interviews and they developed a battery of problems that were most frequently mentioned. These resulting items were used to develop the scales that make up the inventory today.

A preliminary inventory was created and administered to establish internal consistency and temporal stability (Horowitz et al., 2000). It was determined that responses were stable over a two-month period ($r = .77$)

To further refine the instrument, licensed clinical psychologists removed ambiguous and redundant items (Horowitz et al., 2000). A final pool of 127 items was retained. The items were then divided into the two sections. The first section of 78 items began “It is hard for me to” and the second section of 49 items “These are things I do too much.” This 127-item scale was again administered and it was during factor analysis that the eight subscales comprised of a total of 64 items emerged.

To ensure that the normative sample was representative of the United States population, Horowitz et al. (2000) used the U.S. Bureau of the Census report as a baseline. Equal numbers of participants were selected by gender and within each gender classification, race and level of education were equally distributed. To address regional representation, participants were chosen from eight cities. Further, a large city and small city were selected from each of four regions of the country. Norm groups were developed and the inventory was administered.

Once the representative sample was established and the inventory was administered, the raw scores were standardized using a linear T score transformation with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 (Horowitz et al., 2000). The standard T scores for each norm group were determined using means and standard deviations that were specific to the group.

Internal consistency reliability for each of the eight subscales and the total score were computed and found to be high. Since this study will look specifically at the overall score of the inventory as it relates to the hypothesis, it is important to consider that a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .96 was reported for internal consistency of the overall scale.

Test-retest reliability was also examined for the IIP-64 standard scores. Sixty individuals were given the inventory twice with a seven-day interval. The inventory's stability was not as high as to be expected and there was variability between sub-scales. The scale's test-retest reliability for the total score was $r = .79$. It is speculated that this lower than expected finding was a result of the non-clinical normative sample.

Validity for the IIP was examined by correlating the instrument with other assessments of psychological symptoms such as depression. A correlation ranging from .31 to .48 was calculated. Horowitz et al. (2000) feel that this is a result of interpersonal problems being related to, but not predictive of, depression.

Procedure

Information was provided to prospective participants about where and when the study will take place via the sign-up sheet. Participants signed up for 20-minute sessions with a maximum of twenty individuals per time slot for logistical purposes. As

participants arrived, they were given a packet of information including two informed consent documents (Appendix A) and a copy of the IIP-64. Before being allowed to begin completing the IIP-64, the researcher reviewed the informed consent document with the participants. Each participant was then asked to sign one of the informed consent documents and return it to the researcher with the completed inventory. The other copy was for the participants to keep. At this time, participants were still not told the true purpose of the study.

Instructions were read to the participants as outlined in the IIP test manual. Upon the inventory's completion, participants were instructed to raise their hands. A demographic data sheet (Appendix B) was then given to each participant as to not evoke any negative feelings related to parental divorce prior to completing the test instrument. The demographic data sheet asked participants for information regarding their present age, race, education level of their parents, and if their parents are divorced, at what age did they separate. See the Appendix for the full document.

As each demographic information sheet was completed, the participants were asked to bring all of their materials to the front of the room. The informed consent documents were separated from the other materials and the IIP and demographic data sheet were stapled together. As the materials were turned in, each participant was given the debriefing form (Appendix C) and provided with a final opportunity to withdraw their participation. The debriefing form explained that the true purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between parental divorce and interpersonal problems. It was also asked of the participants to not share this information with future participants. Each

participant will then be given “verification of participation” slips that could be used for extra credit at the discretion of instructors.

Deception was necessary for this study. Because there was a risk that if participants were aware a priori that their score was being correlated with the age at the time of parental divorce, there was a chance that they may answer items differently due to underlying psychological factors such as guilt and/or anxiety. In addition, there was a risk of data contamination if those simply out to receive extra credit were allowed to participate if they had not experienced parental divorce. No harm was intended and the debriefing form explained the deception in detail (see Appendix C).

Data Analysis

After scoring the completed inventories, the data was entered into Systat 10 for review. Two specific analyses were conducted to test the study’s non-directional hypotheses. First, a t-test was conducted to see if a difference in overall scores on the IIP existed between the groups of participants whose parents were divorced versus those whose parents were together in regards to interpersonal problems. This analysis was necessary due to the need to determine whether or not there was any variation in the presence of interpersonal problems between the two groups before drawing any conclusions among those whose parents are divorced.

Second, a correlation matrix of both total and subscale scores was constructed to examine the relationships between the age at time of parental divorce and any resulting interpersonal problems. This served to provide a statistical illustration as to any relationship that may have existed as a result of the age at the time of parental divorce. The subscales included the following relationship dynamics: domineering/controlling,

vindictive/self-centered, cold/distant, socially inhibited, nonassertive, overly accommodating, self-sacrificing, and intrusive/needy. A database was maintained to consolidate inventory results and demographic information for each participant.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Participant Information

A total of 106 participants volunteered for this study. This overall group consisted of 25 individuals whose parents were divorced and 81 whose parents were not divorced. For the purpose of this study, 48 protocols were utilized for analysis. The final sample consisted of 24 participants who indicated that their parents had divorced and 24 whose parents were still married. Participants included in the married group were chosen by selecting every third packet. The age at the time of participation for the parental divorce group ranged from 19 to 41 years with a mean age of 23.5 ($SD = 5.3$). For the group whose parents were still married, age ranged from 19 to 44 years with a mean age of 24 ($SD = 7.6$). Please see Table 1 for further information regarding participant demographics.

Analysis of Research Questions

The first hypothesis, that interpersonal problems would differ based on the marital status of the participants' parents during childhood, was investigated through the use of t-tests. Total scores and subscale scores were examined and statistically significant differences were not present between the groups and therefore, the hypothesis was not supported. It should be noted that a out of a possible score of 100, any score between 40 and 60 is deemed to be normal relative to a non-clinical, representative sample of United States citizens (Horowitz et al., 2000). This is the case for both total scores and subscale scores. Average scores in this study were within the range of this normative data. A summary of scores can be found in Table 2.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

| Demographic Category | n |
|----------------------|----|
| Parental Divorce | 24 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 6 |
| Female | 17 |
| Not Specified | 1 |
| Ethnicity | |
| American Indian | 1 |
| Hispanic | 2 |
| African American | 4 |
| Caucasian | 15 |
| Asian | - |
| Other | 2 |
| Still Married | 24 |
| Gender | |
| Male | 4 |
| Female | 18 |
| Not Specified | 2 |
| Ethnicity | |
| American Indian | - |
| Hispanic | - |
| African American | 6 |
| Caucasian | 16 |
| Asian | 1 |
| Other | 1 |

Table 2

Mean Scores by Group and t-test

| Scale | Divorced | Married | Pooled Variance t | df |
|--------------------------|----------|---------|-------------------|----|
| Total Score | 54.3 | 56.5 | -0.78 | 46 |
| SD | 9.9 | 9.2 | | |
| Range of Scores | 40 – 72 | 39 - 77 | | |
| Domineering/Controlling | 53.5 | 55.2 | -0.66 | 46 |
| SD | 9.5 | 9.1 | | |
| Vindictive/Self-Centered | 52.2 | 53.1 | -0.33 | 46 |
| SD | 7.6 | 10.3 | | |
| Cold/Distant | 51.1 | 52.6 | -0.56 | 46 |
| SD | 9.0 | 9.7 | | |
| Socially Inhibited | 54.2 | 54.5 | -0.08 | 46 |
| SD | 13.5 | 13.6 | | |
| Nonassertive | 53.8 | 57.2 | -1.06 | 46 |
| SD | 12.8 | 9.0 | | |
| Overly Accommodating | 53.7 | 56.3 | -0.80 | 46 |
| SD | 12.4 | 10.1 | | |
| Self-Sacrificing | 55.0 | 58.3 | -1.10 | 46 |
| SD | 11.0 | 9.7 | | |
| Intrusive/Needy | 54.5 | 54.2 | 0.07 | 46 |
| SD | 11.6 | 10.1 | | |

The second hypothesis investigated was related to the age at which parental divorce occurred in a child's life. Specifically, it was hypothesized that based on the age that the divorce occurred, interpersonal problems would correlate with age. The range for the age at the time of parental divorce was represented by a minimum of during pregnancy and a maximum of 24 years with a mean age of 7.8 and standard deviation of

7.4. A Pearson correlation was conducted to investigate the hypothesis and the analysis yielded no significant results and therefore the hypothesis was not supported. Despite this fact, future researchers may wish to consider that the Overly Accommodating scale had a correlation that approached significance ($r = 0.404$, $p = .05$) suggesting that there may be a meaningful relationship between this trait and the age at the time of parental divorce.

Correlations are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Results by Scale for Age At the Time of Divorce

| Scale | | Correlation | Probability |
|-------------|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total Score | | 0.326 | 0.119 |
| 1 | Domineering/Controlling | 0.131 | 0.541 |
| 2 | Vindictive/Self-Centered | 0.149 | 0.488 |
| 3 | Cold/Distant | 0.043 | 0.843 |
| 4 | Socially Inhibited | 0.163 | 0.445 |
| 5 | Nonassertive | 0.217 | 0.309 |
| 6 | Overly Accommodating | 0.404 | 0.050 |
| 7 | Self-Sacrificing | 0.343 | 0.101 |
| 8 | Intrusive/Needy | 0.314 | 0.135 |

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The current literature regarding the presence of negative effects of divorce in the lives of children is conflicting. Amato and Keith (1991) conducted an extensive meta-analysis to investigate the body of research and attempted to draw more solid conclusions. They concluded that negative effects are present in the lives of children of divorce compared to their peers from intact families but the discrepancy is weak.

Similarly, when one considers the literature regarding the impact of the child's age at the time of parental divorce, conflicting information is presented. Although most researchers have found that age plays a role in how a child adjusts, there is no agreement as to what age is more influential than another (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Grant, Smith, Sinclair, & Salts, 1993; McCabe, 1997; Pagani, Boulerice, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 1997; Pryor, 1999; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

Conflicting information is also found in the small body of research that exists in the area of interpersonal problems related to the age at the time of parental divorce. Some argue that children base their personal relationships on what they observe dynamically between their parents (Pryor, 1999). However, one study determined that no relationship exists between a child's age at the time of parental divorce and later interpersonal problems (Bolgar, Zweig, & Paris, 1995).

The current study sought to further investigate and even clarify the relationship between the age at the time of parental divorce and resulting interpersonal problems in adulthood. It also examined whether or not a significant difference would be detected between those whose parents were divorced and those whose parents were still together

regarding interpersonal problems in adulthood. Neither of the hypotheses was statistically supported and no difference in total scores on the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (IIP) between those whose parents were divorced and those whose parents were still married was found. Likewise, within the group of those whose parents are divorced, age did not correlate with self-reported interpersonal problems.

The results of this study do not support Duran-Aydintug's (1997) findings that trust and fear of commitment were problem areas for those whose parents divorced after the age of eighteen. Rather, scores on the IIP were found to be in the normal range indicating no more problems than one would expect in the normal population.

This study did support the findings of Bolgar et al. (1995) who conducted a similar study using the same instrument. Bolgar et al. found that the time of divorce in a child's life did not relate to interpersonal problems later in adulthood. Bolgar et al. did find that over control and submission were problems for those whose parents had divorced but it was impossible for this study to replicate that result due to the difference in the IIP scales since its standardization.

One limitation of this study is the small sample size that was obtained. It was determined a priori that a sample of 81 participants whose parents had divorced would be needed in order to obtain a medium effect size. This number was not obtained and therefore, the results may not have useful implications for the reader.

An example of how this limitation may have affected the study's results is indicated in Table 3. The subscale entitled Overly Accommodating approached significance with a correlation of 0.404. The IIP test manual states that a score of 70 or higher on this subscale indicates that a person portrays "excessive friendly

submissiveness" (p. 39) during interpersonal interactions. This suggests that the older the child at age of parental divorce, the higher they scored on the subscale. Although the group of those participants whose parents were divorced had a mean score of 53.75 on the subscale, the maximum score that was represented within the group was 81. Had a larger sample been obtained, there is a chance that this correlation would have been significant and meaningful.

It is believed that another limitation of this study was the use of the IIP. Several participants questioned the directions for the instrument during its administration leading one to wonder whether those who did not ask for clarification understood the directions and gave accurate responses. Specifically, several participants asked for new answer sheets when they realized that they were completing the instrument in the opposite way from which it was intended. For example, the questions asked the participants to rate situations based on the level of difficulty when faced with other people. However, the participants found that they had answered the items without considering how hard the situations were for them during interpersonal interactions.

Although no significant findings were discovered as a result of this study, I believe that this is an area worthy of future research. Further, it is recommended that a different instrument be utilized during future endeavors in hopes of finding one that is more sensitive to the experiences of this unique population. As Alden et al. (2000) pointed out, as humans, we engage in interactions regularly with other people and those interactions are carried with us into future interactions. When ideas about past interactions are altered due to life experiences, it is possible that interpersonal problems may result. Parental divorce is certainly an experience that qualifies as life changing and

therefore, must continue to be investigated to better understand its implications for the future of those affected.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Austin Peay State University

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This form is intended to provide you with information about this study. You may ask the researchers listed below about this study or you may call the Office of Grants and Sponsored Research, Box 4517, Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, TN 37044, (931) 221-7881 with questions about the rights of research participants.

1. **TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY:**

Interpersonal problems in adult college students (over the age of 18)

2. **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:**

Stacie S. Nicholson, Graduate Student

Dr. Nanci Stewart Woods, Faculty Supervisor

3. **THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

This study is being conducted to meet a research requirement for the fulfillment of a Masters degree. The purpose of the study is to investigate specific interpersonal problems faced by college students. At a later date, the study may be presented or published.

4. **PROCEDURES FOR THIS RESEARCH:**

When you arrive at the time for which you signed up, you will be seated and given a packet of materials. The packet will include two copies of this document and the instrument that you will complete. I will describe the study to you and review this document before we begin. Once your questions have been answered and if you choose to volunteer, you will sign both forms (you will keep one) and I will ask you to begin filling in the test items. When you have finished, you may raise your hand and I will provide you with a demographic information form that will ask you for such information as your race, gender, and the education level of your parents. Finally, I will pass out the extra credit slips that you may turn in to a professor to show that you were here. This should take about 15– 20 minutes total. The researcher will strive to protect your anonymity. The only form with your name on it is this one and it will be kept separately from your other materials in the office of my faculty supervisor. The instrument that you will be asked to complete and the demographic information sheet mentioned above will have corresponding numbers assigned only for the purpose of analyzing the data. This number will not be in any way linked with this document containing your name. If at a later date this study is published or presented, data will be provided only by groups.

5. **POTENTIAL RISKS OR BENEFITS TO YOU:**

A potential benefit for your participation in this study is extra credit that may be given at an instructor's discretion.

The test items you will respond to will be about how you relate to other people in certain situations. There is a small risk that this may cause you to have uncomfortable thoughts or feelings. If at any time you wish to stop your role in the study, you may do so. In addition, if there are any individual items that you do not wish to answer, you will not be penalized for not answering them. If you wish to talk to someone about any unpleasant thoughts or feelings you are having, I can provide you with information about a professional on campus that can help you free of charge.

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT:

I have read the above and understand what the study is about, why it is being done, and any benefits or risks involved.

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study, and my refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of rights.

I agree to participate in this study and understand that by agreeing to participate I have not given up any of my human rights.

I understand that while in this room, I have the right to withdraw my consent and stop participating at any time during the study and all data collected from me will be destroyed.

If I choose to withdraw, that choice will be respected and I will not be penalized or coerced to continue.

I understand that I will receive a copy of this form.

If I have questions about this study I may call Stacie S. Nicholson (Graduate Student, Psychology department) at 931-221-7233 or Dr. Nanci Stewart Woods (Faculty Supervisor, Psychology department) at 931-221-7236.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Your age in years as of today:

Race/Ethnicity (please circle)

American Indian

Hispanic

African American

Caucasian

Asian

Highest level of education
completed by your mother (please circle)

Elementary School

Jr High

Some High School

High School Diploma

Some College

Associates Degree

Bachelors Degree

Some Graduate Studies

Graduate Degree

Highest level of education
completed by your father (please circle)

Elementary School

Jr High

Some High School

High School Diploma

Some College

Associates Degree

Bachelors Degree

Some Graduate Studies

Graduate Degree

If your parents are divorced,
what was your age when they
began living separately?

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING FORM

The true purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between parental divorce and the presence of any interpersonal problems in adulthood. It was necessary to not share this with you initially in case your parents are divorced and the experience was a painful one for you. If this is the case, then it would be possible that you would be somewhat distracted by these thoughts and your answers on the instrument might have been affected. Having now been told the true purpose of the study, you are still free to withdraw your participation by stating your desire at this time. If this is the case, all of the information you have provided will be destroyed. I very much appreciate your time and participation in this study. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to ask me or contact my faculty supervisor listed on the informed consent document that you were provided.

VITA

Stacie Scott Nicholson was born in Clarksville, TN on May 26, 1976. She attended elementary through high school in Clarksville and graduated from high school in 1994 with honors. Stacie began college at Austin Peay State University in June of 1994 and received a Bachelor of Science degree from Middle Tennessee State University in May of 1998. In January of 2000 she entered the Graduate School at Austin Peay State University and received a Master of Arts degree in School Counseling in August 2002.