

Effects of divorce, custody arrangements, and guilt on college adjustment¹

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Abstract Perceived psychological health of parents, quality of parent-child relationships, and interparental conflict predicted adjustment outcome of college women more than divorce versus non-divorce background. Separation guilt, conceptualized as beliefs about potential or actual harm to loved ones, had a direct effect on adjustment outcome, rather than a mediating effect. Differences between sole maternal custody, joint custody, and non-divorced family experiences were examined.

Going to college is a significant rite of passage for countless numbers of teenagers. For many, college is seen as a necessary building block toward the looming inevitability of adulthood. The common thread between most college-bound young adults is to attend a school where one will succeed academically, socially, and emotionally and to attend an institution where one will be prepared for the future. That is the hope; however, some of these young adults may have unanticipated difficulties in adjusting to a new life where the emphasis rests on becoming independent and separating from their families. Why do some students encounter problems that may persist for years while other students seem to adjust immediately?

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Some recent research has suggested that children of divorce are at high risk for future maladjustment (Buchanan, C., Maccoby, E. & Dornbusch, S., 1996; O'Connor, L., Berry, J., Weiss, J., Bush, M. & Sampson, H., 1997). More recent studies have suggested that it is not divorce per sé which puts children at risk for maladjustment, but rather all of the variables that make up family life (Twaite, Silitsky, & Luchow, 1998). Not all children of divorce are at risk for future emotional problems, just as not all children of non-divorced families are exempt from future emotional problems. Our study investigated some of the determinants of college adjustment of students from divorced and non-divorced families, attending to certain critical variables of family life. The family life variables we studied were the psychological health of the parents as perceived by the children, the quality of the parent-child relationships, and the amount of interparental conflict. These three variables have been identified in the research on divorce as important in affecting child adjustment (Hanson, Saunders, & Kistner, 1992; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Black and Pedro-Carroll, 1993; Scherer, Mellow, Buyck, Anderson & Foster, 1996).

Successful adjustment to college requires separation from parents, feeling good about one's own achievements, and living confidently and independently. However, feelings of guilt may interfere in one's attempt to master the demands of college (Shilkret & Nigrosh, 1997; Baker & Siryk, 1984). Control-mastery theory, a modern cognitive-psychoanalytic approach, defines guilt as a belief about causing harm to others (Weiss, Sampson, and the Mount Zion Psychotherapy Research Group, 1986; O'Connor et al., 1997). Guilt is manifested in pathogenic beliefs, which are maladaptive notions that impede the pursuit of normal, desirable goals because these goals appear too dangerous to pursue. Such pathogenic beliefs may begin in childhood, become internalized, and continue to influence development throughout the lifespan.

Children may experience or be vulnerable to developing guilt due to many aspects of family life, such as the psychological health of the parents as perceived by the children, the quality of the parent-child relationships, and the amount of interparental conflict. For example, due to the relative egocentrism of the child, parental difficulties and conflicts might be conceived by the child as his/her fault. Lapses and less-than-optimal parenting may likewise be seen by the child as due to his/her own badness. Such conceptions serve, at the time, an adaptive function in preserving the relationship between parent and child; but they have the potential of being the basis for pathogenic beliefs later, and these can be maladaptive, especially when issues of separation from the family are salient.

While children in both divorced and non-divorced families experience similar psychosocial challenges, circumstances of divorce may place divorced families at increased risk for parental distress, problems in the parent-child relationship, and interparental conflict. For example, Twaite, et al. (1998) showed that, after a divorce, parents may be more lonely and depressed as they face many new stresses. Johnston (1995) found that depressed parents may not make the best parents, thus complicating the parent-child relationship. Also, children and adolescents of divorce tend to have less parental supervision, poorer parental communication, less affection from their parents, and less consistent discipline than do children of non-divorced families (Hetherington, 1982).

There is much diversity in divorce, not only due to these factors of family life, but also because of new custody arrangements. There are many different living arrangements for children post-divorce; we compared maternal custody with joint physical custody, both of these compared with non-divorced families. Each custody arrangement has its own complications which may contribute to feelings of guilt. For example, a girl living in maternal custody with a mother whom she perceives as depressed is more likely to take on a nurturing or even parental role with her

mother. Further, in this type of custody, she likely has to do this alone, without the buffer of a father. From control-mastery theory, we would expect that she may experience specific kinds of guilt, such as omnipotent responsibility guilt, which is derived from her feeling responsible for her mother's happiness and well-being. She may have difficulties adjusting to college because she unconsciously (and/or consciously) thinks she should not separate from her mother because such separation would somehow harm her mother.

Children of joint physical custody have the added benefit of keeping in close contact with their fathers, and they should find themselves less frequently in role reversals with their mothers, compared with those in maternal custody. However, children who live in this arrangement must negotiate their two worlds, which, at times of intense parental conflict can cause intense loyalty conflicts and the feeling they have no home anywhere, despite the reality that they have two physical homes (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989). Because they remain tied to both parents, they may also blame themselves if their parents engage in continuous conflict. This experience may contribute to feelings of self-hate guilt because the more a child feels threatened or caught between the parents, the more likely she is to develop anxiety, depression, or believe that she is to blame for the failed marriage.

Method

Ninety-one female college first- and second-year students composed the sample (17-20 years); they volunteered to participate in a study of divorce and family life. Thirty-five students were from non-divorced homes, 29 students made up the maternal custody group, and 27 students were in the joint custody group. Students were classified into the custody group they lived in for the majority of their life, since there were some students who had alternated between maternal and joint custody.

Five measures were administered: (1) Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, 1979); this classifies the parent-child relationship into two subscales, amount of reported Care and amount of Overprotection; (2) Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) which assesses the level of Interparental Conflict in the family; (3) an 18-item self-created scale to assess students' perception of parental psychological distress (a series of 5-point Likert scales with items such as, "Have you ever thought your mother might be depressed;" "Do you feel like your relationship with your mother was ever negatively affected by her emotional health?" and "Did you in the past take care of your mother more than you think you should have had to?". There were separate versions for mother and father); (4) The control-mastery Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire (IGQ, O'Connor, et al., 1996), with subscales for Survival Guilt (guilt about one's accomplishments), Separation Guilt (guilt about independence from family and recognition of parents' faults), Omnipotence Guilt (undue responsibility for others), and Self-Hate Guilt (about being worthy); (5) The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ, Baker & Siryk, 1989), a standard measure of college adjustment which yields subscales for Academic, Social, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, and Attachment/Goal Commitment (a measure of commitment to finishing college and accomplishing personal goals).

Results and Discussion

We found, as other recent studies have also (Lopez, 1989; Grant, et al., 1993), that the global variable, divorce versus no divorce, was not related to overall adjustment outcome by the college years (ANOVAs for no SACQ scales or the Full Scale scores approached significance). Likewise, the two custody conditions (maternal versus joint) did not differ in terms of adjustment outcome. We conclude that the simple fact of divorce is not consistently a risk factor for adjustment during college.

Because we expected this outcome and because we wanted to study the effects of more specific family experiences, we included the three family life variables in this study. As Twaite, et al. (1998) reported recently, we also found that parents of divorce are perceived by their children as more psychologically distressed than students from intact families perceive their parents. This was true for both perceptions of mothers ($F = 6.88$; $df = 2, 88$; $p < .01$) and fathers ($F = 10.57$; $df = 2, 86$; $p < .0001$). Adult children of both custody groups perceived their parents equally and as psychologically more stressed than did children of intact families. This finding complements past research that has found that parents of divorce may face many stresses that may make them depressed or lonely.

Another expected result was that the children, in this case all daughters, of maternal custody reported that their fathers gave them less care than those in the non-divorced group ($F = 4.27$; $df = 2, 86$; $p < .05$). This finding is consistent with other research which found that it is not uncommon for fathers of maternal custody to eventually fall out of the lives of their daughters (Buchanan, et al., 1996). These fathers may simply not interact with and see their daughters as much as fathers in other living arrangements. There were no differences in the care reported by mothers for the three living arrangements; and fathers of joint custody children were seen as providing equal care as fathers in intact families.

Children of divorce, both joint and maternal custody groups, reported more interparental conflict during their childhoods than students of non-divorce ($F = 4.06$; $df = 2, 85$; $p < .05$). Our joint and maternal custody groups did not differ in the level of their relatively high conflict. Past research has not always corroborated the view that divorce is associated with high conflict, or that there is more conflict in divorced homes than non-divorced homes (Forehand and McCombs, 1988). However, our finding suggests that divorced homes may be more conflicted than non-divorced homes. Many researchers have suggested that it is interparental

conflict, and not the divorce per sé, “that accounts for many adjustment problems seen in children” (Hanson, Saunders, & Kistner, 1992, p. 435). Recall, however, that we used a new measure in this study to assess interparental conflict. This measure did not correlate with the other family life variables. Further psychometric study should be undertaken of our conflict measure before concluding it is truly independent of the other family experience factors, as it seemed to be for this sample.

Based on control-mastery theory, we had expected guilt to play an important role in understanding some of the effects of family experience on adjustment outcome. However, our results did not confirm this aspect of our expectations. With one exception, none of the guilt variables was found to be related to custody arrangement. The exception was the Separation Guilt measure. We had expected that the joint custody experience would lead to more separation guilt than the other experiences because often in joint custody, children separate frequently to follow prescribed visitation schedules. If there is conflict between the parents, loyalty conflicts may ensue for the child, which has been shown to create anxiety in children of joint custody (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). However, contrary to expectation, adult children from both joint custody and maternal custody experiences manifested less vulnerability to Separation Guilt (compared to the students in the non-divorced group) ($F = 4.47$; $df = 2, 88$; $p < .05$), with joint and maternal custody groups equal on this measure. We think that children of divorce, having had more experience in separations (and possibly with loyalty conflicts too) have had opportunities to master the potential difficulties of such experiences. By the time of leaving for college, these students seem somewhat better prepared to separate than other children who may not, until then, experienced any major separation from the family.

We did some causal modelling to study the potential role of guilt as a mediator between the family life variables and subsequent college adjustment outcome. However, our expectation was not confirmed. In one comparison, we examined the three important maternal variables (mother's perceived psychological health, care, and overprotection) and interparental conflict, as influencing guilt (an overall guilt measure) and adjustment outcome (the Full Scale scores of the SACQ). A model that treated guilt as the sole intervening variable between the family life variables and adjustment outcome did no better in predicting adjustment outcome than did a similar model proposing the family life variables have both direct and indirect effects (via guilt as a mediator) on later adjustment. In fact, this comparison showed that treating guilt solely as a mediating variable came close to modelling our data less well (Δ Chi-square = 7.77; Δ df = 3; $p < .10$).

We also asked our participants who had experienced divorce to comment on their early living situation and any particular stresses ingredient in their custody arrangements. Maternal custody students often commented on their sense of paternal abandonment. Therapists of maternal custody families should stress to fathers the importance of their presence in the lives of their daughters. Research has found that children highly benefit from staying in close contact with their non-custodial fathers. These comments reveal the poignancy with which these students struggled as a result of their fathers' absence.

(Divorce at age 11) Father lives in a different country, so I am not able to see him. It was a very unpleasant divorce. It causes me a lot of stress thinking that I was ripped away from my father and I am not able to see him.

(Divorce at 13) I hated it during the week, especially having to go to school with clothes and stuff...It's hard to break your life in half.

To conclude, our results suggest that children of divorce are at risk in particular ways under particular conditions. But in some instances, they are not at more risk than children of non-divorced families. These results suggest that divorce is neither simply guilt-provoking or growth-promoting. Rather, it has its advantages and disadvantages, as does growing up in non-divorced homes. There is hope, therefore, that given the right kinds of conditions, even certain adaptive possibilities of divorce can be enhanced.

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