

Extended Family Support: Making a Difference in the Attachment Styles of Adult Children of Divorce

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Abstract

Previous research has found that divorce negatively predicts college students' romantic relationships and intimacy (Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 2006). However, previous studies on adult children of divorce have not included extended family support as an influence on attachment styles. To address this void, the current study examined differences in attachment styles of children of divorced and intact parents and investigated whether extended family social support predicted attachment avoidance and anxiety among adult children of divorce. Simple linear regressions revealed that perceived extended family support did not significantly predict attachment avoidance among adult children of divorce. However, perceived extended family support did predict attachment anxiety, such that the greater the perceived extended family support, the lower the anxiety reported.

The relationship children have with their parents is one of the most important relationships they will experience during their entire lives (Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 2006). However, divorce (in which relationships with at least one parent are almost always disrupted) is gaining social acceptance (Riggio, 2004). Recently, researchers projected that at least half of the children born in the United States will live in a single parent home during at least one part of their childhood or adolescence (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Losing a parent through divorce disrupts the important parent-child relationship (Ensign et al., 2006).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) suggests that when the bonds between children and their attachment figures are disrupted, there is a long-term negative impact on the children's future social relationships and psychological adjustment (Mack, 2001). Previous research has found that parental divorce negatively predicts children's social interactions, presumably because the children have higher levels of interpersonal dependence than children from intact families who do not experience parental divorce (Maier & Lachman, 2000). Research has also found that divorce is negatively associated with the quality of college students' romantic relationships and levels of intimacy (Ensign et al., 2006). However, previous research has failed to include

extended family support as an additional predictor of the attachment styles of adult children of divorce.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was not only proposed to explain patterns of behavior between infants and caregivers, but also the bonds that children and other individuals make with important relational figures in their lives (Bowlby, 1988). The availability and responsiveness of the attachment figure gives an individual a strong and pervasive feeling of security. The attachment pattern established in childhood for styles of thinking, feeling, and interacting influence the way children navigate their environments throughout development (Miller, 2002). Although attachment behavior is most evident in childhood, it is observable throughout the entire human life cycle (Bowlby, 1988). Bowlby proposed that individuals have an innate desire to establish emotional bonds with others. In fact, the ability to create and maintain intimate bonds with others is a principle characteristic of a functional personality and mental health (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Interestingly, the combination of children's relationships with their fathers and mothers is not the same as their relationships with the parental couple (Person, Cooper, & Gabbard, 2005). Once children accept the parents as a couple, the children gain a sense of historical continuity within the family. The children depend on each parent through each stage of development. When the relationship between the father and the mother survives disagreements, children are strengthened, because they know it is not dangerous to live with and love individuals who are not in complete agreement.

Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory places emphasis on how early parent-child interactions are likely to influence the attachment security in an individual's later intimate adult life (Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000).

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According to Bowlby (1988), disruptive life events may cause changes in individuals' internalized schemas about close relationships. Parental divorce is a stressful and disruptive life event impacting children and adolescents, and may lead to adverse effects during late adolescent development. Few researchers have investigated the impact of parental divorce on college student adult attachment styles, and there have been inconsistent findings from the studies that have been conducted.

Lopez and colleagues (2000) found that parental divorce influenced their participants' recollection of early bonds. However, it did not influence their current adult attachment styles. Lopez and colleagues suggested that, within peer relationships, experiencing parental divorce may intensify dispositions toward attachment-related anxiety. In a study of adults' attachment representations, researchers found that adults' reflections and evaluations of their childhood experiences predicted their emotional bonds with their own children (Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, & Maurer, 2001). However, the researchers also noted that adults with highly unfavorable attachment-related experiences were as sensitive and responsive to their children as adults with favorable experiences.

Early relationships with caregivers influence how young people see themselves and behave with others (Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002). Offspring may acquire the dysfunctional strategies used by parents due to their exposure to a high conflict parental relationship (Riggio, 2004). Research has shown that minor life events may be disruptive to interpersonal relationships, mood states, and functioning (Hagerty et al., 2002). These disruptions have been associated with negative consequences for children's self esteem, peer relationships, and social functioning.

Types of Attachment

Bowlby's "working models of attachment" refer to individuals' expectations for themselves and others resulting from early relationship experiences with primary caregivers (Person et al., 2005). Bowlby (1988) suggested that these working models persist at an unconscious level and reflect how individuals' primary caregivers have treated them. These models may be self-enhancing, self-maintaining, or defensive (Person et al., 2005). According to Person and colleagues, self-enhancing models promote exploration of the world, whereas self-maintaining models work to maintain access to the attachment figures. Holmes (2001) suggested that defenses strategies are utilized to manage suboptimal environments and to maintain attachments when an individual may feel threatened by relational forces. Evidence from research studies show that parents, especially mothers, have strong influences on their children's development of attachment patterns (Bowlby, 1988).

Self-enhancing, self-maintaining, and defensive strategies can be explained using two dimensions of attachment (avoidance and anxiety) that form the basis of adult attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The first dimension is described as the person's abstract image of the self. In this dimension, the individual's image is dichotomized as positive (low anxiety) or negative (high anxiety), and is defined as viewing the self as worthy of love and support or not. The second dimension is described as the person's abstract image of another. The dimension is dichotomized as positive (low avoidance) or negative (high avoidance), and is defined as viewing other people as trustworthy and available versus unreliable and rejecting. These two dimensions can be combined to describe four attachment patterns. First, individuals with low avoidance and low anxiety display *secure attachment*, or a positive view of both themselves and their relationship partners (Shaver & Farley, 2004). Individuals displaying *preoccupied attachment*, or a negative view of themselves and a positive view of their relationship partners, are represented by low levels of avoidance and high levels of anxiety. Individuals with low anxiety and high avoidance display *dismissing avoidant attachment*, or a positive view of themselves, but a negative view of their relationship partners. Finally, individuals with high levels of both avoidance and anxiety display *fearful avoidant attachment*, or a negative view of both themselves and their relationship partners.

Adult Children of Divorce

Maier and Lachman (2000) found that separation from parents in childhood due to divorce predicts negative consequences for children's health and psychological adjustment in midlife. That is, children suffer emotionally and psychologically when their parents divorce (Baker, 2005). These negative consequences are enhanced when children of divorce are constantly exposed to conflict between their mothers and fathers. Similarly, the relationship between children and their parents may change due to parental divorce (Maier & Lachman, 2000). Adult children of divorce have a greater likelihood of not having a supportive relationship with either parent in midlife than children of intact families. Researchers have also found that parental divorce also predicts the probability of marrying for men (but not for women).

Quality of relationships in courtship and marriage, as well as psychological adjustment, is negatively associated with parental conflict (Ensign et al., 2006). These negative associations of parental conflict are counteracted by a good relationship the child may form with at least one parent. By comparing children of divorce with children of intact families, Ensign and colleagues found that the children of divorce who developed a close relationship with one of their parents did not notably differ in psychological and social adjustment from children from intact families.

In general, however, lower levels of parent-child quality are reported by adult children of divorce than adults raised in intact families (Mack, 2001). Mack found that when divorce occurred, a parent may be perceived by the child to be unavailable. Therefore, the child may show hostility and anger. Adult children of divorce are likely to reproduce anger and conflict in their relationships if they were exposed to parental anger and hostility during the process of their parents divorce.

Not all research suggests that there are only negative consequences associated with divorce, however. One study found that, over a period time after a divorce, children's adjustment improved with few psychological or behavioral disruptions (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997). It is possible that disrupted family connections that occur in divorce forces children to restructure relationships and find new ways to participate in new family systems. Evidence has shown that a relationship between a parent and child that is close, supportive, and warm is important for future adult functioning (Hagerty et al., 2002). Although when compared to children of married families some research has shown that children of divorce are at greater risk for behavioral problems (e.g., Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), most children of divorce do not exhibit these problems.

Some research has suggested that underlying psychological disorders are common and may appear many years after divorce (e.g., Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), especially as young people transition into adulthood. For example, Laumann-Billings and Emery found that many years after divorce young people experience sad, angry, or worried feelings. In addition to these feelings, they may have longings or doubt about their past, present, and future family relationships. These young people may also experience memories of intricate family experiences. Another study found that school-aged children reported more problematic beliefs if they experienced more anxiety, less social support, and poorer self-concepts in relation to their parents (e.g., Kurdek & Berg, 1987). Another study found that the negative adjustment of school-aged children was related to fear of abandonment and maternal self-blame (e.g., Wolchik et al., 1993).

There is also a higher rate of divorce among adult children of divorce than adults with no history of parental divorce (Shulman et al., 2001). Shulman and colleagues attribute this difference to poorer models of interpersonal behavior, which in turn leads to difficulty forming stable, satisfying, intimate, and trusting relationships with a spouse. Many adult children of divorce become fearful of disappointment, betrayal, and abandonment. However, research has also suggested that some adult children of divorce become more sensitive to problems in relationships and make a commitment to solving those problems (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee,

1989). Many of these children not only find loving partners, but become successful and protective parents.

Family Support

The lack of research addressing the pathways in which childhood adversity may have a long lasting impact on development is a limitation to literature (Maier & Lachman, 2000). To this end, Maier and Lachman proposed that the well-being of children after parental divorce is impacted in such a way that the likelihood of other stressors increase. The effect of the stressors may be lessened by certain protective resources. Maier and Lachman also suggested that poor health is also related to parental divorce because the divorce may lead to reduction in social support. Divorce limits the amount of support a child receives because one parent physically leaves the home. Furthermore, the amount of support received by the child from friends and family may decrease due to the loss of a parent associated with interpersonal difficulties. Finally, Maier and Lachman noted that social support may reduce the negative effects of parental support by decreasing the likelihood of stress experienced by the children.

As a result of poor parental models, young adults may have difficulty forming stable, satisfying relationships due to feelings of anxiety about participating in relationships (Riggio, 2004). Riggio found that poor quality parental relationships last into young adulthood. Young adults from high conflict families reported greater anxiety in personal relationships and fewer social supports than young adults from low conflict families. Therefore, young adults from high conflict families may expect low support, high conflict, and poor personal relationships. Furthermore, available social supports were rated higher in young adults of divorce than young adults from intact families.

Research has emphasized the importance of social support in encouraging positive child adjustment after parental divorce (Lussier et al., 2002). During times of familial stress, family members other than the parents often serve as sources of social support for children. In times of need, grandparents have historically provided support for the family. When there are strains on the family, grandparents provide extra support and help with childrearing.

Changes in many family transitions occur as a result of divorce (Lussier et al., 2002). The common practice of awarding custody of children to the mother places economical and emotional strain on the mother. Therefore, single mothers often request assistance from their parents for support. As a result, the grandparent-grandchild bonds after divorce are often stronger for maternal grandparents when compared with paternal grandparents. Lussier and colleagues found that this is likely due to frequency of contact, level of involvement, and feelings of closeness between grandparents and grandchildren. Some evidence also supports the idea that

the involvement of grandparents of children at risk for negative behaviors encourages children's social-emotional adjustment (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1982).

Present Study

Previous research has emphasized the need for social support for children of divorce (cf. Maier & Lachman, 2000). However, research on extended family support received by the adult children of divorce is lacking. Social and emotional support from family and friends during stressful events is extremely important (Van Der Merwe & Greeff, 2003). Although some researchers believe that the support of family members is more important than support of extended family members, extended family social support serves as a foundation of encouragement, security, and stability. To address this void in the literature, the current study examined the relationship between extended family social support and attachment in both intact and divorced families. It was expected that the current study would replicate previous studies, such that adult children of divorce would have higher levels of anxious and avoidant attachment than adult children of intact families. In addition, it was expected that among adult children of divorce, perceived extended family support would negatively predict attachment anxiety and avoidance.

Method

Participants

Ninety-nine students enrolled in non-traditional adult undergraduate¹ⁱ and graduate programs at a small private mid-western university participated in the study²ⁱⁱ. The researchers targeted this population because of the possibility that there would be a higher rate of parental divorce and a greater number of significant romantic relationships than among the traditional undergraduate students. Researchers recruited the participants during various courses at the university and participated in exchanged for goodies (such as cookies). Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for demographic and background characteristics. The average age of all participants was 37.49 years ($SD = 10.94$). The average number of years all participants lived with both primary caregivers prior to their divorce was 5.07 years ($SD = 1.37$).

Materials

Demographics and background questionnaire. All participants completed a demographic and background questionnaire. This questionnaire included information about gender, age, race, marital status, and education. It also included information assessing the marital status of the participants' biological parents (i.e., "What is your biological parents' marital status?"), which was used to determine whether or not the participant was considered an adult child of divorce (i.e., only participants that reported their parents "divorced" were included as adult children of divorced parents).

Table 1: *Descriptive Statistics for Demographic and Background Characteristics*

Variable	Number	Percent
Gender		
Female	71	71.72%
Male	27	27.27%
Not reported	1	1.01%
Ethnicity		
White, non Hispanic	64	64.65%
Black or African American	23	23.23%
American Indian or Alaska Native	8	8.08%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	1	1.01%
Other	2	2.02%
Not reported	1	1.01%
Parent's Marital Status		
Single, never been married	3	3.03%
Single, living with significant other	1	1.01%
Separated	1	1.01%
Divorced	29	29.29%
Widowed	12	12.12%
Married	50	50.51%
Not reported	3	3.03%
Participant's Marital Status		
Single, never been married	13	13.13%
Single, living with significant other	10	10.10%
Separated	1	1.01%
Divorced	16	16.16%
Widowed	1	1.01%
Married	57	57.58%
Not reported	1	1.01%

Extended family support. The Perceived Social Support Family Scale (PSS-Fa; Procidano & Heller, 1983) was used to assess the participants' social support from family. This instrument measures the degree to which perceived needs for support were fulfilled by an individual's family, using a "yes/no/don't know" response format. In the original development of the scale, the 20 items on this instrument were developed from a pool of 84 items and were chosen by the importance of items to total correlations. Procidano and Heller developed norms for the instrument using a sample of 222 undergraduate psychology students. They reported that the internal consistency of the PSS-Fa is very high, $r = .90$ and that the PSS-Fa also has good concurrent validity to measures of social competence as well as distress and

psychopathology (inversely related). Similarly, in the current sample, internal reliability was excellent, $r = .94$.

The instructions of the PSS-Fa ask the participant to refer to his or her “family” (Procidano & Heller, 1983). To assess extended family support, the instructions for the current study were altered to ask the participant to refer to his or her “extended family.” Each individual item was also changed from the use of the word “family” to “extended family.” For example, the statement “I rely on my family for emotional support” was changed to “I rely on my extended family for emotional support.” The term “extended family” was not defined for the participants; that is, participants were allowed to interpret for themselves those they would include in the definition of “extended family.”

Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) was used to assess participants’ adult romantic attachment styles. The ECR has a two dimensional scheme focused on experiences in romantic relationships. Brennan and colleagues report that internal consistency for the measure is very high, $r = .91$ and $.94$ for the anxiety and avoidance subscales, respectively. Retest reliability for anxiety and avoidance is moderate, $r = .70$. In the current sample, internal consistency was also very high, $r = .91$ for both avoidance and anxiety.

The ECR consists of statements on how a person may feel in romantic relationships (Brennan et al., 1998). The anxiety subscale corresponds to anxiety about close relationships and hypervigilance regarding rejection (Tsagarakis, Kafetsios, & Stalikas, 2007). An example of a statement on the anxiety scale is “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them” (Brennan et al., 1998). The avoidance subscale represents feelings of discomfort becoming close to and reluctance developing relationships with one’s romantic relationship partner (Tsagarakis et al., 2007). An example from the avoidance scale is “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep down” (Brennan et al., 1998). Participants responded to the ECR using a 7-point Likert-scale (1 = disagree strongly; 7 = agree strongly).

Procedure

Participants completed the study in a classroom setting. Each student was given a packet consisting of the PSS-Fa, the ECR, and a demographic questionnaire. The order of the PSS-Fa and ECR was counterbalanced. The demographic questionnaire was provided last.

Results

Based on the demographic and background information provided, participants were grouped into two categories: children of divorce ($N = 29$) and children of intact families, which included all other participants ($N=70$). Two-independent sample t -tests were performed on perceived extended family support, avoidance, and anxiety to replicate differences between children of intact families and children of divorce (e.g., Love &

Murdock, 2004) and resolve evidence from contradictory studies suggesting no long-term differences (e.g., Lopez et al., 2000). There was a difference in perceived extended family support, $t(46.19) = 2.24, p = .03$ ($M_{\text{intact}} = 14.91; M_{\text{divorced}} = 11.66$), such that (consistent with prior research) children from intact families reported higher levels of extended family social support than children from divorced families. In addition, there was a difference in anxiety, $t(94) = -3.07, p = .003$ ($M_{\text{intact}} = 49.72; M_{\text{divorced}} = 63.90$), and avoidance, $t(43.75) = -2.55, p = .006$ ($M_{\text{intact}} = 42.71; M_{\text{divorced}} = 54.66$), such that children from intact families reported lower levels of anxiety and avoidance than children from divorced families. A simple linear regression was used to examine the relationship between extended family support and attachment avoidance and anxiety for all families. The model was significant ($R^2 = .07; p = .01$) for perceived extended family support and avoidance. That is, perceived extended family social support accounted for 7% of the overall variance in attachment avoidance. Perceived extended family support predicted avoidance, $\beta = -.26, t(97) = -2.54, p = .01$, such that the greater the perceived extended family support, the lower the avoidance reported in adult romantic relationships. The model was also significant ($R^2 = .06; p = .01$) for perceived extended family support and anxiety. That is, perceived extended family social support accounted for 6% of the overall variance in attachment anxiety. Perceived extended family support predicted anxiety, $\beta = -.25, t(97) = -2.51, p = .01$, such that the greater the perceived extended family support, the lower the anxiety reported in adult romantic relationships.

A simple linear regression was also used for divorced families only. It was expected that for adult children of divorce, perceived extended family support would negatively predict attachment anxiety and avoidance. Perceived extended family support did not significantly predict avoidance among adult children of divorce. However, the model was significant ($R^2 = .15, p = .04$) for perceived extended family support and anxiety. That is, perceived extended family social support accounted for 15% of the overall variance in attachment anxiety for adult children of divorce. Perceived extended family support predicted anxiety, $\beta = -.39, t(26) = -2.16, p = .04$, such that among adult children of divorce, the greater the perceived extended family support, the lower the anxiety reported in adult romantic relationships.

Discussion

In the current study, adult children of divorce reported less perceived extended family support than adult children of intact families. In addition, the findings of this research suggest that adult children of divorce report more avoidance and anxiety in romantic relationships than adult children of intact families. Thus, the study was consistent with the finding that adult children of divorce report less secure attachment than

children of intact families (e.g., Love & Murdock, 2004). Researchers expected that among adult children of divorce, extended family social support would negatively predict anxiety and avoidance in adult romantic relationships. This hypothesis was only partially supported; that is, extended family social support negatively predicted anxiety, but did not predict avoidance. The current study extends previous research by Lussier and colleagues (2002) by examining all types of extended family instead of focusing only on closeness to grandparents.

Although the total amount of variance in attachment accounted for by extended family social support was relatively small (i.e., 15%), this significant effect is important to counselors and clinicians working with children of divorce. In fact, because the average age of the adult children of divorce was 35.32 years – almost twice the age typically reported in studies of adult children of divorce (Love & Murdock, 2004) – this evidence suggests that the role of extended family social support may be a long-lasting predictor of the attachment style of adult children of divorce. Therefore, understanding the importance that even extended family may play in buffering against negative effects associated with divorce, counselors and clinicians should promote and support the development of these relationships and bonds, and encourage the parents of these children to do so as well.

Methodological Strengths and Limitations

Although this study is a step in extending the research on adult children of divorce in many ways, it is not without limitations. First, this study utilized self-report measures, which may be influenced by biases (Brennan et al., 1998). These measures also depend on the honesty and self-insight of the participants, which could be limited to fears of self-enlightenment or embarrassment of self-disclosure. It is also possible that participants who were raised by an attachment figure other than their biological parents, and have the same type of disruption (i.e. divorce or separation) were included in the study. In addition, not specifying what “extended family” means in the PSS-Fa (Prociano & Heller, 1983) could have created unnecessary ambiguity. All of the participants may not have known to whom the researcher was referring by simply stating “extended family.” The sample size may also be a limitation. That is, although 99 participants completed the study, only 30 of the participants reported that they were children of divorce. It is possible that using a larger sample of children of divorce might have resulted in full support of the research hypotheses. It is also possible that using a larger sample would include more male participants. As noted, the majority of the participants were female. Maier and Lachman (2000) found that parental divorce has a greater impact on men than women. Therefore, the results of the study may be biased towards the female interpretation of parental divorce. It is possible that the

original hypotheses regarding avoidance and extended family support would have been supported with a larger sample of male participants.

Although the research may be somewhat limited, there are many methodological strengths to the study as well. The measures used in this study are statistically reliable and valid (Brennan et al., 1998; Prociano & Heller, 1983). The ECR avoids some of the attraction toward biased responding stimulated by simple measures (Brennan et al., 1998). Brennan and colleagues also demonstrated better precision than the traditional self-classification measure (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), which makes their results similar to giving interviews. The sample used in this study was also a methodological strength because non-traditional undergraduate and graduate students were used as the participants. These participants may have been exposed to more (and a greater variety of) romantic relationships and may be more representative of the childhood experiences and adult romantic relationships of the general population than a traditional undergraduate college student sample.

Future Research

Future research is needed regarding the attachment styles of adult children of divorce and extended family support. Although the present study did not find that extended family social support is a significant predictor of avoidant attachment of children of divorce, future research should further investigate this relationship. First, future research should include a larger sample size with more male participants. If a significant effect is found, future studies should investigate the type of avoidance found in those relationships. For example, it is possible that adult children of divorce would report more fearful avoidance than dismissing avoidance in current romantic relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). Due to the experience of parental divorce, adult children of divorce might display a fearful avoidant romantic attachment style out of the fear of having a similar experience of the past. Therefore, adult children of divorce may avoid situations in current romantic relationships because they do not want to re-live their experiences of parental divorce. This research may aid counseling professionals in the therapeutic setting by recognizing avoidance patterns in adult children of divorce so that counselors may identify behaviors that may hinder romantic relationships and encourage clients to effectively approach these issues.

Future studies should also investigate the effectiveness of developing and strengthening extended family social support as a buffer against the insecure attachment associated with parental divorce. That is, these studies should examine whether therapeutic interventions can simulate the experience of extended family social support as well as help to strengthen the bonds of existing family members. Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to determine how changes in extended family social support predict changes in attachment over time.

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Endnotes

ⁱ The university defines non-traditional undergraduate programs as programs requiring a minimum age of 25 years to enroll. In addition, classes in both non-traditional undergraduate and graduate programs at the university are held one night per week for the duration of the program (which typically lasts for two years), during which, students complete once course (or module) at a time.

ⁱⁱ Although the university has a religious affiliation, other research utilizing the population of students in non-traditional undergraduate and graduate programs has shown that the religious affiliation of the students does not differ from the religious affiliation of students in traditional undergraduate programs at large public universities in the same regional area (Gray, 2005; Zeigler-Hill & Limke, 2004).