

Divorce or Conflict?: The Effect of Parental Marital Status and Discord on Adult Children's Relationship Outcomes

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Abstract

This research aims to understand how changes in parental marital quality and marital status influence adult child relational outcomes. Specifically, we examine the effect of parents' conflict, marital quality, and alcohol abuse on adult children's conflict within current cohabiting or marital partners. Using waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to construct a history of parent relationship transitions and family structure. We use NSFH3 to capture our main outcome variables, adult child reports of their level of disagreement with their current partner. We find that children with high conflict or alcoholic parents have a greater propensity for partner conflict themselves. Our key finding is that children who had high conflict parents report lower conflict in their own adult relationship if their parents separated or divorced compared to children from high conflict families whose parents remained together through wave 2.

Introduction

The consequence of divorce for children's outcomes has received much research and media attention. Most of the research has focused on the consequences of divorce on children's short-term outcomes (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, 2002), while valid findings on the long-term effects of childhood divorce, especially on adult child outcomes, have been constrained by a lack of longitudinal data from nationally representative data sets (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Wallerstein, 1984). The most established finding in this literature is that children of divorce are more prone to divorce themselves (Amato & Booth, 1991; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). In addition, most of this research compares children who experienced a divorce to those who remained in an intact family. Researchers have argued that it is not the divorce per se that causes many of the adverse outcomes for children of divorce, but rather conflict between parents that may have begun long before the divorce (Cherlin et al, 1991; Peterson & Zill, 1986). Thus, little research has examined a broader range of marital circumstances within intact marriages (Peterson & Zill, 1986). This research suggests we need to better understand the effect of growing up in an intact family characterized by discord, disagreement, or stress on adult children's relationship outcomes.

Theoretical Framework and Previous Literature

How is marital accord/discord transmitted to children?

Do children who grow up in families with successful, positive relationships have better adult personal relationships and conversely does growing up in a family filled with discord mean children will experience similar discordant relations as adults? What is the mechanism through which parental accord or discord is transmitted to children in a way that later affects children's adult relational ability? Observational learning theory suggests that children learn a variety of behaviors by observing adult relationships especially those of their parents with whom there is frequent opportunity for observing such relations (Bandura, 1986). Researchers find that children from intact families who are exposed to high, persistent conflict exhibit behavioral problems. Higher parental conflict has also been related to negative effects on children's relationships with peers and siblings (Stocker & Youngblade, 1999). Recent research supports the assumption that children exhibit similar conflict resolution and affective styles,

as well anger levels, as their parents (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blum, & Lendich, 1999; Jenkins, 2000; Katz & Gottman, 1994). Although limited by the use of cross sectional data, research has linked childhood exposure to marital violence to both a higher likelihood to be physically violent or to be victimized as adults.

Poor adult relationships have also been linked to growing up with an alcoholic parent. For example, researchers argue that Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOAs) have been exposed to poor models of dyadic behavior and may not have learned the skills and attitudes that facilitate successful functioning in adult relationship roles (Larson et al., 2001). Again, the observational learning perspective offers a plausible avenue for the intergenerational transmission of the dynamics of alcoholic families. However, while it is generally accepted that exposure to an alcoholic parent has negative consequences for children, the question of whether adverse effects persist into adulthood remains unanswered. Although popular media and chemical dependency researchers have asserted that adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) exhibit difficulty establishing and maintaining healthy and stable relationships, little empirical evidence based on representative samples has been conducted to test this assertion. Much of the research is based either on small clinical samples or samples of college students collected at a single university, which may partially explain why the research findings are mixed.

For example, while some researchers using college student samples find no long-term effects of growing up in alcoholic families (Guinta & Compas, 1994; Olmstead, 1997; Segrin & Menees, 1996), others find adverse effects on adult children's relationship outcomes and satisfaction levels (Larson et al., 2001, Larson & Reedy, 2004). Larson et al. (2001) find that ACOAs from families with low family affection, high anxiety, and frequent family conflicts led to interpersonal problems for many young ACOAs. In more recent research, Larson and Reedy (2004) find that having an alcoholic parent, indirectly affects ACOAs' relationship outcomes through family dynamics. Specifically, adult children from non conflictual alcoholic families report higher satisfaction in dating relationships compared to those from conflicted alcoholic families. They also find parental divorce directly and adversely affects adult children's dating relationships. They conclude that ACOAs are more likely to experience family dysfunction than young nonACOAs before marriage and these dysfunctional patterns may be carried into marriage.

To address the data shortcomings in the literature, Watt (2002) examined differences in individual relationship outcomes and satisfaction among ACOAs and nonACOAs using data from waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households. He finds that children raised in alcoholic families are less likely to marry, more likely to be unhappily married, and more likely to divorce. Although his analysis addresses the problem of nonrepresentative data in previous research, it is still hampered by reliance on retrospective reports of the family of origin. Thus, these memories could be inaccurate or exaggerated. However, previous empirical findings and observational learning theory suggest a plausible path through which adult children may emulate the conflictual or dysfunctional interpersonal style of their parents in their own adult personal relationships.

In addition to examining the intergenerational transmission of poor relationship skills, we also ask: are positive relationship behaviors exhibited by parents emulated by their children? Much literature examines how dysfunctional family behaviors influence children, but little research examines whether and how positive behaviors are transmitted intergenerationally. Furthermore, what types of relationship interactions or behaviors are likely to be transmitted and how can we measure these? Qualitative research suggests that children learn about fairness by observing their parent's division of labor (Gager et al. 1998). However, only some adult children emulated the unequal division of household labor among their parents, while other children chose to attempt a more equal and less gendered behavior division of labor as a reaction to an unequal one exhibited by their parents. Thus, there is reason to examine whether parent's positive relationship behaviors are transmitted to their children.

We will examine measures of positive behaviors reported by parents used in previous research on marital quality including report of the amount of time partners spend together, marital happiness, and perceptions of how one's life might be different if separated. Parental time spent together is important as greater time together likely reflects that parents enjoy being together and that they have a higher level of interaction and communication (Gager & Sanchez, 2003), behaviors that children might model. Growing up in a happy family is likely to influence children's expectations that marriage is a satisfying and positive experience. Although we cannot directly measure positive couple interactions, reporting that your marriage is happy likely reflects positive interaction. Last, examining parental perceptions of their life without their partner also provides insight

into their satisfaction with their relationship as well as reflecting the level of gratitude they have for their partner and relationship. As Hochschild (1989) suggests, a scarcity of gratitude can be detrimental to a marriage, thus holding the view that your life would be worse off if you separated suggests couples appreciate what they have. Again, although not a direct measure of behaviors, these perceptions may be a proxy for parental behaviors showing appreciation or frustration.

Observational learning theory suggests several hypotheses. Children who grew up with parents who exhibited successful conflict-resolution strategies and displayed mutually supportive relations and positive interactions will likely have a more highly developed relational “tool box” which may lead to more successful, long-term interpersonal relationships. Conversely, children who observed more negative, conflictual parent relationships are more likely to reach adulthood with a poorly developed set of relationship skills. In addition, having an alcoholic parent may lead to adverse relational outcomes such as high conflict levels or marital dissatisfaction.

Socialization theory departs from observational learning by suggesting that while individuals are oriented by their childhood relationships, childhood orientations are not fixed but rather are fluid, changing as people come into contact with new experiences, social institutions, or confront major changes. In other words, socialization is a lifetime process. For example, an individual who observed positive relations between their parents when quite young, might later observe negative parental relations if their parents’ relationship deteriorated or ended in divorce. Thus, we need to take into account life course transitions which are also correlated with adult relationship outcomes. These include whether or not their parents remained together or divorced.

Teachman (1982) argues that all these life course transitions are characterized by three dimensions, number, timing, and sequencing – all of which have important implications for the development of relationship skills. For example, the timing of divorce has important implications for children’s relationship skill acquisition. On the one hand, some research shows younger children are more likely to have lasting effects of divorce compared to adolescents or adult children. On the other hand, if parents did divorce when children were young, children would have less time to observe negative relations between their parents as research shows conflict is higher in families that divorce compared to intact families (Cherlin et

al., 1991; Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993). Thus, it is important to examine adult children's parent's relationship history and the age at which children experience parental conflict and/or divorce.

Socialization theory also suggests that more recent experiences in romantic relationships should also impact the quality of their current cohabiting or marital relationships in addition to childhood experiences. For example, we posit that failure in past romantic relationships may influence current relationship quality or disagreement level. We argue that individuals who have already ended a cohabiting or marital relationship may be individuals more prone to arguments than those who have never ended a long-term relationship. In addition, having had previous relationships may lead individuals to compare their current partner to their past partners, which could lead to dissatisfaction, at least in some areas of their current relationship. Thus, we will take into account adult children who report having ever ended a cohabiting or marital relationship.

According to socialization theory, we hypothesize that changes in parent's level of conflict or marital status will affect adult child relationship quality. For example, if children witness an increase in parents' levels of conflict we expect they will have more negative relationships. We also expect that children with high conflict parents, who divorce, will have better relationship outcomes than children with high conflict parents who remain married. Socialization theory also suggests that more recent adult relationship experiences should influence relationship quality. Specifically, we expect that individuals who have ever ended a cohabiting or marital relationship will be more likely to report relationship dissatisfaction or disagreements compared to those who have not experienced a previous relationship dissolution.

A few studies to date have examined sex differences in the transmission of parental marital discord to offspring. Du Feng et al. (1999) find a significant association between fathers' and mothers' positive reports of marital interaction with their sons' reports of their own marital quality 20 years later. However, while father's positive reports are associated with sons' more positive reports, mothers' positive reports are associated with more negative reports of marital interactions by sons. Furthermore, they find no relationship between mothers' and daughters' reports of marital interaction. However, the analysis is based on a sample of less than 70 respondents; thus the findings are not conclusive. Amato and Booth (2001) assess whether the relationship between parent's marital discord and adult children's marital happiness and psychological well-being varies by

gender. They find that parents' conflict has a similar effect on boys and girls, although parents' conflict was slightly stronger for boys' psychological stress and self-esteem. The authors suggest that their mixed results certainly merit further research attention on this topic. Previous research on smaller, regional samples also find mixed results on gender differences in the effect of conflict and divorce on children's outcomes. Accordingly, more research is needed on this area using a larger nationally representative sample.

Other family, parental, and child characteristics measured during childhood and currently may also influence the level of parent's relationship satisfaction or discord and consequently their adult children's personal relationships. These include child's age (as a measure of developmental stage) and parent and adult child's socioeconomic status. Developmental stage clearly influences the degree to which children may understand or interpret parental divorce and/or conflict. For example, researchers find that preschool children were more adversely affected by divorce than older children (Alison and Furstenberg, 1989; Zill, 1993), as younger children may be more likely to misunderstand the divorce, blaming themselves and may be less adept at seeking resources outside the family (Hetherington, 1989). In addition, research suggests adolescence is an especially vulnerable time for children to experience divorce (Barber & Eccles, 1992). Our models will also take into account economic status of the family at wave 1 and, which is associated with lower rates of divorce and perhaps parent educational level as more education may be associated with greater problem solving abilities in relationships.

We also control for parent reports of children's well-being during childhood such as whether they exhibited signs of depression or aggression as children. Controlling for these family and individual factors will allow us to disentangle the effects of parental conflict from other family circumstances or individual child characteristics that may also lead to poor adult relationships.

In sum, the proposed research will take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the NSFH dataset, to address previous shortcomings in the research on intergenerational transmission of relationship dynamics. Specifically, we will examine whether the level of parent's marital satisfaction influences their adult child's relationship satisfaction and whether parent's level of disagreements affects their adult child's reported level of disagreement with their current cohabiting or marital partner. Similar to research documenting that children of divorce are more likely to experience a

divorce themselves, we expect that growing up in a family with discordant parental relations will increase the likelihood that children have discordant, less satisfying personal relationships when they reach adulthood. Thus, we extend previous research on the intergenerational transmission of divorce by examining a broader range of parental relationship characteristics in intact marriages, including marital satisfaction and level of conflict, on their adult children's relationship outcomes.

Data & Methods

Until recently, examining the effect of parental discord/relationship success on adult children's own relational outcomes has been limited to two national longitudinal data sets (the NLSY and the Marital Instability over the Life Course). However, recently the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) have completed data collection of a third wave of data. NSFH3 is comprised of main respondents with an eligible focal child ($n=1952$). Focal children were eligible for a wave 3 interview if they were at least 5 years of age at time 1 and had been eligible at time 2 for interview (at least 10 years old at time 2). All focal children interviewed at time 3 were 18-34 years old (Wright, 2003). Thus, the design permits the detailed description of parents' relationship satisfaction, level of conflict, and relationship transitions between time 1 and time 2, as well as the characteristics and experiences of an adult focal child's including their current relationship status and quality, and their current and past psychological well-being (for more information see: Sweet & Bumpass, 1996; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988; Wright 2003).

The NSFH focal children in Wave 3 exhibit a variety of current relationship statuses (see Table 1). To ascertain that we had sufficient cases of for our analyses, we first examined the current relationship status and found that there are sufficient cases in every category for analysis of relationship formation and relationship quality. Next we examined the number of first marriages and cohabitations that ended in dissolution to determine whether we would have sufficient cases to examine the effect of having had multiple breakups. Again, even with the young age of the wave 3 focal children, there are enough instances of relationship dissolution for analysis.

Table 1: Relationship Status of Focal

Child, NSFH3	
Current Relationship Status	
Married	663
Cohabiting	289
Steady	424
Not in Relationship	576
Outcome of First Relationship	
First Marriage	
Intact	600
Divorced	191
First Cohabitation	
Intact ¹	628
Separated	345

For the present analyses, we include focal children who are currently in cohabiting or marital unions. We recognize that children who grow up in unhappy or discordant parent relationships may avoid relationship all together, and thus we plan to explore this outcome in future research. We also limit our sample to focal children whose parents were married or cohabiting at wave 1 as our focal variables regarding frequency of disagreements and relationship satisfaction were only asked of two-parent families. As it is still generally accepted that cohabiting differs from marriage, we include a dummy variable measuring whether the parents were cohabiting or married.

Outcome variables

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

Marital Happiness Scale

Focal children were asked a set of questions to assess happiness with specific aspects of the current relationship at wave 2:

¹ Intact cohabitations includes ongoing cohabitations and cohabitations that ended in marriage

“Now I'd like to ask you how happy you are with the following aspects of your relationship. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is very unhappy and 7 is very happy, how happy are you with 1) the understanding you receive from your partner, 2) love and affection you get from your partner, 3) the amount of time you spend with your partner, 4) the demands your partner places on you, 5) your sexual relationship, and 6) the work your partner does around the house.

We create an additive index and will predict level of happiness across these relationship dimensions and assess the degree to which these reflect various dimensions of relationship satisfaction. The scale has a range from 9 to 42, with a mean of 34, which indicates that the average respondent is happy, rather than neutral or unhappy with his or her relationship. The Cronbach alpha for reliability of this scale is .76.

Scale of disagreement

Those who were currently cohabiting or married were also asked questions about the frequency of disagreements: “How often have you had an open disagreement about: 1) household tasks 2) money, 3) spending time together, 4) sex, and 5) your in laws. Would you say 1) never, 2) less than once a month, 3) several times a month, 4) about once a week, 5) several times a week, or 6) almost every day?” We create an additive index using these 5 questions on disagreements (see Sanchez and Gager, 2000). The scale ranges from 5 to 29 with a mean of 11.2, indicating an average of less than once a month across all items. Cronbach alpha reliability for this scale is .76. We will use OLS regression to predict disagreement among married and cohabiting respondents.

Predictor Variables

Our main predictor variables report of parental marital satisfaction and the frequency of disagreement level of conflict between parents -- is from waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). These are measured similarly to the questions asked of focal children described above. We will also use these two waves to construct a history of parent relationship transitions, which should have a large effect on adult relational outcomes.

Parental Disagreement

For the models predicting adult children's level of disagreement, we measure level of parental disagreements between parents using the scale described above and the disagreement questions measured at wave 1. However, there were two additional items asked of parents. One was whether they ever argued over the kids and the other whether they disagreed over whether to have more children. The scale ranged from 7 to 35 with a mean of 12.7, toward the lower end of possible arguments. Again, Cronbach's alpha is above the acceptable level (.74). Next, using the first two waves of data, we measure the degree to which parental conflict is resolved, stays the same, worsens, or results in separation or divorce. We measure these changes with two variables. First, we create a variable measuring 1) whether disagreement level increased from wave 1 to wave 2, 2) remains the same from wave 1 to wave 2, and 3) whether disagreement level decreased from wave 1 to wave 2. Second, we create a dummy variable to capture whether parents remained married or divorced or separated by between wave 1 and 2. We used increased conflict, decreased conflict, and parents separated as dummies with arguments stayed the same as the reference category.

Parental Marital Satisfaction

We use the global marital happiness from wave 1:

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

happy, taking things all together, how would you describe your current relationship?”

Time Spent Together

Parents were asked “During the past month, about how often did you and your partner spend time alone with each other, talking or sharing an activity? 1) Never, 2) About once a month, 3) Two or three times a month, 4) About once a week, 5) About two or three times a week, 6) Almost every day.

Perceptions of life is separated

Parents were asked to evaluate how various aspects of their life would change if they were to separate using the scale 1) Much worse, 2) Worse, or 3) Same. Various areas include 1) your standard of living, 2) your social life, 3) your career opportunities, 4) your overall happiness, 5) your sex life, 6) being a parent.

Childhood Psychological Well-being

We create a scale to control derived from several measures of children's well being as reported by parents in Wave 1. Parents were asked "I am going to read some statements that might describe a child's behavior. Please tell me whether each statement has been often true, sometimes true, or has not been true of child in the past three months:" 1) Is unhappy, sad, or depressed, 2) Loses temper easily, 3) Is cheerful and happy, 4) Bullies or is cruel or mean to others, and 5) Gets along well with other kids. We recoded all questions so that a higher number represents more negative behavior/affect and created an additive scale. Cronbach's alpha is .62 thus slightly below the acceptable .7 cutoff, but we have too few cases to use all items separately. Therefore, we use the scale, but interpret its results with caution. In sum, we control for a history of psychological functioning and personal affect that might influence children's adult relationship skills. Because of the borderline alphas level, in future analyses we will use additional items to create additional sub-scales to measure children's internalizing and externalizing problems from the first wave.

Parental Alcohol Use

We include a variable measuring if either spouse reports that they or their partner has a problem with alcohol.

Multiple Partners Prior to Current Relationship

We include this measure of the adult children's relationship history with a dichotomous variable measuring ever having ended a cohabiting or marital relationship prior to the current cohabiting or marital relationship. We argue that an individual with multiple breakups may signal a willingness to argue and to end relationships. We expect that having multiple breakups will be associated with higher frequency of disagreements and lower relationship satisfaction in a current relationship.

Demographic Characteristics

Last, we will examine the effect of adult focal children's sex, age, and education level as well as the parent's and socio-economic status on adult children's relationship quality and level of discord. Developmental stage (as measured by age) is also an important characteristic related to the effects of divorce and conflict on children's later outcomes. However research findings have not been consistent. In our research it will be necessary to account for the age of the child when conflict occurred as well as their age when we assess their relationship outcomes. We will include two sets of questions asked of parents based on child's age including. The inclusion of these variables will control for children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors that may confound effects attributed to parental relationship quality or conflict. Because socio-economic status influences family processes, conflict levels and maternal warmth and level of psychological issues, we will control for family income and parents' educational level in our models.

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2. Parents have on average 13.7 years of education, the mean family income \$49,060. Eighty-eight percent of parents were non-Hispanic white, 7 percent were African American, 4 percent were of Hispanic ethnicity, and 1 percent were of other race/ethnicity. Ninety-seven percent of parents were married at the first wave, with the remainder cohabiting.

Results

In Table 3, we present the results of the ordinary least squares regression analysis predicting the adult child's disagreement scale. In Model 1, we include only the parent's disagreement scale. In Model 2, we add independent variables related to parent and family of origin characteristics. In Model 3, we examine the additional effects of past and current characteristics of the focal child. In Model 1, we find that increases in parental disagreement are associated with significant increases in adult children's level of disagreement. In Model 2, this effect remains significant, even after controlling for other parental and family characteristics. In addition, the dummy variable for whether parents separated or divorced by time 2 and an interaction term for parents divorced with disagreement scale are significant. Thus, as hypothesized, children who grew up in high conflict families report lower conflict in their own relationship if their parents separated or divorced compared to children from high conflict families whose parents remained together through wave 2. We also find that increases in parental conflict level between waves are associated with increased conflict among

adult children, but decreases in conflict between waves have no effect. Last, we find that having an alcoholic parent significantly increases adult children's disagreement level.

With the addition of the focal child's past and current characteristics in Model 3, the significant effect of parental conflict level, increased parental conflict, parental marital dissolution, the interaction term, and having an alcoholic parent remain. In addition, the variable measuring whether the focal child ever had a breakup is positive and significant. Thus, consistent with our hypothesis, adult children who have ever dissolved a cohabiting or marital relationship report a higher level of relationship conflict than those who have not ended a long-term relationship prior to their current one. It is important to note that these significant findings persist even after controlling for childhood affect and/or problematic behavior. Thus, exhibiting problematic behavior in childhood does not seem to influence adult relationship outcomes as we measure them here. We also find no sex differences in the intergenerational transmission of discord or accord among our sample.

Because the interactions in the Table 3 between parental arguments and relationship status at time 2 are difficult to interpret, in Figure 1, we plot the predicted disagreement level for focal children by their parents' disagreement level and wave 2 status. The predicted lines are controlling for all other variables in the regression in Table 3 held at their means. The graph shows that for parents who stay together at time 2, the more that the parents argue at time 1, the more their children will argue in their own cohabiting or marital relationships. One explanation is modeling. When parents who argue stay together, children have a lifetime to observe and potentially model their parent's conflictual style. The more their parents argued, the more the children are predicted to argue.

The results for the parents who separate are more surprising. Holding other variables at their means, we see that the more that the parents argued at time 1, if they had separated by time 2, the less their children will argue in their own relationships. Perhaps, the more the parents argue, the more that arguments and disagreements are viewed by the child as the reason for the divorce. Children evidently learn from their parents' negative example. The more that their parents argue, perhaps the harder they work at reducing marital arguments. This might be viewed as counterintuitive as we know that children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce. However, remember that the focal children are very young (mean age = 28). So

at least early in their relationships, for children whose parents separated or divorced after wave 1, the more the parents argued at wave 1, the less the focal children argue with their cohabiting or marital partners.

In Table 4, we show the results of our OLS regression predicting adult children's happiness scale. For consistency we use the same variables as our previous model, but begin with the three focal independent variables measuring parent's marital quality: time spent together, marital happiness, and perceptions of life if separated. In Model 1, we see that the measures of marital happiness and time spent together do not significantly predict adult children's level of happiness. However, we do find that the scale measuring parent's report of how life might be different if separated does have a significant and negative effect. Thus, the findings indicate that parents who perceived that their life would be worse if they separated, had children who reported greater marital happiness in their own relationships. This effect is attenuated but remains significant with the addition of the parent and family of origin characteristics in Model 2. However, none of these additional variables are significant. Last, in Model 3, the addition of child variables the marital quality variables becomes insignificant. The only significant variables are those measuring whether the focal child has ever dissolved a cohabiting or marital union and focal child's age. Specifically ever having dissolved a prior union is associated with decreased relationship satisfaction as is increased age. In sum, we have less success predicting the intergenerational transmission of positive relationship behaviors than predicting negative relationship behaviors.

Conclusions

Our research adds to the debate over whether divorce per se or the conflict between parents that occurs prior to divorce leads to adverse outcomes for children. Our results support previous research that conflict in families has negative and long lasting effects on children. In addition, our findings provide support for the argument that the long-term adverse effects are attenuated when parents dissolve their marriage. We suggest that this attenuation occurs as children no longer have the opportunity to observe and model their parent's conflictual style. This finding has implications for recent policy initiatives that aim to promote marriage and reduce divorce. Our research suggests that "staying together for the sake of the

children” may not be the best option for highly conflicted families. While we do find that high conflict increases the likelihood that adult children will more conflicted relationships themselves, we do not find that parental conflict or marital satisfaction has a long term impact on adult children’s level of satisfaction with their marriage. We suggest that negative models may be more easily transmitted intergenerationally compared with positive behaviors associated with high relationship satisfaction and interaction. Future research needs to better understand the mechanisms through which such a transfer takes place, and the family contexts that mediate or moderate this transmission.

Potential Limitations

A potential limitation of our research is reliance on self-reported measures that may be plagued by social desirability bias. Individuals may be reluctant to report marital difficulties such as frequency of disagreements and verbal and physical abuse (Szinovacz & Egley, 1995). Additionally, spouses may respond to a socially normative script – that marriages are supposed to be happy – resulting in over reporting of marital happiness. However, for NSFH1 and NSFH2, these questions were included in the self-administered questionnaires portion to reduce potential bias of asking such questions in face-to-face interviews (Babbie, 2004). Unfortunately, the focal child data collected at Wave 3 were collected via phone interviews, thus social desirability bias may be more problematic. Fortunately, the result of such measurement error is that we underestimate the relationship between the variables with measurement error, making ours a conservative test of the impact of parental conflict on young adult’s relationship quality. Last, the alpha for our focal child problems at wave 1 is below .7, thus we need to further investigate whether this effect is indeed insignificant. We plan to use additional measures of children’s behavior (as reported by parents at wave 1) to create a sub-scale representing internalizing and a sub-scale representing externalizing behaviors.

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Table 2: Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Wave 1 Respondent Characteristics	Percent/Mean
Age	39.6
Family Income	49060.4
Education	13.7
Sex (% female)	51.1
Marital Status (% married)	97.0
Race	
(% non-Hispanic White)	87.8
(% black)	6.6
(% Hispanic)	4.3
(% other)	1.3

Figure 1. Focal Child's Disagreements by Parental Disagreements and Wave 2 Relationship Status

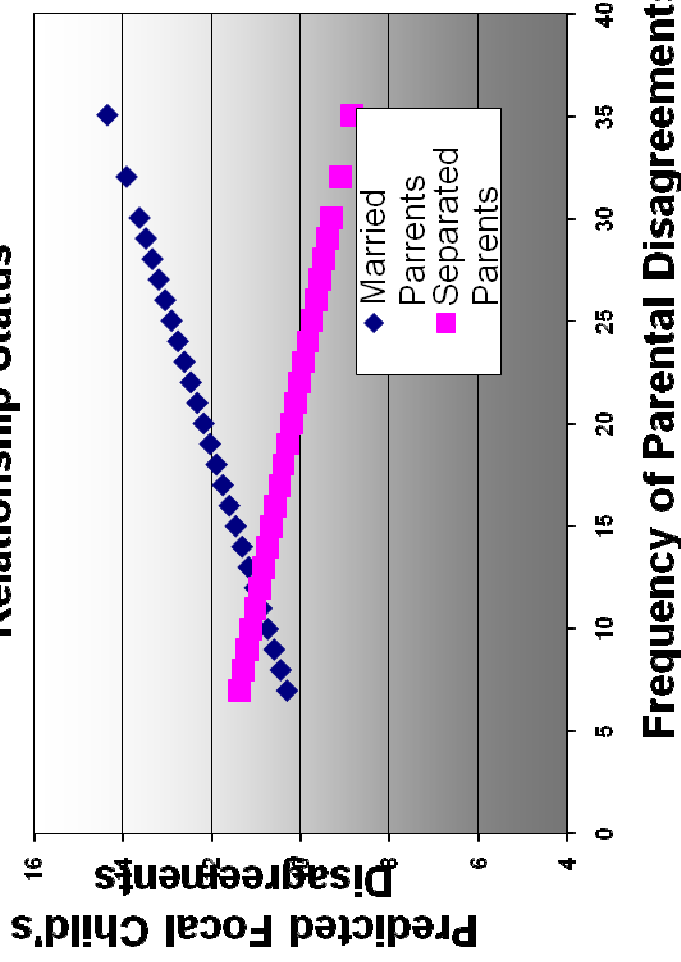


Table 3: Predictors of Adult Focal Disagreement Scale

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Level of disagreement	.089	.040	.99*	.145	.046	.162**	.145	.048	.162**
Parent's cohabiting				.934	.800	.053	.904	.808	.051
Parent's separated, wave 2				3.107	1.473	.276*	2.897	1.479	.257*
Alcoholic parent				1.722	.688	.112*	1.724	.691	.112*
Parent education level				-.051	.066	-.034	-.041	.072	-.028
Disagreement*separated				-.249	.106	-.311*	-.235	.106	-.294*
Greater conflict-wave 1 to 2				.920	.457	.096*	1.017	.458	.106*
Less conflict waves 1 to 2				-.096	.411	-.011	-.091	.413	-.010
Child dissolved prev. relation							1.207	.493	.117*
Child cohabiting							.075	.448	.008
Child problems							.018	.099	.008
Child highest degree post h.s.							-.040	.177	-.011
Child age							.025	.050	.025
Child female							.106	.339	.014
R^2							.01	.05	.06

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4: Predictors of Adult Focal Child Happiness Scale

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Parent happiness	-.228	.213	-.055	-.231	.224	-.056	-.307	.223	-.074
Parent time spent together	-.131	.192	-.033	-.110	.196	-.028	-.053	.197	-.013
Life worse if separated	-.204	.080	-.130*	-.169	.086	-.107*	-.132	.087	-.083
Level of disagreement				-.041	.077	-.030	-.059	.079	-.044
Parent's cohabiting				-1.043	1.287	-.039	-.664	1.288	-.025
Parent's separated, wave 2				-.784	2.319	-.046	-.524	2.309	-.031
Alcoholic parent				-1.779	1.114	-.076	-1.896	1.108	-.081+
Parent education level				.026	.109	.011	-.051	.079	-.044
Disagreement*separated				.056	.170	.046	.023	.169	.019
Greater conflict-wave 1 to 2				.258	.744	.071	-.061	.742	-.004
Less conflict waves 1 to 2				.940	.658	.071	.888	.656	.067
Child dissolved prev. relation							-1.835	.780	-.117*
Child cohabiting							-.636	.709	-.047
Child problems							.046	.162	.014
Child highest degree post h.s.							.507	.281	.094+
Child age							-.188	.081	-.123*
Child female							.131	.540	.011
R^2					.03			.06	
		.01							

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$.