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# **The Impact of Marital Discord on College Students in relation to Future Emotional Wellbeing and Academic Achievements**

**Kerri Schulz**

## **ABSTRACT**

Several studies have been published discussing the repercussions of marital discord relative to the future wellbeing of children. However, few studies have specifically addressed the potential effect that marital discord could have on the emotional wellbeing and academic achievements of children into their adult lives. This study uses data collected from a sample of undergraduate students (ages 18-22) attending the University of New Hampshire. This study failed to identify a correlation between marital discord and the future wellbeing of children, emotionally and academically, within the sample of undergraduate students. Further research including a larger and more representative sample size has the potential to lead to different conclusions.

Family is a social institution meant to bind a group of individuals based on marriage, law, and societal norms. It represents the foundation on which lives are shaped and defined. Amato and Sobolewski suggest that “children’s wellbeing is highest when children are close to two continuously married parents who have a low conflict relationship” (2007). Unfortunately, between 40% and 50% of first time marriages end in divorce, impacting more than 1 million children per year in the United States (Soria and Linder 2014). Between 25% and 35% of college students have felt these effects as well (Soria and Linder 2014). Those who experience family issues at a young age tend to have “significantly more current life stress, family conflict, and avoidant coping...” thus causing an increase in antisocial behavior, anxiety and depression (Short 2002). Therefore, the children of marital discord have an increased risk of academic, behavioral, emotional, and social problems compared to their peers. Evidence suggests that over time, these children will continue to face similar issues into adulthood (Short 2002).

The impact of marital discord on college students in relation to future emotional wellbeing and academic achievements is of concern. In this research, marital discord is the independent variable, and includes instances such as divorce, intimate partner violence, and other forms of confrontation that lead to an unhappy or unsuccessful marriage. The dependent variables are psychological well-being and grade point average (GPA).

Marital discord is capable of negatively impacting an individual into their adult lives. According to the findings of Jerome Short’s study, *The Effects of Parental Divorce During Childhood on College Students*, the adult children of divorced parents experience an increased amount of present life stress in comparison to those whose families are still intact. Short was able to draw these conclusions by comparing several groups of college students between the ages of 18 to 28. The first group consisted of 87 college students who experienced parental divorce between the ages of 8 and 18. The second group consisted of 67 college students who experienced parental death between the ages of 8 and 18, and the third group represented the parents of 87 college students who have been continuously married (Short 2002). The life stressors as discussed by Short include family conflict, avoidant coping, and less supportive parenting before divorce.

Research by Juliana M. Sobolewski and Paul R. Amato assessed the relationship between marital discord and divorce relative to the adult child’s

wellbeing and the subsequent relations had between parent and child. The study found that children had the highest level of wellbeing when they grew up in a low conflict, married family, and were close to both parents. In cases of parental divorce only, the odds of children being attached to one parent over the other increased. In cases of parental divorce and marital conflict, the odds of children being attached to neither parent into adulthood increased as well. Finally, in cases of divorce and high levels of marital conflict, children were not better off if they were close to both parents than to one parent only (Amato and Sobolewski 2007).

Similarly, Paul Amato and Tamara Afifi conducted a 17-year longitudinal study of marital instability over the life course in which they analyzed children's feelings of being, and if children felt caught in between. The need to identify with and seek the approval of parents is crucial in early development, but during periods of divorce or marital confrontation, this process becomes strained. Previous research on divorce suggests that the feeling of being caught in between parents has the ability to manifest into weak parent-child relationships and the subsequent internalization of problems. Several conclusions were drawn from this research: (1) Children with parents in high conflict marriages are at higher risk of feeling caught in between parents; feelings which are associated with lower subjective wellbeing and poorer quality parent-child relationships. (2) Children with divorced parents were no more likely than children with continuously married parents in low-conflict relationships to report feeling caught. (3) Feelings of being caught between parents seemed to fade in the decade following divorce. (4) Children with parents in conflicted marriages, who do not divorce, may be unable to escape from their parents' marital problems – even into adulthood (Amato and Afifi 2006).

Lastly, by utilizing data collected from the 2007-2008 Cooperative Institutional Research Program of first-year students, Soria and Linder (2014) examined the relationships between parental divorce and first-year college students' persistence and academic achievements at a large public university. Results suggest that students whose parents are divorced are less likely than their peers to continue into their second year. This study also suggests that students of divorced parents had significantly lower cumulative grade point averages compared to other students (Soria and Linder 2014).

## **Research Method**

In November 2014, the students of Sociology 601 distributed a survey to a convenience sample of other University of New Hampshire students through the online survey program, Qualtrics. Each student requested the participation of those within their social networks by sending an email with a link to the survey. The survey was completed anonymously and without compensation. The first page of the survey contained a consent form. The participants and their responses remained anonymous throughout the duration of this study in order to protect the welfare and interests of those involved. The data was then aggregated and analyzed for the purpose of investigating the relationship between marital discord and subsequent emotional wellbeing and academic success.

Specific questions on the survey had the potential to illicit negative feelings on the part of the survey participants. Questions pertaining to marital discord and the subsequent effects on a person's wellbeing has the ability to induce emotional distress. Although there was no intention of eliciting such a response, the risk was acknowledged. Ultimately, the potential to better understand the link between marital discord and subsequent outcomes outweighed the risks, because this research could benefit the university community and help to relieve such stressors. Since this research focuses on the success of college students, the results can directly help build programs and support groups within the University specifically designed to address the needs of students dealing with issues at home. The goal of these programs will be to increase the acceptance and understanding of the negative circumstances taking place at home and to develop a positive outlook through encouragement of academics and healthy relationships.

A convenience sample is utilized in this study. Convenience samples are relatively easy to acquire, inexpensive, and are an efficient way of obtaining a sample. Convenience sampling is useful for the preliminary phase of an exploratory study but there are downsides to this sampling method. A convenience sample is a non-random sample that often produces unrepresentative samples of the population. This method lacks both context and in-depth characteristics that are necessary when conducting quantitative research. The null hypothesis of this study states that there is no correlation between marital discord and a college student's emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. The directional alternative hypothesis states that individuals who experience marital discord in their childhood have higher chances of

experiencing emotional distress and having fewer academic achievements through their college career.

## Results

Table 1 presents the survey respondent's demographics. According to this table, 57% of the 246 participants identified themselves as female. Of the 256 participants 74% of those who completed this survey consisted of those with junior standing or above.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics**

<i>Gender</i>		
Female	140	57%
Male	102	41%
Transgender	4	2%
Total	246	100%
<i>Academic Class Standing</i>		
Freshman	30	12%
Sophomore	33	13%
Junior	109	44%
Senior or more	74	30%
Total	246	100%

Table 2 examines the relationship between the respondent's parents. Compared to the larger sample, table 2 represents a smaller sub-sample for whom relevant data was available. This data provides a basic representation of what types of families the survey participants come from. Of the 245 respondents, 70% reported coming from a family with married parents. Of the 233 participants who responded to the question, "during high school my parents fought often" 70% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

**Table 2. Parent Relationships**

<i>Parent's Marital Status</i>		
Together	172	70%
Separated/Divorce	67	27%
Never Married	6	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>245</b>	<b>100%</b>
<i>"During High School my Parents Fought Often"</i>		
Strongly Agree	20	9%
Agree	51	22%
Disagree	81	35%
Strongly Disagree	81	35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 1 displays the frequency distribution of the marital status of the subject's parents. The majority of respondents' parents are married to each other (70%), while about one-quarter of respondent's parents are divorced or separated (27%).

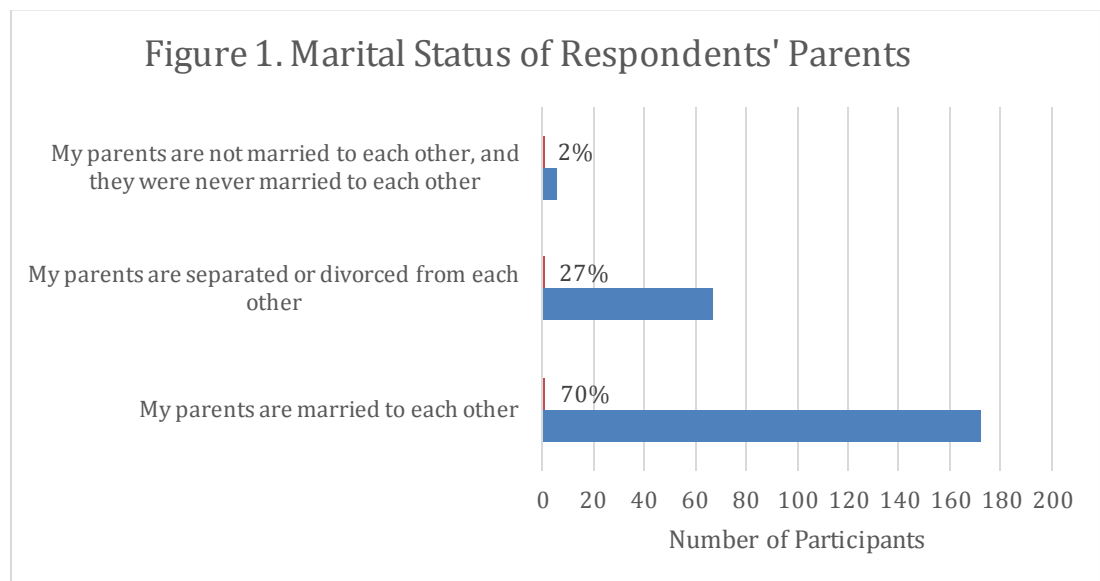
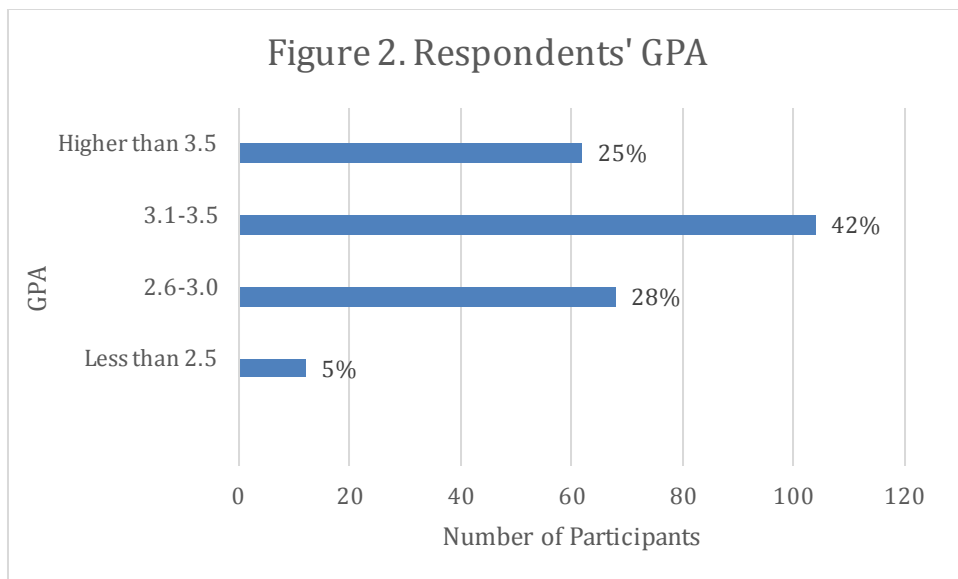


Figure 2 presents the frequency distribution of respondent's GPA. Of the 246 respondents of the survey, 42% indicated having a grade point average in the realm of a 3.1 – 3.5, while about one-quarter of students reported a GPA of 2.6-3.0 and about one-quarter reported a GPA higher than 3.5.



The first cross-tabulation presented in Table 3 measures the frequency of parental disputes during high school and its association with later emotional wellbeing.

During high school my parents fought a lot						
In general, I feel good about myself		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
	Strongly Agree	4 28.57%	3 15.79%	8 25.81%	7 50.00%	22 28.1%
	Agree	9 64.29%	14 73.68%	20 64.52%	5 35.71%	48 61.54%
	Disagree	1 7.14%	2 10.53%	2 6.45%	1 7.14%	6 7.69%
	Strongly Disagree	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	1 3.23%	1 7.14%	2 2.56%
	Total	14 100%	19 100%	31 100%	14 100%	78 100%
	Chi Square	7.81				
Degrees of Freedom	9					
p-value	.55					



The results from the Chi-square analysis presented in the cross-tabulation above fail to reject the null hypothesis. Based on these results, we cannot feel confident that any differences in emotional wellbeing are attributable to differences in how often parents fought.

The second cross-tabulation shown in Table 4 measures the respondent's parent's current marital status in relation to the student's grade point average.

What is the current marital status of your parents?					
What is your current grade point average (G.P.A)?		My Parents are married to each other	My parents are separated or divorced from each other	My parents are not married to each other, and they were never married to each other	Total
	Less than 2.5	8 4.65%	2 2.99%	1 16.67%	11 4.49%
	2.6-3.0	44 25.58%	22 32.64%	2 33.33%	68 27.76%
	3.1-3.5	73 42.44%	28 41.76%	3 50.00%	104 42.45%
	Higher than 3.5	47 27.33%	15 22.39%	0 0.00%	62 25.31%
	Total	172 100%	67 100%	6 100%	245 100%
	Chi Square		5.42		
	Degrees of Freedom		6		
	p-value		.49		

The results from the Chi-square analysis presented in the cross-tabulation above fail to reject the null hypothesis. Based on these results, we cannot feel confident that any differences in GPA are attributable to differences in parents' marital status.

There were several shortcomings of this study. First, and most importantly, I found that my research topic, in general, provided me with a lot of difficulty. Throughout the course of research, this topic proved to be somewhat vague and generalizable. Although it was specified what each variable was referring to, the fact that each variable contained multiple definitions proved to hinder the accuracy of the overall results. Another shortcoming of this paper is that there were not an equal number of respondents completing each one of my survey questions. It is possible

that my experiment would be more successful with a different group of research participants and maybe a different research design altogether.

## References

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