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“IT WAS JUST UGLY AND UNCOMFORTABLE:” A PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
STUDY OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AMONG  
ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of  
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

CARLY A. NACER

Montclair State University

Upper Montclair, NJ

2017

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Brad van Eeden-Moorefield

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

We hereby approve the Dissertation

“IT WAS JUST UGLY AND UNCOMFORTABLE:” A PHENOMENOLOGICAL

STUDY OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AMONG

ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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## ABSTRACT

### “IT WAS JUST UGLY AND UNCOMFORTABLE”: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AMONG ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

by Carly A. Nacer

Grounded in the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory, this qualitative phenomenological study explored how lived experiences of relational communication among female Adult Children of Divorce (ACOD) might reflect those of their parents who divorced during the adult child’s adolescence years. Ten in-depth Skype interviews were conducted with female ACOD at a large northeastern university. All participants shared negative communication behaviors that they perceived their parents used before the divorce. They described their experiences as “ugly and uncomfortable.” The findings suggested that ACOD’s exposure to conflict influenced the communication behaviors of their romantic relationships. Specifically, ACOD have had limited positive communication behaviors that could serve as models for their own romantic relationships. These findings support the need for research education programs aimed at adolescents to teach healthy communication skills at the start of their romantic relationship experiences.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would also like to thank my wonderful, loving parents. Without them, I never would have been able to embark on this journey. They have always supported me in all

of my decisions, and never once made me feel as if I could not achieve this goal. My research is based on children of divorce. However, my parents have always provided me with a relationship model that I hold to the highest of standards. They represent an ideal relationship, one filled with love and laughter. They are the model relationship that makes me want to provide others an opportunity to achieve. Mom, thank you for always helping to make all my other daily tasks much easier by taking some off my plate, bringing me goodies while doing work, or even just stopping by Barnes and Noble to say hello. You always encouraged me every day and believed in me. You were always so calm and patient with me, even when I was stressed. You were always there to listen to me, or just to be my company. Dad, thank you for showing me that hard work pays off. You are the hardest working person I know. From always seeing you working at all hours of the day, it has made me believe that I can do the same. Your work ethic is beyond admirable.

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“It Was Just Ugly and Uncomfortable:” A Phenomenological Study of Intergenerational  
Transmission Among Adult Children of Divorce

**CHAPTER I**

**Introduction to the Study**

Divorce has a myriad of consequences for children, including an increase in psychological problems, difficulty in relationships with peers, and behavioral concerns (Hetherington, 2003). Although many families with children become resilient when faced with the stresses and transitions of divorce, there are still negative consequences that can occur (Hetherington, 2003). Consequences for children can be short-term (e.g., decline in school performance) or long-term (depression; Hetherington, 2003). An often overlooked potential long-term consequence of parental divorce is difficulty in the Adult Children of Divorce's (ACOD) romantic relationships. ACOD have shown less developed skills to cope with disagreements or strains in romantic relationships and are more vulnerable to divorce in their marriage, which is the focus here (Schulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-Shapira, Connolly, & Bohr, 2012).

**Divorce Statistics**

By the end of the 20th century, 43% to 46% of marriages were predicted to end in divorce (Amato, 2010). With a small percentage of marriages ending in separation rather than divorce, it is assumed that about half of all marriages are voluntarily disrupted (Amato, 2010). The most recent estimates suggest that about 20,257,000 children, out of

approximately 73,692,000 in the United States under the age of 18, live with only one parent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Of these children, 9,221,000 live with a parent who is either divorced or separated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Given these numbers, approximately 46% of children under 18 living with one parent have experienced divorce or separation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This number is an underestimate because it does not include children who experienced the dissolution of cohabiting unions. Cohabitation and childbearing outside of marriage have become more widely accepted and increasingly common (Selzer, 2000). The number of cohabiting unions has risen, and these unions are much more likely to dissolve than marriages (Selzer, 2000). Children from dissolved relationships may be exposed to poor relationship behaviors of their parents. For the purpose of this study, the participants will be ACOD. Research has found ACOD are likely to possess behaviors and traits that interfere with their romantic relationships (Amato, 1996).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory is used to explain ACOD's vulnerability to divorce (Giuliani, Iafrete, & Rosnati, 1998). ACOD have an elevated risk of seeing their marriages end (Amato, 1996). They are more likely to have an interpersonal style of problematic behaviors (e.g., jealousy and dealing with stress) and ineffective communication (Amato, 1996). Although the risk of a breakup is high if one partner's parents divorce, the risk is slightly heightened if both partners have parents who divorced (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Further, the female's family history is more

important than the male's in the prediction of future divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Theoretically, this gender difference is asserted to exist because females are considered the emotional regulators in the marriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Importantly, this research comes only from heterosexual couples. Women are typically the initiators of divorce and separation and experience a long period of contemplation before leaving. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that many ACOD view divorce as an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage. This acceptance of divorce for ACOD may be because they lack the skills to compromise and negotiate (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This theory has been used to explain how ACOD may lack the developmental skills or exposure to successful models necessary to maintain strong and healthy romantic relationships (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Similar to above, how one behaves in a relationship can be linked to models they have been exposed to at home (Furman, Simon, Shaffer, & Bouchey, 2002). Early experiences are profoundly influenced by both family and peer relationships and often influence one's romantic relationship trajectory. Consistent with theory, studies have shown that children who have healthy relationships at home are likely to carry this through to relationships outside of the home (Furman et al., 2002). For example, the emotional closeness and support from parents during childhood predicted similar closeness and support between romantic partners in the ACOD's relationships (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Further, ACOD can use how parents functioned, whether positive or negative, while dissolving their marriage as a guide for their romantic relationships.



Alternatively, research suggests ACOD may not learn skills (such as communication) important to maintaining a long-term romantic relationship (Amato, 1996). ACOD have reported a fear of disappointment or worry about their chances of love, ultimately resulting in a higher level of distrust, and a lower likelihood to foresee marriage in their futures (Giuliani et al., 1998). Taken together, theory and research suggest the relationships of ACOD may be at higher risk of dissolution compared to children who enter adulthood with continuously married parents (Amato, 1996). However, less is known about some of the specific skills and processes related to the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Given the highly important role of communication and conflict resolution in determining if relationships succeed or dissolve, it makes sense that these skills might be key in understanding the higher risk of divorce among ACOD.

Gottman (1999) suggested that a healthy marriage is created when couples work together and appreciate the best qualities of each other. They also can cope with solvable conflicts (Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2015). Gottman's work with over 700 couples over the last three decades helped provide scholars and practitioners with an understanding of how marriages work, as well as how to predict changes in marital stability (Bischoff, 2002; Carrère, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000). He has helped to understand the basis of adult behavior in relationships, as well as the consequences of those interactions between partners (Gottman & Levenson, 2002). Gottman developed the *Four Horsemen* as four distinct ways of acting during conflict discussions that can sabotage a relationship (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman, 1999).

His four horsemen include (a) criticism, (b) defensiveness, (c) contempt, and (d) stonewalling. These horsemen typically happen in sequential order unless the couple does something to stop the cascade effect. If left to continue, marital stability will erode, and the relationship or marriage likely will dissolve.

Other researchers also assert that conflict resolution is an essential component to relationships (Ha, Overbeek, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Engels, 2013). Most of the conflicts are about the way people are fighting, rather than an actual reason (Gottman, 1999). Gottman (1999) suggested that to develop healthy, lasting relationships we do not only need to know how to repair conflicts, but also need to learn how to display positive emotional behaviors such as humor, affection, admiration, exploration, and adventure (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Gottman et al., 2015; Gottman, 1999). Most of this research includes only White, heterosexual, first-married adults, and limited research focuses on communication and conflict in the relationships of ACOD (c.f., Ha et al., 2013). Ha et al. (2013) found that conflicts do occur in ACOD's relationships and increase as they become closer and more intimate with one another. We do not know what particular conflict behaviors ACOD learn from their parents and bring into their romantic relationships. However, these scholars suggest that as ACOD become more intimate with a partner, fears surface about experiencing the same dissolution of a relationship as they witnessed among their parents. Remember too, these experiences are slightly more critical among females (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Females, in particular, show greater vulnerability to the effects of divorce, especially during the adolescent

developmental age, when they expect independence and autonomy. Although scholars know ACOD's vulnerability to divorce, we need to understand what behaviors may increase this vulnerability. How these fears lead to poor relational behaviors or intensify already learned behaviors from witnessing parental divorce was unknown. Since we know that ACOD are more vulnerable to divorce, we needed to better understand whether learned behaviors impact intergenerational transmission.

### **Purpose Statement**

Grounded in the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory, this phenomenological study explored how lived experiences of relational communication/conflict resolution among female ACOD might reflect those of their parents who divorced during the adult child's adolescence years. Three main research questions were addressed to understand this phenomenon: (1) What communication during conflict discussions do female ACOD perceive their parents used during their divorce, (2) What are the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that female ACOD use in their romantic relationships, and (3) In what ways might female ACOD use communication during conflict discussions in their romantic relationships that potentially indicate intergenerational transmission?

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

Divorce is a transitional period for all family members. After the initial adjustment period, most family members are resilient. Although families become resilient from the stresses of divorce, children can face long-term consequences. Consequences of divorce have been researched over the years, and the outlook on the effect of divorce on families has changed. This change in perspective has not been isolated to scholarly communities, rather it may be a product and an agent of broader changes in how society has come to view divorce. Among such changes include wider acceptance of divorce, legal changes, particularly in child custody decision-making, and advances in methods and theoretical explanations of divorce and its consequences. These developments are important for understanding the trajectory of the scholarly literature, as well as how divorce has impacted actual families and social systems. Accordingly, below is a brief overview that discusses perceptions of divorce and consequences of divorce on children. What follows is a discussion of the theoretical foundation of the current study: the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory. Finally, a critical assessment of the literature on conflict among parents in divorced and non-divorced families evaluates the consequences that conflict can have on children.

In the early 20th century, researchers stated that long-term consequences of divorce included a higher incidence of psychiatric and social problems (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). However, much of the research to support these statements relied on

clinical reports (Kelly & Berg, 1978; Rohrlich, Ranier, Berg-Cross, & Berg-Cross, 1977). The average divorce experience was completely invisible in the research. In other words, literature only referenced those with the worst outcomes, thereby exacerbating the perception of actual consequences of divorce in type, severity, and duration.

Societal perceptions of divorce as an impairment or disadvantage in a family continued over the decade. In the 1970s, the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage used a deficit approach. A deficit approach views divorce as a failure within a family. First marriage is viewed as the only good family we have to uphold and anything else that cannot stand up to this first marriage family is a deficit. Using this perspective, the study examined the effects of marital transitions on the adjustment of family as well as children (Hetherington, 1993). It also illustrates gender differences among children in the adjustment of the divorce. In the first year after a divorce, both genders were shown to have more anxious and demanding behaviors with peers as well as with adults (Hetherington, 1993). While behaviors for boys improved two years after a divorce, they still had more problems in school and home than children from non-divorced families. Research found boys to be more vulnerable to the effects of divorce during the preadolescence years (Hetherington, 1993). Girls, especially those who matured early and interacted with older peers, were showing an increase in problems by age 10. Girls were also found, however, to have fewer problems than boys until the age of 15. By the age of 15, both genders had more problems in social competence and behavior problems in school during the adjustment to divorce. Researchers highlighted

negative outcomes of divorce while ignoring positive outcomes (Hetherington, 1993).

Much of the historical literature relied on a clinical perspective which included those with the worst outcomes (Henning, 1977; Sugar 1970). The extent to which they represent the average experience was completely invisible.

Hetherington (1993) completed a study of 144 families, half divorced and half not divorced. They were interviewed at two months, one year, and two years post-divorce, as well as a six and 11 year follow-up through observation, standardized measures of adjustment, telephone interviews, and questionnaires. Parents in divorced and remarried families reported more negative life stresses in the first two years and when the children were in the adolescence stage (Hetherington, 1993). Some of the stresses included change in home, move to undesirable neighborhoods/schools, and economic declines (Hetherington, 1993). Divorced mothers reported task overload, child rearing problems, disorganization of the household, and loneliness, mostly in the first two years (Hetherington, 1993). Nevertheless, these stresses could decrease. Warmth, support, positive discipline, and control in a single-parent home helped lessen these effects of stress (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Another factor to decreasing stress included the end of high conflict marriages, allowing a more harmonious household to begin.

When non-divorced families were separated into high and low marital conflict groups, results showed that divorced women, on average, were less depressed, with less anxiety and health concerns than those in unhappy marriages (Hetherington, 1993). Less

depressed divorced women could be a result of the divorced woman's independence and self-fulfillment after the divorce. Hetherington (1993) found that although most family members go through a disrupted functioning period while adjusting to divorce, they tend to recover within two to three years, as long as the divorce does not have continued stress and adversity (Hetherington, 1989). While stress and adversity may vary in magnitude post-divorce, the influences of divorce may persist.

Research in the last decade has shown that while children typically recover two years after divorce, their parents' divorce may influence their long-term future relationships. The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory can help explain how the parental behaviors and actions of divorce can make ACOD more vulnerable to divorce (Amato, 1996). However, marriage is not the only time when children may apply relationship behaviors learned from their parents. Adolescence is a stage where relationships are of utmost importance, as this is the age where children are building independence and autonomy (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). At this developmental stage, relationships begin to change between friends and family members. Adolescents are creating a sense of self and moving focus away from the parents and more towards their peers (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Divorce of parents during this stage creates a unique experience, as the adolescents are struggling with finding themselves and adjusting to a new family transition. Although the divorce is not typically a spontaneous decision, its buildup may expose adolescents to conflict

behaviors and communication strategies much before the divorce is announced (Sumner, 2013).

John Gottman's research has helped researchers understand conflict and communication behaviors that couples display in a relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). His work started in the 1970's and therapists still use Gottman's research today to help couples in their marriages. He coined the term "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse" to represent four communication behaviors that can sabotage the relationship. If ACOD witness these behaviors, especially during a developmental stage of adolescence where they are learning how to function in their romantic relationships, they will likely mimic similar behaviors as their parents have modeled. By understanding what behaviors ACOD have witnessed, and how they perceive these behaviors useful in their relationships, we can best understand how the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission influences this particular age group.

To help meet the goals of this study, I first present the theoretical foundation of intergenerational transmission and the importance of the modes of transmission. I then examine adolescence, given its developmental importance. I also discuss the relationship between the child and the parent during adolescence to understand how the parent-child relationship may influence adolescents' other relationships. In particular, I focus on the romantic relationships of adolescents. As adolescents experience romantic relationships, they may use similar conflict and communication behaviors of their parents. I use John Gottman's "four horsemen" conception of warning signs of destruction in a marriage to



discuss conflict and communication. I consider whether these four horsemen are also present in the ACOD's romantic relationships during conflict to illuminate the modes by which divorce is intergenerationally transmitted.

### **The Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce Theory**

The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory explains the long-term effects on children of divorce. For example, this theory explains the vulnerability to divorce in these children's own marriages. This theory shows that ACOD have an increased risk of seeing their marriages end if their parents divorce (Amato, 1996). They have a higher level of distrust, and lower likelihood of foreseeing marriage in their own futures (Giuliani et al., 1998). I discuss the behaviors and beliefs of ACOD, as these behaviors and beliefs may interfere with the ACOD's future relationships.

Many ACOD view divorce as an acceptable solution to an unhappy marriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They may exhibit a lack of trust, or inability to commit long-term to the relationship (Amato, 1996). A common view among ACOD is that marriage is only forever if things work out (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). This makes ACOD less amenable to minor annoyances that can occur in every marriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). For example, arguments that occur in every relationship may cause the partner to have a low tolerance to the conflict, and therefore view divorce as an acceptable option. Even after finding love, ACOD remain doubtful and wary of commitment (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They can become apprehensive of repeating the mistakes of their parents (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

Even though both male and female ACOD are vulnerable to divorce, some gender differences contribute to the instability of their marriages. Karagiannopoulou and Hallam (2003) used semi-structured interviews to study 24 individuals – 12 from divorced and 12 from non-divorced families – in order to compare their individual fears and goals in their future family life. The participants were all aged 25-35. The ACOD reported more negative views of their future family life, indicating caution when choosing their future partners. Females reported more negative views of their future compared to the males in the study.

Although the outlook of ACOD's future relationships may be at risk, there are protective factors to aid in these relationships. The selection of one's partner can serve as a protective factor (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The partner can provide the other with the skills of communication and problem solving that can assist in the stability of the marriage (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). If both partners have experienced divorce themselves, the risk of divorce is heightened, as they may be unable to maintain the relationship (Amato, 1996).

Adult children of divorce (ACOD) may lack the developmental skills that are necessary to hold strong, healthy relationships due to minimal exposure to successful models (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Many developmental stages in their life rely on these models. Adolescence is one stage where the use of these skills is important, as new challenges and adjustments can cause problems that existed during the first two years following divorce to re-emerge, or perhaps surface for the first time (Hetherington &

Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Theoretically, adolescence is an important time period, as we potentially learn modes of transmission that we may carry into future relationships.

### **Adolescence**

Historically, adolescence has designated the ages from 10-14 years old (Dornbusch, Petersen, & Hetherington, 1991). More recent literature conceptualizes adolescence as a much longer development period, beyond the ages of 10-14, until the start of an emerging adulthood period at age 18 (Arnett, 2007; Luyckx, Klimstra, Duriez, Van Petegem, & Beyers, 2013). To best include the range of years discussed in the literature, the current study approached adolescents as those between the ages of 12 and 17. It sought participants whose parents divorced during this age frame because these developmental years are a period when individuals build independence and develop a sense of self (Luyckx et al., 2013). Of course, cultural difference can lead adolescents to have diverse ideas about personal independence and whether it is desirable. In Asian cultures, for example, a commitment to family cohesion often takes precedence over an individual's aspirations (Hays & Erford, 2010). It can be common for adult children to live with their parents until marriage, and at times even after marriage (Hays & Erford, 2010). Such cultural variations, however, attest to the diverse ways that individuals develop during adolescence.

Adolescence is also a period when relationships begin to change (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Early and later experiences in one's life can influence an individual's interpersonal development, which can be identified in the quality of

relationships with those around them (Steinberg, 2011). The parent-child relationship can change during these years. Conflicts between parent and child typically peak at age 15 and decline at age 16 (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). For those in divorced families, parent-child conflict may continue past 16 and not diminish until the adolescent leaves home. This developmental stage may cause adolescents to distance themselves from their parents as a way of obtaining independence around the age of 15.

Independence represents one main developmental change during adolescence. While adolescents are seeking to find themselves, their relationships with their parents can also influence how adolescents behave. Changes in the family can contribute to a change in the parent-child relationship (Hetherington, 1993). The impact of a family transition, like divorce, can also be a significant influence on parent-child relationships.

**Mother-child relationship during adolescence.** In adolescence, mother-child relationships begin to change as adolescents seek their own identities and build independence. The mother may struggle to accept the changing needs of the children as they begin to develop a sense of self (Kenemore & Spira, 1996). While mothers can have strong relationships with both genders of children, popular culture has placed much emphasis on the relationship between the mother and her daughter. This relationship has been displayed as one fraught with conflict. Tension between mothers and their daughters, however, often surfaces during adolescence (Kenemore & Spira, 1996).

During adolescence, relationship dynamics between mother and daughter change as they move from dependence to independence. Both mother and daughter have certain

internal and relational needs and require each other to appreciate these needs. In this developmental period, both mother and daughter grow and develop (Kenemore & Spira, 1996). As the daughter goes through physical and psychological changes, the mother must adjust to the daughter's search for identity. Disappointment with the adolescent can have many negative outcomes, should it occur during this time. If disappointment occurs in multiple areas, such as friends and family, and there are no structures in place to help regulate tension, there is a risk that adolescent girls may turn to destructive behaviors.

During the early 20th century, the literature placed much of the blame for children's destructive behaviors on the mothers, claiming that these mothers were ruining their children's lives through divorce (Henning & Oldham, 1977; Sugar, 1970). It would be difficult to disassociate such research placing disproportionate blame on mothers' performance in the domestic sphere from this earlier period's significant backlash against feminism and women pursuing traditionally male-dominated jobs. Over time, however, research on mother-child relationships continued to investigate the changes that may result in the mother and child during the child's adolescent years.

Adolescent females, in particular, seek validation and connection at this developmental age, and may need this maintained at such a transitional point in their lives (Haaz, Kneaval, & Browning, 1989). Findings on the mother-daughter relationship post-divorce are mixed, with some finding the bond to decrease, and others finding it to strengthen (Haaz et al., 2014; Hetherington, 1989). For example, research has posited an increase in monitoring and control between mothers and daughters between the ages of

10 and 15 (Hetherington, 1993). Yet, early maturity in girls is one factor that has been found to weaken the mother-child bond post-divorce (Hetherington, 1989). This decrease in the mother-child bond may be due to a mother not feeling ready to view the daughter as older than her age, or even a concern about the child's actions that may not be viewed as appropriate for her age (Smetana, 1989). These feelings can increase conflict between mother and daughter

Other research shows that the mother-daughter relationship may improve post-divorce whereas this has not been found with mother-son relationships (Haaz et al., 2014). Wallerstein, Lewis, and Rosenthal (2013) completed a 25-year longitudinal qualitative study on mother-child relationships after a divorce. They conducted structured interviews with 60 families and their 131 children in Northern California at 18 months, five years, 10 years, 15 years, and 25 years. Only half of the mothers were able to maintain the nurturing relationships they had with their children before a divorce, due to a variety of demands such as employment and household management (Wallerstein et al., 2013). This lack of a nurturing relationship is consistent with prior research findings that showed the ability to monitor and discipline children declines following a divorce (Hetherington, 1989). Other women in the study were able to maintain their relationships with their children after successful remarriage or a period in which they prioritized employment, restoring social networks, or replacing intimate relationships (Wallerstein et al., 2013).

Girls often need their mother's presence for emotional and social well-being (Wallerstein et al., 2013). The absence of the mother can lead adolescents to look elsewhere for emotional warmth and security (Ivanova, Mills, & Veenstra, 2014). For example, girls in divorced families are more likely to become involved with older males (Hetherington, 2003). These older partners may provide the emotional connection they do not receive from their mother.

While the work of Wallerstein et al. (2013) marked a significant contribution to the research on mother-child relationships, it remains unclear how changing societal conditions across its timeframe of multiple decades may have influenced results. The children were in the sole custody of the mother in this longitudinal study, yet recent years have seen more attention devoted to joint custody and father involvement.

**Father-child relationship during adolescence.** In the last decade much has changed in both the research and the social expectations on fatherhood involvement. Fathers have taken on a wider set of responsibilities, including those that once seemed part of a mother's traditional role in the family (Gottzen, 2011). The mother's role in the child's life is generally assumed, while the father's involvement in the family was optional (Gottzen, 2011). Society now promotes "responsible fatherhood" initiatives as well as an increase in the woman's participation in the job force (Perry & Langley, 2013).

Fathers can have many roles in the family. They can fill the provider role for the family as well as that of primary caregiver, attending to many aspects of life with his children (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012). Father involvement in

family leisure activities with his kids can contribute to a more positive family relationship as a whole, thus representing an important facet of the father-child relationship (Buswell et al., 2012).

The father's relationship with the family can change, in particular with divorce. For both genders, the father-child relationship has been negatively affected by divorce (Haaz et al., 2014). Amato and Booth (1996) used data from a 12-year longitudinal study of marital instability to research the parent-child relationship before and after divorce. The divorce was found to decline father-child affection. Yet problems with this parent-child relationship existed eight to 12 years before the divorce. Although father-child contact generally declined, contact with sons was more likely to continue than with daughters (Haaz et al., 2014). Further research was needed to better understand the consequences this could have for the daughters.

Haaz et al. (2014) contributed to this research by further explaining the importance of the father-daughter dynamic for the daughter's future relationships. Haaz et al. used a convenience sample of 90 females of divorced parents, at least 18 years old and in their first heterosexual marriage. Women who reported strong emotional intimacy in their marriage also reported a more robust father-daughter relationship (Haaz et al., 2014). Thus, these researchers posit if the daughter can feel supported and encouraged to share with her father, she is likely to perceive relationships with men in the same manner (Haaz et al., 2014). Without this father-daughter emotional connection, the daughter may not believe it exists with any man, or know how to form this relationship with another



man. The stronger the father-daughter relationship, the more emotional intimacy exists in the female child's marriage (Haaz et al., 2014). The father-daughter relationship could have some resistance to the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory, yet longitudinal studies of these women are necessary to evaluate the strength and stability of these relationships.

Adolescent development relies heavily on support from both parents during these transformative years. While adolescents may focus more on peers when building their independence, the emotional closeness and reinforcement from both parents can predict similar expressions in their relationships (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory explains how ACOD are more vulnerable to divorce, but we also need to know the modes of transmission that occur in their relationships prior to marriage. The literature has shown adolescence as a prominent period where romantic relationships occur.

**Adolescent dating.** Peers become paramount during adolescence, as the social acceptance and perceptions by others can academically, socially, and emotionally impact adolescents' adjustment (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Peer expectations and opinions become crucial at this age, as adolescents privilege peer influence on their own attitudes and actions (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Adolescents begin to compare themselves to others (Petersen, Leffert, & Graham, 1995).

Same-gender friendships lead to mixed-gender friend groups (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004). Some begin to form dating pairs as part of a group, which

can lead them to function outside of the peer group (Connolly et al., 2004). These dyadic relationships can begin to develop into more mature relationships. As their focus moves to developing romantic relationships, they start to confront expectations for mature behavior and take on adult roles (Petersen et al., 1995).

Sexual behavior can play the role of acquiring adult status (Salerno, Tosto, & Antony, 2015). Adolescents feel the need to explore and experiment sexually as they continue developing the competency to establish future close relationships (Salerno et al., 2015). Today's adolescent dating has changed significantly from earlier eras. For example, earlier adolescent dating expectations focused on meeting a marriage partner, while the objective of contemporary teenage dating are more casual, social, and increasingly accompany expectation of sexual involvement.

Half of all adolescents are romantically involved by age 15 and have 10 to 12 years of romantic experience before marriage (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Individuals know and respect their partner as a good friend and a romantic partner, yet emotional commitment does not yet exist. Evidence of commitment informs whether intimate romantic relationships can evolve (Salerno et al., 2015). Once they have a current understanding of themselves and others, adolescents can commit to stable and satisfying relationships (Salerno et al., 2015).

During middle adolescence, individuals often build affection and spend much free time with their romantic partners (Salerno et al., 2015). In late adolescence, relationships help convert the functions of attachment and caring into a new sense of personal and

relational security (Salerno et al., 2015). Adolescents, particularly girls, experience an increase in depressive symptoms after they become involved in a dating relationship (Davila, Capaldi, & La Greca, 2004). These adolescents seek support from others around them, particularly their peers and romantic partners, to try to gain emotional security and love (Ivanova et al., 2014).

Adolescents can seek emotional security in a romantic relationship, but the family can also play a role in how they experience these relationships. Researchers have found parental divorce to be a precursor to an initiation of dating in adolescence (Ivanova et al., 2014). Cavanagh, Crissey, and Raley (2008) conducted a study to examine family structure history and adolescent romance. They used adolescents from Add Health data in grades seven through 12 in the United States in 1995, and interviewed a nationally representative sample of 13,570 adolescents. They found a link between the increase in family instability and the likelihood of romantic relationships (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Home-life instability during middle childhood and early adolescence seems to provide adolescents with an opportunity to engage in relationships, and may even provide young people comfort from the changes that are occurring at home. Lower levels of supervision may leave adolescents with more opportunity to engage in relationships (Cavanagh et al., 2008). This research determined the significance of family instability on romantic relationships in adolescence, yet further explanation is needed to understand why this connection exists.

Schulman et al., (2012) used a semi-structured Romantic Competence Interview on 40 adolescents aged 16 to 18 years old whose parents divorced at least three years earlier. They used a control group of 40 girls aged 16 to 18 from non-divorced families. The research found that adolescent girls from divorced families do not reach the same level of romantic competence than those of non-divorced families (Schulman et al., 2012). They either refrained from relationships all together or had a less stable relationship. However, with mothers more capable of supporting their daughters, these adolescents had romantic relationships that proved more stable, in line with previous studies that showed the importance of the mother's presence during the developmental stages of adolescence (Wallerstein et al., 2013).

Adolescents from divorced families characterize their ideal mate as more like their parents than those from non-divorced families (Lazar & Guttman, 2004). This ideal mate concept may stem from the quality of those relationships, or the idea of having *unfinished business* with their parents (Lazar & Guttman, 2004). Adolescents possess less mature and less positive views, and demonstrate less developed skills to cope with disagreements or strains in relationships (Schulman et al., 2012). Marital transitions, including negativity, conflict, aggression, and coercion, affect their relationships (Hetherington, 2003).

Although researchers have stated that ACOD may seek a partner similar to their parents, extant research lacks explanations on how the relationships are similar (Hetherington, 2003). By understanding the similarities between ACOD and their

divorced parents, we can better understand what skills ACOD have and need to function in a healthy relationship. While research has shown that divorce can contribute to initiating dating during adolescence, research is needed to further understand what behaviors the children are exposed to during this transition and that they are potentially bringing into their own romantic relationships.

### **Conflict and Communication**

Conflict is a natural part of relationships, and every couple will engage in conflict during their relationship. How they manage the conflict matters greatly to their marital success. During the first five years of marriage, much of the stress that occurs in the relationship surrounds communication. Distressed couples have more negative communication over time (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). One factor of marital distress is the decrease in positive communication (Markman et al., 2010). When couples focus on the negative aspects of their significant other, this can cause stress. Conflict management involves recognizing both the husband's and wife's perspectives, and finding ways to keep the dispute from escalating.

One assumption about divorce includes a practice of poor conflict strategies. These poor conflict strategies between parents may teach children unhealthy ways of solving conflict (Buehler, Franck, & Cook, 2009). Conflict between parents can sometimes preoccupy their parenting skills, regardless of the guilt they may feel about fighting in front of the children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Parents provide models for their children in all sorts of ways, giving their children tools for coping well into their

future lives. This includes models for managing conflict. Conflict can prove important for children to witness, as it may provide them with strategies for conflict management in their own relationships.

The impact of parental conflict on children has been empirically examined. Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis, using data from over 13,000 children, found that children in married families of high inter-parental conflict have comparable problems as those of divorced children. Age was significantly associated with psychological and social adjustment, and mother-child/mother-father relationships. Effect sizes were largest for those in primary school, high school, and the category described as "mixed-age." For college-students the mean effect size was not significant, presumably due to the level of independence from the family at this point in time.

This research employed eight studies to report data for children in high conflict families. They found significantly lower effect sizes in conduct, psychological adjustment, and self-concept for intact high-conflict families as compared to those in intact low conflict families (Amato & Keith, 1991). Those in high-conflict families exhibited lower levels of well-being than those in low-conflict intact homes. Those observed within two years after the divorce displayed stronger effect sizes for conduct. The meta-analysis showed that divorced families have a higher level of well-being than if they stayed in a high conflict family.

In contrast to the ubiquitous platitude *stay together for the kids*, Amato's research found that an unhappy home environment with high levels of discord is not optimal for

the children's development (Amato, 1993). Growing up in a high conflict family may put a chronic stain on the child and lead to reduced well-being (Amato, 1993). Katz and Gottman (1993) found that the couple's behaviors effect children even before the divorce occurs. With hostile parental behavior during conflict, children tended to show antisocial behaviors in school three years later. If we know parents' conflict resolution strategies affect their children's behaviors in school, we need to understand the additional domains in which these children display impacted behaviors. Although conflict occurs in every relationship, romantic and non-romantic, how couples interact and communicate during conflict can tremendously help the relationship succeed.

**John Gottman's work.** Gottman's (1993) research of more than 30 years with over 700 subjects has provided researchers and therapists with valuable information on couple interactions and communication. His research helped couples reach healthy marital functioning with a focus on communication behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, within intimate relationships. Gottman first started his work in the 1970s, when minimal research existed on keeping marriages stable (Gottman & Silver, 1999). His work includes the study of newlyweds as well as long-term couples well into their sixties (Gottman & Silver, 1999). He employed extensive methods, such as videotaping the couple's discussions and measuring their heart rate and blood pressure during their daily interactions (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Gottman and his colleagues were the first to provide such an exhaustive approach with couples. His work and findings have been tested by a nine-month follow-up with 640 couples. At the beginning of his workshops,

27% were at a high risk of divorce, and by nine months the percentage dropped to zero. Gottman is widely considered a leading relationship expert due to his ability to not only predict divorce but also improve marriages.

While Gottman's (1993) research has been useful in assisting couples in strengthening their marriage, white, heterosexual, middle-class participants dominated his studies and were used to formulate the principles of a good marriage. Given the high prevalence of divorce across demographic groups, researchers need to further his findings by devising studies that consider diverse populations. Knowledge about group differences, and how others have experienced their relationships, can also help counselors, therapists, and other professionals meet the needs of all communities (Hays & Erford, 2010).

Families play different roles across societies, and familial characterizations of white middle-class families may not reflect experiences across racial, socioeconomic, and cultural lines (Hays & Erford, 2010). This awareness can alert professionals working with diverse couples, but also uncover the individual differences necessary to provide couples with the proper resources and principles to strengthen their marriage (Hays & Erford, 2010).

The first seven years of all marriages are the most unstable, with the average time of divorce being around the five-year mark (Gottman & Silver, 1999). At 16 to 20 years in the marriage comes yet another time of possible divorce, with an average of 16 years (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The general absence of positive loving emotions has been



found to be one reason for divorce at this time in the marriage (Gottman, 1999). Conflict is another behavior that can shift the relationship. How the couple works through the conflict can be a predictor of the relationship's future.

Most conflicts in a relationship surround the way people fight, rather than center on an actual reason (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Many marriage therapy programs assume that if one person remains rational during a conflict, the heat in a conflict will decline. Gottman et al. (2015) discredited this assumption by finding repair attempts crucial. Happily married people work together in *repair attempts*, based on increasing emotional closeness (Gottman et al., 2015). Gottman and Silver (1999) found that knowing how to repair conflicts matters, but the more important features include knowing how to incorporate emotional elements such as humor, affection, playing, silliness, exploration, adventure, lust, and touching. Ensuring that the conflict starts in a positive climate is a highly effective repair attempt (Gottman et al., 2015). The couple makes an effort to prevent negativity from getting out of control during a conflict (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The couple's everyday moments can contribute to the positive effect (Gottman & Driver, 2004). For example, during a conflict, one partner's enthusiasm can drive his or her partner's affection (Gottman & Driver, 2004). Positive affection matters not just during the conflict, but in daily interactions as well.

Couples can build a *sound marital house* when they work together, appreciate the best of each other, and cope with solvable and perpetual conflicts that can lead to an *emotional gridlock* (Gottman & Silver, 1999). An emotional gridlock is when the couple

is unable to move forward. Couples can turn around a negative conflict and make it constructive by creating and maintaining an emotional connection (Gottman et al., 2015). Awareness of how to repair conflict, as well as communicate with one another, represent two essential skills in a relationship.

Disagreements can be one of the healthiest things a couple can do in a marriage, yet the intensity of the arguments can best display the true colors of the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Gottman and Silver (1999) have identified three different ways of problem-solving in healthy marriages: validating, volatile, and conflict-avoiding. *Validating* involves compromising and working out problems to create mutual satisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 1999). *Validators* let their partners know that their emotions are valid, even if they disagree. Those fighting on a grand scale fall into the *Volatile* category. The conflict can erupt, often in passionate disputes. *Conflict-avoiding* occurs when couples agree to disagree, without confronting their differences (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Although couples have different ways of solving problems, positivity is essential to the success of their relationship.

A healthy balance of positivity and negativity in a relationship matters to the overall health of the relationship. Although people tend to believe there should be an equal amount of positive experiences as negative ones in a relationship, the positive experiences should far exceed the negative experiences. The magic ratio among heterosexual couples is not 50-50, but rather five-to-one, with five times more positive

experiences in the relationship than negative experiences (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

When negativity takes over, the Four Horsemen may begin to appear.

If the children witness these four horsemen, they may be learning ways of poorly communicating in their own relationships. Gottman's research has found that almost all relationships that dissolve experience some of the horsemen prior to their dissolution. The current study uncovered what horseman, if any, may be experienced by ACOD in their own romantic relationships. The study also examined whether these horsemen are similar or different than those their parents used.

***The four horsemen.*** In Gottman's body of work, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse represent warning signs of destruction and potential separation or divorce during a marriage. The ability to pinpoint when communication begins to spiral downward can assist in bringing the happiness back again (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The four horsemen are four distinct ways of communicating that can sabotage the relationship (Gottman, 1993). The first horseman is criticism. Criticism involves attacking the significant other's personality or character. One of the healthiest activities in marriage is complaining, as expressing anger helps strengthen the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). However, trouble can begin when one partner's needs are not being met when complaining. One partner begins blaming the other partner. This can lead to a term called *kitchen sinking*, when one person expresses every negative thought about the other person (Gottman & Silver, 1999). This display of negative thoughts falls

into criticism. Accusing a partner of untrustworthiness or betrayal is a common criticism. Statements such as “you never” or “you always” clearly exemplify this horseman.

When criticism becomes so large that it begins to take over the marriage, the second horsemen can arrive: defensiveness (Gottman, 1993). Partners can plead innocent at this point, yet both partners do not necessarily get here at the same time. The *victim* does not see defensiveness as a concern, but it can escalate the conflict. Signs of defensiveness include denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with negative mind-reading, cross-complaining, or repeating oneself (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The partner needs to see the words as information that is being expressed rather than an attack. The partner must also understand and empathize with what their partner is saying (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Contempt can arise from defensiveness. Contempt is the intention to insult and emotionally abuse the other person right into the heart of their sense of self. (Gottman & Silver, 1999). It is a condition where negative thoughts about the other take over. The partner cannot recall why they are together. Typically, emotional flooding, or being so overwhelmed by a partner’s negativity, can occur during this stage. At this point a woman’s heart rate goes up whereas a man can move on to the fourth horseman at this point in time (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The majority of the relationship turns abusive with a decay in admiration of one another. Insults and name-calling, hostile humor, mockery, and hostile nonverbal cues such as eye rolling, are examples of contempt. Compliments at this time, rather than attacking the personality or character of the other,

matter a great deal (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Once this horseman emerges, the chances of saving the relationship nearly fail to exist.

The final horseman is known as stonewalling. By the time the couple's communication reaches the final stage, the chances of saving the relationship are almost impossible. Every confrontation leads to shutting the other person out. The partner can abandon the messages and stay in silence, either by refusing to engage or by physically leaving the room. Typically, those in this stage do not realize its power, particularly when a man stonewalls a woman. A man typically reaches this stage first, as they do not tend to respond as emotionally as women do (Gottman & Silver, 1999). At this point, the participants can be so overwhelmed that it can lead to divorce, separation, or living lonely together in the same home (Gottman & Silver, 1999). When this horseman becomes a normal behavior in the relationship, the marriage is much more difficult to salvage. Acknowledging the positive aspects of the marriage can help restore the relationship if one can recognize them.

With the presence of the four horsemen before the divorce, we can assume that family members witness these behaviors. In particular, children's exposure to these behaviors may provide models for their own romantic relationships. In adolescence, children are forming their own romantic relationships. As they build independence, they also use models to guide their behaviors. This makes it crucial for research to better understand if ACOD use conflict behaviors of the four horsemen so that we can better understand the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This phenomenological study explored how lived experiences of relational communication/conflict resolution among female ACOD might reflect those of their parents who divorced during the adult child's adolescence years. Three main research questions drove this study:

- (1) What communication during conflict discussions do female ACOD perceive their parents used during their divorce?
- (2) What are the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that female ACOD use in their romantic relationships?
- (3) In what ways might female ACOD use communication during conflict discussions in their romantic relationships that potentially indicate intergenerational transmission?

Data was collected via semi-structured, in-depth online interviews.

### **Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach**

Some qualitative research approaches focus on understanding how people make sense of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This proves particularly useful when the researcher needs to understand the phenomenon from the participant's perspective as well as how meaning is constructed, as in the current study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, a constructivist theoretical lens informed the study methodology and analysis. This research approached ACOD's romantic relationships and

illuminated how participants have made meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants discussed the conflicts they remembered from both their parents' relationship as well as their own, including the similarities and differences between their parents' and their own conflicts. This sought to determine whether the behaviors present in their parents' conflict are similar to their own.

Much qualitative research uses an inductive process of analysis, deriving information from the data inductively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Inductive analysis involves looking for patterns in the data. When using an inductive approach, the researcher must keep an open mind when gathering data and consider all possible meanings of the text (in this case, a comment) through close reading. Each adolescent's experience may differ from one another. The researcher must trust the process of qualitative research and carefully observe the findings as they unfold (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A phenomenological design will be used to make meaning of the findings. This design will help to better understand how the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission helps explain the ACOD's romantic relationships.

**Design.** Phenomenology was developed in the early 20th century to study how people interpret and describe their lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). The lived experience is how the participant recalled the event and how they interpreted the experiences. The research engages how different subjects experience particular phenomena. The subjects that are recruited offer examples of the phenomenon under

study (Sousa, 2014). The goal of phenomenology, then, is to depict the essence of the experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Phenomenological studies are used to describe and understand human experiences (Sousa, 2014). The researcher must set aside prior beliefs about the phenomenon so that consciousness can be heightened and examined, a process referred to as bracketing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This focuses on the experience itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants in a phenomenological design recall experiences that have occurred in the past. Those who have experienced the phenomenon communicate them to others. Phenomenologists then make sense of the participant's perceptions of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to capture the essence of the experience, the researcher should ask experience and behavior questions related specifically to the conflicts participants have experienced. These types of questions can lead the participant back to the original experience in order to reflect on the conflict they were exposed to and the conflict they experienced in their own romantic relationship (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Previous phenomenological studies have spoken from the perspective of adults in their adult relationships (Stambaugh, Hector, & Carr, 2011). In particular, adults of divorce have received much attention in the literature over the years (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1995; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979; Wallerstein et al., 2013). However, the modes in which transmission of divorce occurs from the parents to the child needs further research. The current study used a phenomenological design to gather qualitative data



from the perspective of ACOD in their adolescent years. It considered the perceptions of female ACOD to examine the communication strategies their parents used for conflict resolution, and their perception of the communication strategies used for conflict resolution in their relationships. Phenomenological studies are best suited to affective, emotional and intense experiences, and can be subjective. Efforts will be made to ensure researcher bias and assumptions do not enter into the interview so that an understanding of the experience comes forth.

Although conflict occurs in every relationship, how couples interact and communicate during conflict can help with the success of the relationship. An unhappy home environment with high levels of discord is not optimal for the child's development (Amato, 1993). The children of these parents may be exposed to their parents' conflict, and possibly carry this into their relationships. Gottman's Four Horsemen provides warning signs of destruction in marriage (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The current study sought to examine whether any of these warning signs and behaviors also existed in the ACOD's conflicts. This was achieved through in-depth interviews with college females, aged 18-21, and from divorced families. The meaning ACOD gave to the conflict in their romantic relationships was uncovered, while also elucidating their experiences (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014).

### **Participant Recruitment**

Using purposive sampling, I recruited a sample of students at a large northeastern university. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding

of specific cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample was chosen precisely because of their experiences. In addition to purposive sampling, the current study also used snowball sampling. It was likely that participants knew someone who also had experienced divorce themselves (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was asked to refer the researcher to other potential participants, who were then contacted to gauge their interest in participating in the study.

The participants in the study: (a) identified as a female, (b) were between the ages of 18 and 21, (c) had parents who divorced when the participant was between the ages of 12 and 17, and (d) had at least one romantic relationship within the last year that lasted at least three months. It was important that the participants witnessed their parents' marriage so that they could best speak to their exposure to conflict and communication strategies. Participants had experienced at least one romantic relationship. Half of all adolescents are romantically involved by age 15 and have 10 to 12 years of romantic experience before marriage (Carver et al., 2003). This study used a three-month period because researchers have suggested that many adolescent relationships are short-lived when adolescents begin dating, but have a higher level of commitment as they get older (Meier & Allen, 2009).

Participants for the sample were recruited from the College of Education and Human Services and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at a large northeastern university. The College of Education and Human Services has a total of 2,041 undergraduate students. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences has a total

of approximately 4,200 undergraduate students. The researcher contacted professors in three departments to gain participants in the study. These departments have undergraduate or dual degree programs, which are likely to have participants in the age range of 18 to 21. The contacted departments had a focus in education or family and children. These departments were anticipated to have a high percentage of females as compared to males. This assumption is based on the 2011-2012 statistic that shows 76% of public school teachers were female (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). By inference, it is likely that a larger percentage of females are entering the education, family, and children career fields.

The chair of each department was contacted via email. The email asked permission to contact professors in regards to entering their classroom to speak about the study to the students (see Appendix A). The chair of the department also received a Site Approval form to sign and return back to the researcher (see Appendix B). Once given permission by the chair of the departments, professors of any research and methods courses as well as 100 and 200 level courses with at least five sections offered in the four departments were contacted via email. The e-mail contained an explanation of the study and a request to enter the classroom to speak to the students about the study and seek participants (see Appendix C). It was anticipated that many first or second year students would be completing 100 or 200 level classes. This also reached students in the 18-19 age range. It was expected that many students completing their research courses would be beyond their first or second year because many of the research and methods courses

have prerequisite requirements that must be completed. This reached students in the 20-21 age range. By speaking to students in 100 and 200 level courses as well as research courses above the 200 level, the population was expected to include a variety of participants.

The first 10 participants were provided with a \$10 Visa gift card incentive for taking part in the interview, and all participants were included in a drawing for a \$50 gift card at the end of the study. When providing incentives, the researcher made sure that justice among all participants was present (Phillips, 2015). By having everyone in the drawing for the \$50, the participants were all provided with an equal chance to win (Phillips, 2015). The researcher provided the participants with an estimated idea of how many participants were expected for this study (Phillips, 2015). Computing the odds provided each participant their estimated odds of winning. There was a reasonable balance between the cash value and the number of prizes that were provided.

### **Sample**

#### **Demographics**

The sample of students were recruited from a large northeastern university (see Table 1). As of December 2, 2015, this university had 16,336 undergraduate students, with 62% of them female. Almost half of all undergraduates are White, followed by Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, and Asian at 28%, 12%, and 6%, respectively. American Indian/Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander comprise less than 1% of the student body population.

Participants from all racial backgrounds were anticipated, as information about the study was communicated to students in 100 and 200 level classes offered in three departments that contain at least five sections. The researcher spoke about the study to the students through an in-person class visit. The researcher also entered available undergraduate research methods courses that were above the 200 level. By speaking to a variety of students in three departments, the researcher shared information with a sizable number of potential participants.

**Sample size.** Qualitative study sample sizes often range from 10 to 20 participants. Stambaugh et al. (2011) studied the experiences of adult women of divorce, using 10 adult females as a sample. Cohen, Leichtentritt, and Volpin (2012) conducted a study of communication between divorced women and their children, with a sample size of 20. As such, the target sample size for this study was approximately 15 participants. The researcher used data saturation to determine the final sample number. Data saturation brings new participants into the study until the data collection produces no new information or insights through data redundancy or repetition (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). No new perceived communication behaviors or experiences were introduced in the interviews. Completing interviews beyond redundancy ensures saturation exists. The final sample number was 10 participants.

### **Procedures**

Once granted permission, the researcher entered the class at the time coordinated with the professor. The professor was allowed to stay in the classroom during the

presentation of the study. If students were being recruited from a research or methods course taught by a research team member, the professor was asked to step out of the room and was not aware of any student who participated. Male students were asked to leave the classroom before the researcher discussed the study, as the study only sought females. All female students received a handout that contained all the information the researcher discussed with the class so they could clearly see the requirements for participating (see Appendix D).

Once the participant recruitment announcements were made in the classrooms, interested participants were asked to set up a time to complete the interview. The time was coordinated at the end of the class. Students were able to keep the handout to help those who wanted to think about participation in the study. Contact information was on the handout for the student to contact the researcher if they decided they wanted to participate at a later time. Three participants emailed at a later time. Participants were instructed to pick a time that allowed them to be free of distraction. To protect their confidentiality, they were asked not to complete the interview in a public place. Some suggestions included a location in their house or dorm room at a time they knew they would be alone. The students who did not sign up in class emailed the researcher with interest in participating. The researcher coordinated a time that worked best for the participant to be interviewed through Skype. All contact was maintained with the researcher through the school e-mail provided, to maintain privacy and secure all information.

An informed consent was then sent to the participant via e-mail approximately a day before the coordinated time, as a reminder of the interview (see Appendix E). Participants were required to read through the informed consent before the interview (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Personal disclosure is cathartic, but only if the person felt their confidentiality and trust was not jeopardized (Geldard & Patton, 2007). Research has found providing the informed consent form prior to the interview, as well as discussing confidentiality, may assist in building the trust before the interview begins (Geldard & Patton, 2007). At this time, they were asked if they needed anything prior to the interview such as directions on how to use Skype if they had not used it before. They were also instructed to pick a location that had wireless connection, so that data charges were not applied if they did not have an unlimited data plan.

This population was likely to have the readability and vocabulary knowledge to comprehend the consent form, as they are currently enrolled in college, and are less likely to be impaired by a lack of education when reading the informed consent (Varnhagen et al., 2005). The participant e-mailed the researcher with any questions or concerns they had regarding the study before the interview. The informed consent process was an ongoing exchange of information between the researcher and the participant (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

**Interviews.** Each participant was contacted through Skype at an agreed time. Skype has become a promising and widely-used form of qualitative research (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). The technology allows greater flexibility to

reach participants and increase their participation, with the limited time they may be on campus. Skype also allows another way of participating to those who may be more reluctant to meet in person. (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Deakin and Wakefield (2014) found that interviewees who did not have time to meet in person were more willing to participate when Skype was provided as an option. Skype provides the researcher and the participant a *safe zone*. The researcher will not feel as if they are imposing on the participant's personal space while the participant can choose a place where she feels most comfortable (Hanna, 2012).

While in-person interviews have been argued to build stronger rapport, researchers have also completed interviews with an option of in-person interviews or Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Skype does not affect the quality of the conversation (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Rapport can be built more quickly through Skype rather than in-person interviews for some participants but is more difficult to develop for more reserved participants (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). For those showing signs of wavering or being unsure to participate, additional emails helped develop a relationship with the participant and increase familiarity prior to the interview (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). For those more reserved, it was important to make the participants feel open to share by allowing them to understand that the conversation will remain confidential. Each participant created a pseudonym, which disconnected any study information from the participant (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). This pseudonym was used throughout the interview and in all interview transcripts to



protect confidentiality. Names and email addresses were kept in a separate Word document on a password protected computer for follow up contact and to send gift cards.

The researcher established rapport with participants through small talk to make them feel at ease at the start of the interview. The participant was notified that the interview could take anywhere from 60-90 minutes or longer. Although the average length of time was shared with the participant, the participants were told at the start of the interview that they were able to take as much time as they needed to discuss their experiences. Further review of the informed consent form was discussed if the participant had any questions or concerns (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). As verification of comprehension, the participant and the researcher discussed the informed consent document before beginning the interview (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In order to gain verbal consent, they were asked to confirm that they read and understood the informed consent and wanted to participate. The participants also had the option to tell the researcher if they did not want to participate. The opt-out option is consistent with the Secretary Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections (SACHRP) considerations for Internet research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Demographic responses including age, race, and ethnicity were collected before the open-ended questions began (see Table 2). Background information was also collected about their parents' relationship (see Table 3). Participants were told that they could stop at any point in the discussion. Following the demographic questions, the

participants were asked the open-ended questions which allowed the ACOD to share their experiences (see Appendix F). A semi-structured interview best enabled the researcher to use the participants' answers as a guide for discussion. Research has found participants may doubt whether the researcher accurately understands them, or their situation (Geldard & Patton, 2007). By allowing them to speak freely and discuss their relationship, they had a chance to explain their previous romantic relationships without judgment. Semi-structured interviews were more conducive to the study because the purpose focused on the responses of the participants, rather than the order of the questions (Merriam, 2009). This had the potential to empower the participants, because they were given more control over the direction of the interview, rather than responding to a static list of questions (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014).

Although participants were told they could stop at any point, the researcher was aware that information about unhealthy and unsafe relationships could be discussed. While telling the participants they could stop at any point is a common interview practice, because bringing up past relationships may cause depressive symptoms to develop, this was particularly important in this qualitative study (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Finchman, 2004). Counseling services on campus were shared with the student, and a list of community resources were emailed to each participant after the Skype call if they wished to discuss their relationships further, as well as if they felt they needed assistance in their current relationship (see Appendix G). The conversation was led to a positive discussion through small talk, to help make the participant feel

comfortable. Small talk consisted of any interests or positive topics discussed at the start of the call.

After the interview questions were answered, participants were asked if they knew anyone who fit the same criteria and were willing to participate. The participant was also asked if they could be contacted again to verify the key points the researcher had gathered from the interview. This step confirmed that the information they shared was successfully captured. Once each interview was completed, the participant was sent a \$10 Visa gift card through email as compensation for their time in taking part in the study. Even though the study initially had decided to provide \$10 for the first fifteen participants, data saturation was reached at ten participants. Their email was placed in a drawing for a \$50 Visa gift card once all participants had been interviewed. All participants completed the interview in its entirety but implications were in place if the participant decided they no longer wanted to participate. If during the interview, the participant decided they no longer want to participate, the participant still would receive the \$10 Visa gift card and be included in the \$50 drawing, if they answered at least three of the five main questions provided.

***Recordings.*** Interviews were recorded on a small handheld recording device, as well as through an MP3 Skype Recorder as a backup during the interview, for later transcription. Recording the interviews ensures that everything can be referenced later for analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recording the interviews allows the interviewer to be fully engaged during the sessions and not distracted by the task of taking notes.

After some initial wariness, participants typically forget they are being recorded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were made aware that the researcher may take notes during the interview to explain why notes may be captured during the conversation. Notes were only taken to *mark* reactions to interview questions or to record observations during the interview that would not be captured on the audio recording (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To maintain the security of all information and protect the confidentiality of each participant, the computer, all notes, and audio recordings were kept in a locked cabinet at the researcher's home address to protect confidentiality over the length of the study. Only the researcher had access to this locked cabinet.

### **Analysis**

After conducting each interview, the recordings were transcribed through Microsoft Word. Computer programs are used to create a clean record (Merriam, 2009). These data files were located in a password protected program on a password protected computer. The researcher considered all data and viewed the transcripts as having equal value in the initial data analysis stage.

**Constant comparative analysis plan.** The Constant Comparative Analysis plan by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to analyze data for this study. This analysis was best used for this study to compare the experiences of all participants interviewed, to find common themes, and identify patterns in experiences. This analysis plan establishes the generality of findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constant Comparative Analysis enabled

the researcher to identify and compare where findings were similar and where they were different among participants.

The researcher was first immersed in the data. Reviewing data without coding allows the researcher to make meaning and create a general understanding of the experiences (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). Each transcript was read thoroughly. Once the researcher had been immersed in the data, the transcripts were re-read. Meaning units were identified that could help address the research questions. This step is known as *open coding*. These meaning units were written in the Microsoft Word program to best organize them. During open coding, the meaning units were constantly compared by reading through all transcripts. These units included the exact words of the participant and the researcher's own words (Merriam, 2009). For example, some open codes included "they were really never quiet about it," and "it was always just an intense environment."

All meaning units used to identify recurring patterns were examined (Merriam, 2009). These recurring patterns became emergent themes. Once the researcher identified the emergent themes, each emergent theme was given a code. This stage is known as *axial coding*. For example, some axial codes were "perceived communication behaviors" and "emotional perceptions." Themes were created based on similarities that were found among the meaning units. While deciding if a meaning unit fit into a theme, information was constantly compared with all interviews in the theme. The researcher reviewed the

interviews to discover what meaning units could be placed into each theme (Merriam, 2009).

The final stage is called selective coding. In this stage, the researcher created a core code that included all of the data in each theme. The core code became a guide (Strauss, 1987). For example, some core codes included “boundaries” and “emotional hesitation.” These core codes were constantly compared to each interview to place any information that fit into each core code. These core codes best described the experiences the participants shared.

### **Trustworthiness**

Many employed techniques ensured trustworthiness in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is the extent to which research findings are plausible and consistent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is important to ensure trustworthiness in a study so that the results provide an accurate picture of the phenomenon. The researcher was sure to get rich, thick descriptions from the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To obtain rich, thick descriptions, the researcher had prompting questions ready to keep the conversation flowing and allowed the participant to fully describe their experience (see Appendix F). The researcher extracted quotes from the interview that got the depth of the experiences being described. It was crucial for the depth of the experiences to be accurate so that the researcher was clearly able to explain the experiences the participants shared.

One way to ensure that the quotes are representative of the data is through member checks (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checks, or respondent validation, occurred during the interviews to confirm that the information recorded matched the participant's experiences, and mitigate the possibility of misinterpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Twenty-five percent of participants were chosen to receive preliminary results via e-mail in order to ensure that the researcher accurately recorded their experiences. The selected participants were those with atypical experiences, or those that had unique differences among all participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Choosing these participants helped develop a sense of trustworthiness. These participants were asked to read through a short summary of the findings, and report whether they agreed with the assessment. The short summary included the themes that emerged, an explanation of these themes, and a quote that exemplified each theme. Participants recognized their experiences in the descriptions. All of the participants agreed with the findings and there were no areas that needed to be revisited (Merriam, 2009). If they had felt that the results did not accurately reflect their experiences, the researcher would have reviewed the themes and the coding again. After reviewing the themes and coding, the participant would have been asked if they were available to reconvene via Skype at a time that was convenient for them. The Skype conversation would have helped the researcher understand, record, and accurately explain their experience.

Throughout the study, the researcher had an audit trail which described each step in the process, how decisions were made, and offered meta-analysis of each step in the

process of collecting and analyzing data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These trails were kept in a researcher journal. The audit trail was used to reflect on the procedures to ensure that each step was the best possible means to answer the study's research questions (Merriam & Tisdell 2016). Peer review with the researcher's advisor occurred throughout the study at least every other week. The peer review provided an outside perspective to assess the findings and discuss common themes.

**Reflexivity.** Reflections on the self as the researcher was made using feminist reflexivity. Reflexivity helps understand how the values and expectations of the researcher can influence the study. Reflexivity is considered a process that increases self-awareness and sensitivity to the experiences of others (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). This process has now become a common practice for researchers, before and during each stage, while conducting a study (see Appendix H). To become reflexive means to become aware of how our behaviors may influence or affect others. We could learn more about the interpretation of the researcher if we understand how and why the knowledge was created (Allen, 2000). Our academic choices come from our private experiences (Allen, 2000). Studying families, in particular, may surface challenging ideas, but our findings can be improved by attending to these factors (Allen, 2000). As researchers, if we ignore our behaviors, influences, and experiences, we fail to clearly understand how to study families, including our own (Allen, 2000). The more we can critically reflect, the more valuable the study can become (Allen, 2000). Reflecting on how the researcher



and participants are alike and different makes us aware of the limitations that may exist in our perspectives (Jorgenson, 2011).

An essential component of reflexivity includes an understanding that one's family experiences do not represent the only, or best way, in which families can have their experiences (Allen & Farnsworth, 1993). Reflexivity relies on the belief that all understandings of research come from the interpretation of its processes, content, and dissemination (Hurd, 1998). The researcher can bring context throughout the process and create a broader understanding (Hurd, 1998). In other words, a researcher can present information with more accuracy by voicing one's values as a researcher (Hurd, 1998).

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

This phenomenological study explored how lived experiences of relational communication and conflict resolution among female ACOD might reflect those of their parents, who divorced during the adult child's adolescent years. Three main research questions, grounded in the theory of intergenerational transmission of divorce, were addressed: (1) What communication during conflict discussions do female ACOD perceive their parents used during their divorce, (2) What are the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that female ACOD use in their romantic relationships, and (3) In what ways might female ACOD use communication during conflict discussions in their romantic relationships that potentially indicate intergenerational transmission? This chapter presents key findings obtained from 10 in-depth Skype interviews.

#### **Research Question 1: What Communication During Conflict Discussions Do Female ACOD Perceive Their Parents Used During Their Divorce?**

One criterion for participation in this study was for the participant to have been between the ages of 12 and 17 when her parents divorced. Participants were asked to share a typical disagreement they remembered their parents had in their relationship before they divorced. For research question 1, asking what communication during conflict discussions do female ACOD perceive their parents used during their divorce, produced three themes across participant responses (see Table 4). Multiple sub-themes

also emerged for each theme. All ten ACOD in this study were able to recall how they perceived their parents' communication during conflict.

**Boundaries.** One of the most dominant themes to emerge for this research question was ACOD's recalled sense of boundaries, or the degree to which the participant was exposed to displays of conflict between her parents. Boundary exposure is controlled by the degree of openness, referred to as permeability in systems theory (Gladding, 2011), and is something that often can be controlled by parents. Openness can include physical presence and witnessing the conflict directly, hearing part or all of an argument directly or indirectly (e.g., hearing one parent recount an argument with a spouse to a friend over the phone), or may lack a degree of openness, thereby becoming a closed boundary. Three boundary types emerged from the data across all participants and are indicated as sub-themes: open boundary (n=4), semi-open boundary (n=5), and closed boundary (n=1). If the participants experienced a fully open boundary, they recalled moments when they physically witnessed conflict discussions between the parents. The parents did not hide most of the fighting and the children were present during conflict. If the participants experienced a semi-open boundary, they recalled moments when they overheard conflict but were not physically watching the parents argue with one another. Most of the participants who experienced this boundary remembered hearing their parents argue in another location of the house. If the participants experienced a closed boundary, they were unable to recall witnessing or overhearing conflict between their parents.

***Fully open boundary.*** Four of the ten participants experienced a fully open boundary during parental conflict discussions (see Table 5). These participants witnessed conflict between the parents and were physically present during this time. The fully open boundary often created a sense of fear in the participant experience during the conflict discussion and a feeling of sadness or annoyance. One participant recalled watching her parents fight in front of her. She described how the fights would escalate into hitting or throwing things:

I would have to watch all of these things. I would just literally sit there and cry...I would have to watch all of these fights. I would have to listen to them. There would be scenes where it would get physical as well in front of my face. (Rachel)

The open boundary Rachel experienced was a frequent occurrence each weekend.

Rachel discussed how she and her mom got in the habit of going to her aunt's house a block away to get away from her father. When hitting or throwing things would occur, her mother told her to put on her shoes and jacket and they left right away. She expressed a feeling of fear when the conflict discussion would become physical and always felt that she had to be ready to leave at any given moment. She shared how she recently was talking with her mother and felt that these events are what stood out the most. Rachel said: "I only remember the bad parts. I don't remember any of the good parts. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing." Rachel shared a feeling of sadness that she could not remember any happy memories when her parents were together.

Ann shared her experience of the open boundary by describing how her parents did not really care about the location of where the fight occurred. Ann said: “And they never were quiet about it. They never checked. It was never behind closed doors. It was open and loud and wherever it started.” She experienced an open boundary so often that their communication was what she called a “constant argument.”

*Semi-open boundary.* Half of all participants experienced a semi-open boundary during parental conflict discussions (see Table 5). These participants may have overheard conflict but were not physically watching their parents argue. All of these participants stated that even though they did not actually witness the conflict, they heard the arguments. Cari described being awoken by the arguments: “...when they would fight, too, like, they wouldn’t do it in front of me, but it was because I woke up. It was never blatantly in front of me, or me and my brother.” Cari shared that her father would often stay out late and come home waking her and her brother by fighting with their mother in a very loud tone. Cari shared that this would happen four or five times per week and often her brother would sleep with her in the same room every night because they were scared. Cari recalled the source of the argument stemming from him being out so late and her mother questioning where he was. Cari discovered, years after the divorce that her father was cheating on her mother. Cari could not understand what was happening until her brother explained to her that her father had cheated on their mother. She shared that she would often side with her father when her parents would fight because she spent most of her days with him when her mom went to work. When her

brother explained to her about her father having cheated, Cari started to piece together why he was coming home late at night.

Marie shared a semi-open boundary between her parents by stating: “They tried to avoid fighting in front of us as much as they could, so they would go into their room and shut the door.” Even though they shut the door, Marie shared how she could still hear the verbal arguments. Sometimes she would be in her bedroom or even in the living room, but they never would argue in a place where she could visually see. Marie shared how her parents would often act like the fight never happened. She expressed a feeling of annoyance that her parents acted as though she could not hear the argument.

*Closed boundary.* Only one of the ten participants experienced a closed boundary during parental conflict discussions (see Table 5). She was not exposed to any of her parents’ conflict discussions. Rose described how her parents never fought in front of her. The only fight she heard was the last time her dad lived in her house: “I mean, my parents would never really fight in front of me, ever. There was one particular fight though that my parents had that was pretty bad that I remember. That was the only one.” Rose shared a feeling of sadness when she discussed the one conflict discussion she recalled because this conflict had such an impact on the family’s living situation. This particular fight stood out to her the most because the next day her father told her he was going to live with his parents and that her and her mom would stay at their house. Rose shared: “It was just recently within the past three or four years that my parents were able to be in each other’s company and not be awkward. So I did always feel tension when I

was a kid.” Even though her parents attempted to keep a closed boundary during conflict discussions, Rose felt that conflict had occurred prior to this one event.

**Ugly and uncomfortable.** The second theme to emerge was identified as Ugly and uncomfortable. This theme best described the participants’ perceptions of their parents’ communication behaviors during conflict discussions, and captures both the negativity of parental conflict behaviors that participants recalled, as well as the discomfort it evoked as part of their emotional experience. Kami shared her perception of her parents’ communication behaviors and said: “...it was just ugly and uncomfortable.” Communication behaviors during conflict are the way in which a person acts or conducts themselves during conflict discussions (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Accordingly, it is not surprising that participants’ experiences heavily involved memories of specific behaviors that were part of parental conflict discussions. Eight behaviors emerged from the data and are indicated as sub-themes: yelling, eye rolling, name calling, blaming, controlling behaviors, sarcasm, stonewalling, and criticism.

**Yelling.** All ten participants witnessed at least one parent yell at the other (see Table 5). Yelling was perceived by the participants as one parent raising their voice at the other parent. Even though some participants talked about their parents trying to hide their conflict, yelling was still seen or heard from all participants. Jenny discussed yelling being a common behavior: “They’d really just fight over anything. Like yelling at each other.” Jenny shared that yelling would sometimes lead to physical abuse. In one

particular instance, she recalled seeing her mom with a bruise on her arm, but her mom denying that it had anything to do with her father. Jenny said: "I knew it was my dad."

Jules described conflict discussions between her parents escalating to yelling: "It would start as a conversation, but my dad has an anger problem, so he would start yelling and screaming and slamming things." She shared that all of the conflict discussions she remembered had to do with money. Jules said: "A screaming argument would last only about ten minutes and then they would cool off themselves." Although the yelling was ten minutes, she felt that it happened often.

**Eye rolling.** More than half of all participants witnessed one parent use eye rolling (see Table 5). Eye rolling is a nonverbal behavior that is often an expression of disbelief or disapproval. Those who experienced the semi-open boundary could recall their parents eye rolling regularly, even if the participant did not witness the conflict discussions. Rachel discussed her parents using eye rolling among other negative facial behaviors towards the other. Rachel said: "They would definitely do eye rolling. It was just evil faces, like, 'I hate you,' faces basically." As Rachel shared this detail about her parents, she imitated the eye rolling with a look of disgust on her face. Marie described her mother using eye rolling frequently in the relationship. She shared: "My mom used to eye roll like there was no tomorrow." She felt that her mother was the one who used eye rolling rather than her father.

**Name calling.** More than half of all participants witnessed a parent use name-calling towards the other parent (see Table 5). Name calling was discussed in the



interviews as mean-spirited words that one parent used when talking about the other parent. Half of the participants were those that experienced a fully open boundary and the other half were those that experienced a semi-open boundary. Even if the participants did not see the conflict, they overheard name calling between parents. While most participants discussed name calling in the interviews, Cari recalled specific names that were used during conflict between her parents. Cari shared: “My mom would be like, ‘Don't be a dead-beat. Don't be this and that,’ things like that...” Cari remembered her father also calling her mother names. Her father would get off the phone with her mom and call her names once she hung up. Cari shared that she felt bad for the mom when she heard this. She said: “I kept thinking of my mom.” When sharing this experience, Cari seemed to look upset having known that her father had spoken about her mom in a negative way behind her back. Her eyes looked down when she shared this experience.

**Blaming.** Four of the ten participants witnessed one parent blame the other (see Table 5). Blaming is defined as assigning responsibility for a fault or wrong. Half of the participants were those who experienced a fully open boundary and the other half were those who experienced a semi-open boundary. The participants were either present when the blaming occurred or this behavior was overheard during conflict. One participant shared how her mother would put on makeup to fix herself up at home, since she was unable to display her physical attributes out in public in the Arab culture. She recalled her mother being blamed by her father for trying to impress other men:

So then he'll be like, "Okay, who did you put makeup for?" Mom would say, "Nobody. I put it on for myself because I'm in my own house." Ten minutes later, he'll ask the same question, and he'll keep going on throughout the entire night. (Luna)

Luna shared that her mother would eventually ask her father what he wanted her to say so that he would stop questioning her. She shared that even if the argument ended, her father would use this in a future argument. As Luna shared this particular story, she rolled her eyes and seemed to sympathize with her mother's experience.

Rachel remembered her mother blaming her father because of them not having enough money. Rachel shared: "So my mom would always blame him and be like, 'I'm making more money. Why can't you do the same? We're not financially stable.'" Rachel defended her mother when sharing this experience. Rachel said: "She would always have to worry financially, you know, pay the rent, pay the bills, pay the water bill, and they accumulate. So my mom would blame him for that." She felt like blame always came from the mother towards her father. Rachel discussed that her father often drank and her mother blamed him for drinking and not being able to take care of the house. When Rachel shared this experience, she discussed how she felt her father drank because he may have been worried about his other kids from his previous relationship. He was no longer in contact with those children. Rachel said she tried to think of why he would drink, but could never figure out an exact reason. She did not view his drinking as an illness but rather as a way to cover up something that was bothering him.

***Stonewalling.*** Four of the ten participants witnessed one parent act as if he/she did not care about what the other parent was saying (see Table 5). Some of the participants shared how their parents would shut down during conflict. The parent disengaged from the conflict and became less responsive or left during the conflict discussion. More than half of the participants were those who experienced a semi-open boundary. Even though they did not witness the conflict, they were aware that one parent would shut down entirely or leave during the conflict discussion. Ann shared how her parents would not speak to one another at the end of their conflict: “But my parents will go as long as possible – even the stupidest fight.” Both parents would wait as long as they could to keep from communicating with one another after a conflict discussion.

Kami recalled both parents leaving after a fight, which sometimes lasted a couple days: “One of them would just leave and knock them back for the night or maybe knock them back for a couple of days. It was mostly my mom.” In one particular instance, her father changed the locks when her mother left. Kami discussed feeling bad for her mother and wondering how her mother was going to feel when she came back unable to get into their own house. It was at this point that her father tried to get a restraining order filed on her mother. Kami said: “...it was just ugly and uncomfortable.” She shared how this time marked the end of their relationship.

***Controlling behaviors.*** Four of ten participants witnessed one parent display a controlling behavior towards the other parent (see Table 5). Controlling behaviors are behaviors that influence or direct the other person’s actions. All of the controlling

behaviors that the participants witnessed were behaviors from the father towards the mother. Half of the participants were those who experienced a fully open boundary and the other half were those who experienced a semi-open boundary. The controlling behaviors that were described by the participants seemed to occur frequently in these relationships. Jealousy was perceived to be one factor behind the controlling behaviors. One participant described her father as being jealous towards her mother:

My dad is very controlling, very jealous. So he would act on it and maybe restrict my mom from doing something, or only give her a little bit of money for going out, just because, you know, it was a lot of controlling and a lot of jealousy.

(Kami)

Kami shared that she did not witness how the arguments would begin, but she often witnessed her dad controlling the mother.

Similar to Kami, another participant remembered her father controlling her mother during conflict. The participant shared one instance where her father abruptly told her family that they all had to leave a party. Once they all reached the house, Jenny witnessed controlling behaviors toward the mother: "I remember being in the car and then him telling us to go inside. He made my mom stay outside while we all went in." Jenny shared how confused she was at this time. She did not understand why her father was having her mother stand outside. Jenny shared that her mother left her father soon after this incident, and the family all moved into a condo without the father. Her father was persistent that he had changed and wanted to get back together. Jenny's mother

accepted him into her new household, but similar controlling behaviors occurred once again. This was the last straw for her mother and the relationship officially ended soon thereafter.

**Sarcasm.** Three of the ten participants witnessed at least one parent using sarcasm (see Table 5). Sarcasm is a sharp or ironic statement directed at another person. More than half of these participants were those who experienced a semi-open boundary. They had overheard sarcasm between their parents. Ann discussed sarcasm being used in a joking manner, but eventually resulted in hurt feelings by the other: “So it’s very sarcastic and poking fun, but then it turns out that it stops being fun.” Sarcasm was discussed in a more comical way that turned into negative comments. Even though sarcasm can be used playfully, these participants recognized sarcasm as being used in a hurtful manner.

**Criticism.** Only one of the ten participants witnessed a parent state negative words about the other parent’s character or personality (see Table 5). Even though one participant shared having witnessed criticism, only four of the ten actually experienced a fully open boundary during conflict discussions. Criticism could have occurred behind closed doors as well. Rachel described a time when she heard her mother criticize her father during conflict: “Like, my mom would start yelling, ‘You’re not being a good father. You’re not being a good husband. What kind of role model are you to your daughter?’” Rachel shared that she currently has taken on the role of being a caregiver for her father. She helps him financially and emotionally. She described her connection

with him as different than his connection with his other children. She felt that even though she witnessed his drinking behaviors, she became a model for him as she grew up.

**Unspoken.** A particularly salient part of participants' experiences concerned context, best indicated as a perception of their home environment during the unfolding of their parent's divorce. Participants were clear that the home environment gave them a sense of unexpressed conflict between the parents, which is captured in the theme unspoken. The participants perceived their parents were in conflict by the atmosphere in the household. Two perceptions of the household emerged from the data and are indicated as sub-themes: tension and lack of communication.

**Tension.** Seven of the ten participants experienced a sense of tension in the household, even when their parents were not actively engaged in a conflict discussion (see Table 5). Tension is a feeling of emotional stress. Five of these seven participants were those who either experienced a semi-open or a closed boundary. Their parents may have wanted to hide the conflict, but the tension was very much present in the household. Kami described it as a feeling she had right when she walked in: "Probably for the last couple of years that they were together, there was a lot of tension in the house, a lot of unspoken issues. Yeah, I could totally feel it the moment I walked in." Kami shared that her parents often would have her communicate between the two rather than talking directly to one another. Her parents would have Kami provide messages from one parent to the other rather than talking directly to one another.

Another participant remembered feeling the tension even if she had not been home the night before:

Yes. That usually happened after a night that my mom had drank because my mom's an alcoholic. She suffered from alcoholism. So a lot of their fights happened about that. So if I walked in the next morning, like, after staying at a friend's house or after I'd gone to school and came home, I would feel tension, especially if she drank the night before because they usually argued about it the next day. (Marie)

Marie shared that her mother's drinking was what often led to many of their arguments and was what most of the tension revolved around. Marie discussed how, even today, you can feel the tension rise if either parent talks about the relationship.

***Lack of communication.*** Six of the ten participants perceived a lack of communication between both parents during parental conflict discussions (see Table 5). Three participants who did not talk about a lack of communication in the main interview questions shared that communication was one area of advice they would give to a couple of the same age. They felt communication was an important part of a relationship.

All but one of the participants who had experienced tension in the household also experienced a lack of communication in the household. Not to be confused with the stonewalling behavior of shutting down during conflict, the participants viewed this environmental perception as a typical communication style between the two parents on a regular basis. Lack of communication included one parent not expressing their emotions

to the other or not talking to one another in the household. Ann viewed the lack of communication as a way of leading to arguments between her parents: "...one of the things in my parent's marriage that I grew up seeing was communication wasn't there. It was always arguments. And so fighting scared me. Fighting still scares me." She shared that even in her current relationship she often asks her boyfriend if he will still tell her he loves her when they are older. It was evident that this fear has carried through to her current relationship.

Kami discussed a lack of communication between her parents. She said: "They would barely speak to each other. They would ask me, 'Oh, can you tell your mom this? Can you tell your dad this?'" Kami felt she was often the communicator between her parents and placed in the middle of their conflict.

### **Research Question 2: What Are the Lived Experiences of Communication During Conflict Discussions That ACOD Use in Their Romantic Relationships?**

For research question 2, asking about the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that female ACOD used in their romantic relationships, three themes emerged (see Table 6). Multiple sub-themes also emerged. This study was able to best understand the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that ACOD used in their romantic relationships by listening to ACOD describe their previous relationship. Qualitative research approaches focus on understanding how people make sense of their lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The lived experience is how



the participant recalls the event and how they interpret the experiences. All participants in this study recalled specific communication behaviors during their conflict discussions.

**Emotional hesitation.** Findings showed that half of the participants in the study experienced emotional hesitation at the beginning of their relationship (see Table 7). The participants shared a feeling of worry and uncertainty prior to getting deeper into the relationship. Similar to the findings of Hetherington and Kelly (2002), the participants expressed emotional concerns or fears about the relationship. One female expressed her fears about love: “One of the scariest things in relationships is the idea of being so in love in the beginning, and somehow that love turning into almost hatred of years and years of being together, it’s such a fear” (Ann). Ann shared how she has even carried this fear into her current relationship and often asks her boyfriend if he will still share the love for her when they are older. Ann explained how she felt her parents were only together because they were together in high school and probably wanted to keep the title of “high school sweethearts.” She shared that her and her ex-boyfriend met the same way. They began dating in high school and were from the same home town. She feared that she would stay together and eventually divorce just as her parents did. In her current relationship she tells her boyfriend: “We can’t wind up like them.” Ann was the only participant out of the five who attributed her fears to her parents’ relationship. All the other participants who expressed emotional hesitation did not discuss their fears in connection with their parents’ divorce and did not share where they felt the fears came from.

Another participant expressed her worry and fear about the relationship at the beginning. The participant and her boyfriend had known each other through social media but met face-to-face at a party. She shared:

So I kept my guard up, especially because I didn't know that much about him or anything. So that was basically it. I was just more reserved with him and I kept my guard up for a while because we were together for a year. (Cari)

Cari explained that she did not really open up until it started to become an issue when her boyfriend would tell her she needed to open up more with him. She shared how she had trouble opening up to anyone and had a difficult time letting her guard down. It took almost five months until she felt she could start to let her boyfriend in.

**Lost love.** Participants shared a change in their relationship experience from the beginning to the end. They shared specific communication behaviors during their own conflict discussions that made some participants question what had happened. Many of the participants felt that their relationship was very different than how it began because the love had diminished. Specific behaviors that best demonstrated this experience were identified as ten different sub-themes: eye rolling, stonewalling, sarcasm, pursuer behavior, yelling, criticism, name calling, blaming, hiding emotions during conflict, and controlling behavior. These sub-themes were described in the interviews with the ACOD.

**Eye rolling.** Nine of out ten participants used eye rolling during conflict (see Table 7). All nine participants were conscious of their own eye rolling and admitted to

this behavior. Kami described being very aware of her facial expressions: “Yes, yes, definitely eye-rolling. I'm going to be honest. I'm very aware of my facial expressions and I kind of, I don't want to say manipulate them, but, like, I know that I look how I feel.” Kami discussed eye rolling as a common behavior of her and her boyfriend. She felt eye rolling was offensive and that she needed to control this non-verbal reaction better. Kami described using this behavior in her current relationship and her boyfriend always reminding her that she is rolling her eyes. When sharing this experience, she seemed to feel guilty of using this nonverbal behavior.

Marie felt that eye rolling was one-sided in her relationship. She shared: “It would be more eye-rolling on my part.” Marie recalled that her boyfriend would often point out her eye rolling during conflict discussions. Similar to Marie, Ronnie felt that eye rolling was a behavior that she used during conflict discussions. She was certain that this behavior was one she used often and said: “Definitely an eye-roller.”

***Stonewalling.*** Eight of the ten participants experienced stonewalling, where one partner acted as if he/she could not care less about what the other person was saying (see Table 7). The participants admitted that this behavior would occur more than once. Jules shared her experience of not talking with her boyfriend for a few days after a disagreement: “It was just giving each other the cold shoulder...And then one of us would leave and then it was just, like, a cold shoulder for a couple of days.” She shared that someone would eventually give in to the silence.

Stonewalling was also a typical behavior in Marie's relationship. She shared: "We would just ignore each other. Sometimes I would even wonder where our love went." Marie would often be the one to try to end the silence and would send a text message to her boyfriend trying to make up with him. She shared that it would be an "easy make up" when she would send a text message, but it would typically be on her to initiate this reconciliation.

Rose recognized stonewalling as a negative behavior. She shared that when the conflict would continue, their behaviors would include: "...ignoring each other kind of, which isn't good." She shared that her and her boyfriend would often sit in silence for about 15 minutes until someone would get tired of the silence. Then, they would act like nothing happened and pretend that the argument did not occur. She shared that even though they would pretend this never happened, it would typically occur in the next disagreement.

***Sarcasm.*** Six out of ten participants used sarcasm during conflict discussions (see Table 7). Sarcasm was described as a common behavior in the participant's conflict discussions. Ann discussed both her and her boyfriend using sarcasm: "I think we were both cynical people, so it was kind of like sarcasm or cynicism or things like that than anything else." Ronnie described sarcasm as a frequent behavior in her relationship: "Sarcasm, definitely, from both parts." Sarcasm was often discussed as a normal behavior that was frequently used.

***Pursuer behavior.*** Four of the ten participants used pursuer behaviors during their relationship (see Table 7). Pursuer behavior was expressed in the interviews as a push for communication or resolution during conflict. The participants who experienced pursuer behavior often wanted to resolve the conflict or have their boyfriend agree with them before ending the conflict. These participants all described themselves as the pursuers of communication, rather than the boyfriend, during conflict. Cari recalled a fight that stood out to her specifically from the relationship. She shared a time she went over to her boyfriend's house to hang out and he sat there playing video games and talking on his phone. She shared that she wished he had been giving her attention while she was over. This led to an argument between the two. When she woke up the next morning she brought up the topic again. She said: "And then I tried bringing it up again and he literally shut me down completely. I was just like, 'Okay, whatever.' I kind of didn't stop. So I kept pestering him about it." She shared that she would not leave because she did not like leaving with the conflict unresolved. When she would not leave, he took her purse and threw it out of his room as a way to get her to go. Cari explained that she refused to leave until he would talk to her.

Kami shared that she not only wanted to resolve conflict discussions between her and her boyfriend, but typically was not the one to end the disagreement. She shared: "I would want things to be resolved, so I would keep pushing for it, for him to say what I wanted him to say or things like that." Kami felt that, for the most part, her boyfriend would be the one to end the disagreement.

**Yelling.** Four out of the ten participants yelled during conflict discussions with their boyfriend (see Table 7). Most of the participants admitted to yelling at their boyfriend but shared that they were often not the ones to initiate the yelling. Kami discussed yelling from both her and her boyfriend during conflicts: “On both sides. [Laughter]. I mean, I will admit, like, if he made me mad, I would explode.” Kami shared that she would be the first to start yelling, but then her boyfriend would yell back.

Luna would try to tell her boyfriend to stop the yelling during conflict: “And if he starts to scream, I’ll be like, ‘Lower your voice. Do not raise your voice at me.’” Luna described hearing a lot of aggression in her boyfriend’s voice when he would yell. At the beginning of the relationship she would speak to him in a calm manner and tell him to calm down when he would yell. Luna shared that she would start to yell back towards the end of the relationship.

**Criticism.** Four of the ten participants used criticism by stating negative words about the other’s character or personality (see Table 7). The participants viewed these comments as hurtful. The participants often felt that it was their boyfriend who criticized them in the relationship. Ann shared a disagreement that her and her boyfriend had about him cheating. Her friend texted her one night telling her that she had been intimate with Ann’s boyfriend. Shortly after this text message from her friend, Ann started to receive text messages from her boyfriend. She said: “he was sending me text messages about how I was manipulative and how he can’t handle this.” At this point, her mother made her change her phone number so that he could not treat her in this way anymore.

Luna talked about how her boyfriend criticized her for having previous relationships. She said: “You know I’m a girl. I shouldn’t have even looked at a guy.” She said that it did not matter how many girls he had been with, but she was criticized for even speaking with guys in the past. She was told that she needed to share every detail about her past with her boyfriend. Luna said she had a tough time remembering every detail from her past but often was worried to leave out anything.

*Name calling.* Four out of ten participants experienced name calling in the relationship (see Table 7). All four participants discussed being called names from their boyfriends during arguments. Even though some of the participants shared that they used name calling at times towards their boyfriend, the majority of the participants experienced being called names more often. Cari remembered specific names her boyfriend would call her during conflict: “He would say, ‘Why are you being such a bitch?’ I’m like, ‘I’m not. I’m just trying to tell you how I feel.’ There was a lot of that.” Cari shared that being called names is something that she never wants to experience again because it always hurt her feelings.

Luna discussed her boyfriend behaving in the same way as Cari’s. When describing her relationship, her first words to share were: “I was in an emotionally abusive relationship.” Cari said: “He was fighting with me for some reason and calling me all these names.” She shared that she felt more sad than happy in the relationship. She described a time when she was browsing the internet and came across the term

“emotionally abusive.” She immediately recognized this term as exactly what she was going through.

**Blaming.** Four out of ten participants blamed the other during conflict discussions (see Table 7). These participants often felt that blaming occurred because the other refused to either apologize or admit to a mistake. Ann discussed how her boyfriend blamed her when she had found out that he was cheating on her. Ann said: “And so he was very like, ‘She did this to herself. She knew what I wanted, so she can’t be that surprised.’” Ann shared that she never wanted an open relationship but was reluctant to tell her boyfriend the truth. She said they had an agreement that anything that happened would occur at his college and not with anyone she would ever need to see. Ann was still in high school at the time. She found out that her boyfriend had cheated on her with her friend from home. She was shocked to find this out and wished he had admitted to being wrong rather than blame her. Ann was in the high school play with this particular girl. She said that she could not wait to get out of the play experience so that she would not need to see the former friend.

Cari admitted to both her and her boyfriend never wanting to be wrong. She said: “We’re both defensive and we’re both stubborn, so there were a lot of butting heads for that reason.” Cari shared that she would eventually own up to her mistakes, but her boyfriend would never give in to being wrong. He would argue until she would admit that the argument was her fault.



***Hiding emotions during conflict.*** Three of the ten participants hid their emotions from their boyfriends during conflict (see Table 7). The participants never wanted to share the emotion of anger with their boyfriends because they feared it would end the relationship. Ann was so excited to be in a relationship that she did not want to speak up during arguments in the beginning of the relationship. She said: “So that was kind of the beginning arguments that I kind of swept under the rug because I was still like, ‘Oh, my goodness, this boy wants to be with me!’ It was so exciting.” The fact that she was in a relationship seemed to keep her from wanting to share her emotions.

Another participant wanted to eliminate fighting by hiding her own feeling, as she had witnessed her parents doing:

They’d be fighting all the time, in the morning, whatever. So I felt like I always needed to compensate. I like to talk about everything now, every little thing. In the relationship, at first, I was pretty much not like that. So I was hiding everything that I was feeling. (Cari)

Cari felt the need to counterbalance the fighting she witnessed by hiding her emotions altogether. She was worried to fight with her boyfriend because she had seen what happened during fights with her own parents.

***Controlling behaviors.*** Two of the ten participants discussed their boyfriends using controlling behaviors (see Table 7). The participants shared an awareness of the controlling behaviors, but accepted the behaviors in hopes of keeping the relationship together. Ann felt that she could never make her boyfriend happy. She shared: “He was

like, ‘You do this and you do that.’ There was no way that I could make it right, no matter how much I tried.” Luna’s boyfriend controlled her social media. She said: “Instagram, Snapchat, anything, like, literally everything. I wasn’t allowed to have any of those.” Luna explained that her boyfriend had all of these social media accounts himself. They broke up for a few months after a disagreement. This was when she created her own account. He tried to follow her on these accounts, but she refused to accept his request. When they got back together she made sure to delete these accounts again. The participants felt as if they just could not make their boyfriend happy.

**Acts of submission.** Some females in this study discussed being submissive to their boyfriend during conflict. They displayed these acts of submission through appeasement. This appeasement then led some of the participants to feel resentful after submission.

**Appeasement.** Six out of ten participants tried to make their boyfriend happy, even when they did not agree with the conflict (see Table 7). Many of the participants felt the best way to make their boyfriend happy was to pacify the situation. Ann said she only agreed to her boyfriend’s request to have an open relationship because she wanted to make him happy. She shared: “And it wound up happening that I changed my morals where it was like, this is what he wants and I want to make him happy.” Ann recalled her friends often asking her why she was agreeing to something that she never wanted before. They would often try to talk to her and question if she really wanted to be with her

boyfriend. She explained that she was so excited to be with him that she did not want to do anything that would end their relationship.

Luna would apologize during conflict even though she did not think she did anything wrong. She explained: "...even before when I would admit just to let the conversation go because I wouldn't want to argue with him, I'd be like, 'You're right and I'm sorry.'" Luna shared that she later learned to stick up for herself the second time that they got back together after a previous breakup. She would speak up and refuse to apologize if she felt she did nothing wrong.

***Resentment after submission.*** Three of the six participants that used appeasement in their relationship felt resentment (see Table 7). Resentment is a feeling displeasure at something regarded as wrong. Even though they were wanting to make the other happy, half of the participants who used appeasement felt resentful towards their boyfriend. Kami shared: "We'd fight and it would be resolved pretty quickly, but there was always resentment there afterward."

Ann wished her boyfriend recognized that she was changing herself for him by agreeing to an open relationship. She shared: "It bothered me that I was changing myself and he didn't really seem to notice or mind if he did notice." She wished he acknowledged how much she would do to make him happy.

**Research Question 3: In What Ways Might Female ACOD Use Communication During Conflict Discussions in Their Romantic Relationships That Potentially Indicate Intergenerational Transmission?**

The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory suggests that ACOD have an increased risk of seeing their marriages end (Amato, 1996). This theory informed the implementation and analysis of Research Question 3, which asks how female ACOD use communication during conflict discussions in their romantic relationships that potentially indicate intergenerational transmission? Pursuing this investigation, three patterns emerged (see Table 8). All are discussed below.

**Do you see something familiar?** Consistent with intergenerational transmission of divorce theory (Amato, 1996), a pattern emerged that suggests ACOD used many similar communication behaviors during conflict in their romantic relationships that they perceived their parents used during their divorce. One of the dominant patterns to emerge was participants' insights about many of the communication behaviors they experienced were similar to their parents' relationship (see Table 9). It is possible this indicates a type of intergenerational transmission. The participants who experienced a semi-open boundary had the strongest connection between use of similar behaviors, even though the fully open boundary participants witnessed the most behaviors. A few of the discussions about these similar behaviors are shared below.

Cari recalled her boyfriend behaving very similar to her father. She said: "My ex was a lot like my father. They would scream." Cari shared that if her father would have

heard her boyfriend talk to her in this way he probably would have asked her why she allowed him to speak to her like that. She said she would respond to him and say: “Okay, well, do you see something familiar? Because this is how you speak to your girlfriend or wife and then my mom.”

Another participant recognized her own behaviors were similar to her mother:

And then my mom is really – I guess I kind of get his a little bit from her. She’s really, really, really patient and then once she kind of like cannot stand it, that’s when she would start yelling back. (Luna)

When Luna was with her boyfriend before they broke up the first time, she would often be very patient and calm. It was not until they got back together after breaking up when she started to speak up and argue back.

Ann saw her boyfriend’s behavior as similar to her father: “Honestly, it was very similar to how my ex and I were. It was like my dad was very blaming towards my mom.” Ann shared how her mother never accepted her boyfriend. She shared how her mother would always say she would not want Ann’s boyfriend over at the house. Ann felt that the similarities between her boyfriend and her father was most likely the reason her mother did not want her to be with him.

Marie also had an awareness of similar communication behaviors. She shared that facial expressions were very common for her and her mother. She said: “...we also have the same mannerisms, like, we flare our nostrils when we’re mad, we roll our eyes.” Marie explained that many people have shared this to both her as well as her mother

when they do these particular facial expressions. Kami shared that her parents would often hear the arguments. Kami's father would ask her why she was with him. When Kami discussed the arguments she and her boyfriend had, she said: "Where do you learn to argue, right? I hear it at home."

**Love into hate.** A second pattern to emerge from the data was a strong connection between the experience of witnessing parental conflict discussions with the presence of a fully open boundary and a sense of emotional hesitation in their own relationship (see Table 9). Participants who experienced a fully open boundary during parental conflict worried that the love in their relationship would not last forever, which is captured in the theme love into hate.

Ann shared her feeling of emotional hesitation as a connection to her parent's divorce. She felt worried about her relationship ending like her parents. She said: "One of the scariest things in relationships, especially mine now, the idea of being so in love in the beginning, and somehow that love turning into almost hatred of years and years of being together, it's such a fear."

Three out of the four participants who experienced a fully open boundary also shared a feeling of emotional hesitation. Jenny was the only participant who did not share emotional hesitation even though she had experienced a fully open boundary. Jenny had witnessed the least amount of communication behaviors of her parents and also was the only participant who did not experience any similar behaviors of her parents. All the other participants who experienced a fully open boundary shared a fear or

uncertainty at the beginning of the relationship. This fear or uncertainty made them hesitant to take the relationship further until greater amount of time passed.

**I miss the old you.** The final pattern to emerge evolved from many of those who experienced a semi-open or closed boundary (see Table 9). That experience was connected to a greater sense of tension and lack of communication in their home environments, and they seem to be consistently engaged in appeasement at the beginning of their own relationships. As their relationship progressed, all of the participants who kept quiet when they were unhappy or did not share their view in a disagreement eventually spoke up and shared how they felt. This behavior of eventually speaking up lead to fights between the couples because the boyfriends missed the participants' previous appeasement behaviors.

Cari shared how her parents lack of communication made her want to speak up more as she progressed into the relationship. She shared:

So I always felt in my parent's relationship, they never really talked about it, other than fighting. They just fought about everything. They didn't communicate other than fighting at one point. So everything that they disagreed on, it would just turn into this big fight. So I felt like I always needed to compensate. In the relationship, at first, I was pretty much not like that. Like, if I didn't like something he was doing, I wouldn't say anything. But I guess when I got comfortable enough, I let my guard down. To him, it was like, "Where is all this coming from?" Then he'd be like, "I miss the old you." (Cari)

Cari shared how the only communication she perceived her parents had was fighting. She wanted to eliminate the fighting as much as possible, but eventually needed to speak her true feelings.

Kami discussed how she would typically not say anything when her boyfriend would disrespect her and call her names. She shared:

By the end of our relationship, it started to become a lot more serious and I wasn't okay with it all. So I would react and he would be like, "Well, you didn't have this problem back then." But, you know, I would say really that was my bad because I didn't stop it from the beginning. (Kami)

Jules was the one participant who experienced a semi-open boundary but did not use appeasement in her relationship. She was also the only participant in this boundary time who did not discuss a lack of communication in her parents' relationship. Lack of communication in the parents' relationship displayed a pattern between those in semi-open boundaries and their own acts of appeasement.

Luna was the only participant who did not experience tension or a lack of communication in her parents' relationship, but did experience appeasement in her own relationship. Luna had a unique experience in comparison to the other participants in her boundary. She experienced a large amount of controlling behaviors in both her parents' relationship and her own, which she called "extreme." Analysis of these findings will be shared in the following chapter.



## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

The present phenomenological study, guided by the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory (Amato, 1996), explored how lived experiences of relational communication/conflict resolution among female ACOD might reflect those of their parents who divorced during the adult child's adolescence years. The previous chapter presented findings of the study based on the themes, sub-themes, and patterns that emerged from each research question. The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into these findings in the context of theory and extant literature. The discussion analyzes the findings from each research question to better understand how the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission played a role in the ACOD's romantic relationships. This chapter discusses limitations and implications of the study and concludes with policy ramifications for relationship education programs aimed at adolescents of divorce.

#### **Research Question 1: Perceptions of Relational Communication/Conflict Resolution**

The first research question explored how ACOD perceived their parents to have communicated during conflict. Research has shown that arguing can be one of the healthiest things a couple can do in a marriage, yet the intensity of the arguments can provide insight into the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). How ACOD perceived parental communication can serve as a model or a guide for their own relationships. To best understand how ACOD perceived parental communication, participants were asked

to share their experiences. One of the most paramount themes that emerged from this research question was that ACOD recalled a sense of boundaries, or the degree to which the participant was exposed to displays of conflict between her parents. ACOD have typically been exposed to conflict in years leading up to the divorce even before the separation began (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Fully open and semi-open boundaries were the most prominent boundaries shared from the participants and only one participant experienced a closed boundary. The participants who experienced a fully open boundary witnessed the most amount of communication behaviors as a whole. The participants who experienced a semi-open boundary had the second most behaviors witnessed and the participants who experienced a closed boundary had the least amount of behaviors witnessed. This is to be expected based on the closed boundary participant not having been exposed to conflict during their parents' relationship. The parents of ACOD may have intended to hide conflict, but the children still had an awareness of the conflict that occurred. Not only can this exposure to conflict create confusion for ACOD, but they can also be exposed to parents having difficulty regulating emotions during conflict (Buehler et al., 2009).

The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory suggests that offspring have a greater likelihood for divorce if their parents are divorced, yet the modes of transmission have remained unknown. By looking at the boundary of each participant, the findings suggest that the level of exposure can impact the amount of behaviors the participants are witnessing. Previous research has suggested that how one behaves in a

relationship can be linked to models they have been exposed to at home (Furman et al., 2002). Taken together, the findings of this present study suggest that the more behaviors ACOD witness may impact the amount of similar behaviors they use in their own romantic relationships. This may be one mode of transmission between the parents and the ACOD.

Research has found that conflict is not about resolving the issue but it is about learning how to honor and respect one another during the conflict (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Another theme to emerge for this research question was called “ugly and uncomfortable.” Participants perceived the communication behaviors between their parents to be, as one participant described, “ugly and uncomfortable.” Most conflicts in a relationship surround the way people fight, rather than center on an actual reason (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The participants recalled the negativity of parental conflict behaviors as well as the discomfort it evoked as part of their own emotional experience. Since ACOD were exposed to negative communication behaviors during parental conflict, this finding suggests that ACOD have had limited positive communication behaviors that could serve as models for their own relationships.

Research has shown that as long as both sides share the same problem-solving style there is potential for the relationship to succeed (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The relationship still needs to have more positivity than negativity. Positive communication was never shared in any of the interviews. This is consistent with previous research findings that one factor of marital distress is the decrease in positive communication

(Markman et al., 2010). The participants in this study perceived more negativity in their parents' relationship than positivity. Regardless of the boundary type the participant experienced, all participants perceived negative communication behaviors between their parents. In particular, the participants who experienced a semi-open boundary witnessed the most negative behaviors. When negativity starts to take over, the four horsemen can exist (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

It was not surprising to see that the participants in this study perceived at least one of the four horseman to have existed in their parents' relationship because we know that these behaviors are typically warning signs of destruction in a marriage (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Criticism was perceived to have occurred in their parents' relationship through the use of blaming behaviors during conflict. Contempt was perceived to have occurred as well through eye rolling, name calling, and sarcastic behaviors. Yelling and controlling behaviors were also shared in the interviews. When the participants discussed their parents' experiences, the participants felt that their parents' communication behaviors negatively impacted the parents' conflict discussion with one another.

A particularly interesting part of participants' experience was the perception of their home environment during the unfolding of their parents' divorce. Participants were clear that the home environment gave them a sense of unexpressed conflict between the parents, which is captured in the theme "unspoken." Tension and a lack of communication were two observations that the participants shared. The conflict did not need to occur in front of them for the participants to experience a sense of unspoken

issues in the household. Research has shown that tension can become triadic if the parents involve a third party (Buehler et al., 2009). Even though parents may not have put the participant in the middle of the conflict, the participants still felt as if they were involved because they experienced the tension between the parents. Research has found that an unhappy home environment with high levels of discord is not optimal for the children's development (Amato, 1993). Katz and Gottman (1993) found that the couple's behaviors have an effect on the children even before the divorce occurs. This has potentially negative impacts for children who remain in these environments. This suggests that sometimes it is better for the parents to divorce. In these cases, divorced families have a higher level of well-being than if they stayed in a high conflict family (Amato & Keith, 1991).

More than half of the participants also recognized a lack of communication between parents. When asked to provide advice to a couple their age, the three participants who did not specifically discuss a lack of communication in the interviews shared how important communication is to a relationship. Even though the participants may have witnessed a lack of communication, all participants found communication to be important in a relationship's success. Although prior research has shown that poor conflict strategies between parents may teach children unhealthy ways of solving conflict (Buehler et al., 2009), this study suggests that children are aware of what is considered a poor conflict strategy even if they do not witness healthy ways of solving conflict. Previous research has found that offspring whose parents divorce during adolescence

may be at a greater risk in regards to social relationships (Lansford, 2009). It is suggested that their awareness of poor conflict strategies might help mitigate transmission.

There are other protective factors that can provide these positive models. Adolescence is a time when kids shift their focus from family to their peers (Hetherington, 2003). Peers can serve as models outside of the home. Peer expectations and opinions become crucial at this age, as adolescents view peers as influential towards their own attitudes and actions (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). This awareness of unhealthy ways of solving conflict can be beneficial to their own relationships in the future. Adolescents feel the need to explore and experiment, as they continue developing the competency to establish future close relationships (Salerno et al., 2015). This further prompted the study to look at what specific behaviors the participants could recall in their own romantic relationships.

### **Research Question 2: Conflict Communication Experiences of ACOD in Their Romantic Relationships**

The second research question explored the lived experiences of communication during conflict discussions that female ACOD used in their romantic relationships. The female ACOD described their individual experiences in their previous relationship. Although the participants shared their most recent relationship, they seemed to reference relationships that occurred earlier as well. This was not surprising to hear because half of

all adolescents are romantically involved by age 15 and have 10 to 12 years of romantic experience before marriage (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003).

One major finding was the experience of emotional hesitation of half of the participants at the beginning of their relationship. The ACOD felt worried or uncertain about getting deeper into the relationship. This is consistent with previous research that found children of divorce to have a higher level of distrust, and lower likelihood of foreseeing marriage in their own futures (Giuliani et al., 1998). Similar to the research, the participants who experienced emotional hesitation discussed uncertainty about the future of the relationship. Amato (1996) found that ACOD may exhibit a lack of trust or inability to commit. Half of these participants were not sure if they could commit to the relationship because they were uncertain about the outcome. Although research has found ACOD to perceive divorce as an acceptable option if the relationship does not work out (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), this study suggests ACOD may be fearful because divorce is not an option they want to consider. The participants discussed that they wanted their relationships to be different than their parents. These dyadic relationships develop into more mature relationships. They start to confront expectations for mature behavior and take on adult roles, as their focus moves to developing romantic relationships (Petersen et al., 1995). Even though the participants in this study seemed to want different relationships than their parents, many shared similar behaviors as their parents in their own relationships. Previous research has found adolescents from divorced families characterize their ideal mate as more like their parents (Lazar &

Guttman, 2004). This finding suggests that ACOD, without realizing, may be searching for a mate that is similar to their parents. This ideal mate concept may stem from the quality of those relationships, or the *unfinished business* they perceive with their parents (Lazar & Guttman, 2004).

Although we know ACOD can become apprehensive of repeating the mistakes of their parents (Whitton et al., 2008), this study found that some ACOD do not always recognize their hesitation as a connection to their parents' divorce. Even though half of the participants in this study shared a sense of hesitation at the beginning, only one participant discussed her emotional hesitation in connection to her parents' divorce. Other participants did not share an awareness of the connection. On one hand, participants shared they wanted their relationships to be different, yet they did not always make connections between their behaviors and those of their parents. Research has suggested ACOD to be hesitant to acknowledge similarities as a way of distancing themselves (Furman et al., 2002). This suggests that ACOD, without realizing it, may use behaviors that they believe protect themselves from possible divorce. They may be so focused on trying to have a different relationship than their parents that they are unable to recognize the behaviors that may be intergenerationally transmitted.

Another important finding that emerged from this research question was a change, or a sense of lost love, by the end of the relationship. In other words, many participants shared communication behaviors in the relationship that differed significantly from those apparent at the beginning of the relationship. They felt the reason for these behaviors



was that the love in the relationship had diminished. Maintaining an emotional connection is important to help the relationship progress (Gottman et al., 2015). All of the specific communication behaviors that were shared were discussed as negative behaviors. This may have contributed to the lack of progress by the end of the relationship. Even though we may lose a sense of love in any relationship that ends, the findings of this study suggest that ACOD may not have the communication skills to work through conflict and keep an emotional connection. Research has found that offspring whose parents divorce are more likely to develop behaviors such as poor communication (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Ultimately, poor communication could lead to a downfall in the relationship.

Similar behavior patterns shown in Gottman's work were also displayed in the relationships of ACOD. Although Gottman's work has focused on marriages, this study has suggested that ACOD may also experience the horsemen in dating relationships. All participants shared an experience of contempt in their relationship. Contempt was displayed through nonverbal actions such as eye rolling and verbal actions such as sarcasm and name calling. These contemptuous behaviors were discussed in a majority of the participants' interviews. Research has found that the chances of saving the relationship at this point nearly fail to exist (Gottman & Silver 1999). A majority of the participants also experienced stonewalling. This is the fourth and final horseman. We know that if stonewalling occurs in marriage, the chances of saving the relationship at this point are nearly impossible (Gottman & Silver, 1999). It was not surprising to see so

many participants reach contempt or stonewalling because these behaviors ultimately mark the downfall of the relationship. The participants may not know the skills to build their emotional connection if their parents did not display these skills to them in their own marriage.

A few of the participants in the study shared acts of pursuing behaviors in their relationship. These participants expressed they were the ones who pushed for conflict resolution or pushed for their boyfriend to agree with them during conflict. Research has found repair attempts to be even more important in the preservation of the relationship than the resolution of the conflict (Gottman et al., 2015). The participants in the study did not express their parents using any repair attempts, such as humor, affection, playing, silliness, exploration, adventure, lust, and touching. This finding suggests ACOD may push for resolution because they have not learned the skills of successful repair attempts that can be essential for relationship success.

A final theme to emerge for this research question was acts of submission by the participants. Several participants in the study shared that they would try to appease their boyfriend during conflict to make him happy or to eliminate conflict altogether. This suggests that submission may be an ineffective repair attempt from the participants. The participants who discussed that they would hide their emotions were also among those who used appeasement during conflict. The participants' experiences imply that ACOD may be so fearful to share their emotions because they fear that this could end the relationship in the same way that their parents' marriages had ended (Whitton et al.,

2008). Since we know their fear may be connected to intergenerational transmission of divorce theory, this suggests that ACOD are more vulnerable to divorce (Schulman et al., 2012). The third research question further analyzes patterns of similar to best understand this phenomenon of intergenerational transmission.

### **Research Question 3: Intergenerational Transmission of Behaviors**

The intergenerational transmission of divorce theory can help explain how the parental behaviors and actions of divorce can make ACOD more vulnerable to divorce (Amato, 1996). Theoretically, adolescence is an important period, as we potentially learn modes of transmission that we may carry into future relationships. Arguably, communication is the strongest predictor of a relationship's success (Gottman, 1999). Previous research has found ACOD report less communication competence (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Because of the importance of communication to a relationship, the third research question explored the ways in which communication behaviors during conflict could be intergenerationally transmitted from parents of divorce to ACOD. Three patterns emerged from the data. One of the dominant patterns to emerge was participants' insights about many of the communication behaviors they experienced that were similar to those of their parents' relationship. Cari best described this pattern in her interview. She discussed what she would say to her father if he ever overheard the way her boyfriend talked to her. Cari explained that her father would probably ask why she was with her boyfriend. She said that she would follow her father's question by asking him: "do you see something familiar?" Cari's response characterized the response

pattern for many of the participants' experiences.

How one behaves in a relationship can be linked to models that they have been exposed to at home (Furman et al., 2002). Surprisingly, the participants who experienced a semi-open boundary had the strongest connection between use of similar behaviors, even though the fully open boundary participants witnessed the most behaviors. This finding suggests that participants who are in a fully open boundary may be less inclined to use similar communication behaviors of their parents. They may be more hesitant to use the same behaviors if they feel that these behaviors contributed to their parents' divorce. Previous research has found ACOD can become apprehensive of repeating the mistakes of their parents (Whitton et al., 2008). The findings of this study further suggest that apprehension may follow the fear that these behaviors could result in the downfall of their own relationship.

Although research has shown that ACOD may not learn skills to maintain a long term relationship (Amato, 1996), this study suggests that exposure to poor behaviors could also be a mode of transmitting behaviors that they should not repeat to preserve the emotional connection in their relationships. In other words, they may have learned some of what not to do but may not have necessarily learned what behaviors should be pursued instead to protect the relationship. Those who experienced a semi-open boundary may not have witnessed the consequences or reactions of these communication behaviors because they were not physically present during most conflict discussions. This may have made the participants more open to using similar behaviors because they did not

witness their effects as acutely as the participants who experienced a fully open boundary.

The findings also revealed a strong connection between the experience of witnessing parental conflict discussions with the presence of a fully open boundary and a sense of emotional hesitation in their own relationship. Participants who experienced a fully open boundary worried about the feeling of love in their own relationship eventually changing. Ann best described this fear as a worry that it would change from “love into hate.” Previous research has found that even after finding love, ACOD remain doubtful and wary of commitment (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). The findings of this study suggest that the more exposure to conflict the participants had, the more hesitant they became of their own relationships. This finding further explains that this hesitation may be due to apprehension about repeating the mistakes of their parents (Whitton et al., 2008).

Although research has found that divorced families have a higher level of well-being than if they stayed in a high conflict family (Amato & Keith, 1991), the level of exposure has also had an impact on the outlook of ACOD. A fully open boundary during conflict has made ACOD more emotionally hesitant or fearful in their own relationships. Previous research has identified ACOD as more fearful or hesitant about the outcome of their romantic futures (Giuliani et al., 1998). However, the findings of this study show emotional hesitation to be more prominent in cases where conflict was fully witnessed by the participants. This finding suggests that those who witnessed the most behaviors may

be the most hesitant because they were fully exposed to conflict between their parents. They perceived their parents to fight in front of them, without them trying to hide their arguments. Consequently, they witnessed many negative behaviors and ultimately watched the downfall of their parents' relationship. This could have instilled fear for their own relationships.

The final pattern to emerge for this research question evolved from those in a semi-open and a closed boundary. The participants who noticed a greater sense of tension and lack of communication in their home environments were the ones to most consistently engage in appeasement at the beginning of their relationship. As the ACOD's relationship progressed, the participants started to speak up at times when they would have used appeasement. Cari's boyfriend used the term "I miss the old you" when she started to speak more candidly about her feelings during conflict. This pattern emerged for most of the participants who experienced tension and lack of communication in their parents' marriage.

Previous research has found that participants avoid problems they felt their parents had made in their own relationships (Karagiannopoulou & Hallam, 2003). By witnessing tension and a lack of communication, this study suggests participants used appeasement to eliminate tension and create an environment that they perceived to be more pleasant than their own experiences. However, the participants eventually voiced their feelings rather than solely trying to appease their boyfriend. Since previous research has identified ACOD as more fearful about the outcome of their romantic futures

(Giuliani et al., 1998), it is possible participants that may have been using appeasement to eliminate conflict from occurring in their own relationship.

The three main patterns found between the relationship of ACOD and the relationships of their parents helped to illuminate workings of intergenerational transmission from the self-reported experiences of ACOD. Negative communication behaviors of divorced parents are suggested to be transmitted to ACOD. Previous research has found ACOD can become apprehensive of repeating the mistakes of their parents (Whitton et al., 2008). Findings of this study further contribute to previous research. Participants who experienced fully open boundary during parental conflict may be more hesitant to use the same behaviors. This suggests ACOD who experienced a semi-open boundary may be less hesitant to use similar behaviors because they did not see the effects to the same extent as those in a fully open boundary. Environmental experiences such as perceived tension and a lack of communication in the household are suggested to influence the communication behaviors of participants. If the ACOD witnessed poor communication behaviors, findings suggest ACOD may try to use appeasement behaviors to eliminate potential conflict. Even though the intergenerational transmission of divorce theory helps explain how the parental behaviors and actions of divorce can make ACOD more vulnerable to divorce (Amato, 1996), the findings of this study suggest that transmission occurs during ACOD's own romantic relationships before marriage.

**Limitations**

Before concluding, it is necessary to note some of the limitations of this study. First, most of the questions in this study relied on retrospective reports of the participants' experiences while their parents were together and their experiences in their previous relationship. In retrospective studies, selective recall may be an area of error (Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993). Even though a semi-structured interview was used to get an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences, there may have been omissions from their recollections. To help minimize this limitation, the participants were asked to share about their most recent relationship that ended within the past year that lasted at least three months.

The participants in this study were also asked to recall an argument that stood out to them the most in their parents' relationship and in their own relationship. The study lacked further information on other arguments that may have occurred. Divorce is not typically a spontaneous decision, and ACOD may have been exposed to many other conflict discussions throughout their parents' relationship (Sumner, 2013). The participants may have known about other arguments that they did not see or hear. Communication during conflict shifts over time. Distressed couples have showed more negative communication over time (Markman et al., 2010). Without asking the participants to share more than one argument, the experiences they share are necessarily limited in scope.

Another limitation included the perspective of the responses. This study was told



through the perspective of the participant and did not include the perspectives of the parents or the participant's previous boyfriend. Even though the purpose behind interviewing only the female ACOD was to get to the depth of their individual experience, the perceptions of the parents and the boyfriend can provide a better picture of the relationship. Typically, when there is conflict in families, triangulation can exist (Gladding, 2011). When adolescents are triangulated during parental agreements, they can be involved as mediators or allies (Buehler et al., 2009). We can develop trustworthiness by hearing all members involved. This will help ensure the findings are plausible and consistent (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although the participants shared communication behaviors they recalled from their previous relationship, research has found that all relationships have conflict (Gottman, 1999). Although this study showed patterns in communication behaviors between parents of divorce and ACOD, we must take into consideration that some of these behaviors are consistent in any relationship. For example, behaviors of contempt and stonewalling typically develop at the end of a relationship (Gottman, 1999). The chances of saving a relationship once contempt is involved nearly fails to exist (Gottman & Silver, 1999). By the time the relationship uses stonewalling behaviors, saving the relationship is nearly impossible. This is another limitation to this study because we need to ensure these behaviors were not just typical behaviors at the end of a relationship but that they were intergenerationally transmitted.

Further, research has suggested building rapport through online interviews to be

more difficult than face to face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). At the start of the interview process, the first participant seemed hesitant to talk and share her experiences. It seemed as if rapport was not established, which may have limited the amount of information shared about the experience. When transcribing the interview, the conversation seemed to include less time spent on building rapport, which may have influenced the responses she was willing to share. After the first interview, more time was spent on building a level of comfort through the first few minutes of the conversation before beginning the interview questions. During this particular interview, the participant also seemed to have many distractions. Even though participants were asked to pick a location that was private to respect confidentiality, the participant chose to complete the interview in her dorm room. During this time, she had asked to excuse herself from the interview and answered the door to respond to a peer. After a review of the reflexive journaling during the analysis phase, I noticed that the participant also seemed to be distracted by her cellphone throughout the interview. An in-person interview may help to eliminate these distractions, as face-to-face interaction has been found to best build rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

One final limitation of this study included the demographics of the participants. Even though the study aimed to get a diverse population by entering a variety of classes to recruit participants, eight out of the ten participants in this study identified their race as white. One participant identified her race as “other” and another participant identified her race as Black/African American. A more diverse group of participants may have

expanded the applicability of these findings. If there are differences, we need to best understand how to meet the needs of each group (Hays & Erford, 2010). White, heterosexual, middle-class participants dominated Gottman's studies and were used to formulate the principles of a good marriage (Gottman, 1993). Several contemporary studies continue to include primarily white, middle class participants (Morrison, Fife, & Hertlein, 2017; Konstam, Karwin, Curran, Lyons, & Celen-Demirtas, 2016). The participants of this study were predominantly white Hispanic/Latina. This is particularly different from most of the literature on divorce which typically includes primarily, or entirely, white non-Hispanic samples. Given the high chance of divorce, researchers need to build upon Gottman's research by considering their applicability to various populations. Research needs to capture the experiences of those who have remained in the shadows of scholarly investigation to broaden our insights and inform practices that help reach the populations we seek to serve (Harcourt & Adler-Baeder, 2016).

### **Future Directions**

Although this study helped illuminate the intergenerational transmission of divorce, future research is needed to further develop these findings. While this study utilized data saturation when conducting the interviews, future studies using a more diverse sample of participants can better contribute to these findings and broaden the scope of this study. The majority of the participants were white females. Having knowledge of group differences and how others have experienced their relationships can help develop this work. This will provide counselors, therapists, and other professionals

to further meet the needs of all communities (Hays & Erford, 2010). One of Gottman's limitations included that his work used mainly white, heterosexual couples. While the study intended to draw from a diverse sample, further studies are needed to move beyond white, heterosexual couples and also better attend to the experiences of diverse populations. One participant who discussed her background as an integral part of her experience best displayed the need for more diverse findings. The participant shared how her family's culture impacted many of the conflicts she witnessed. She shared experiences of her mother being unable to wear makeup outside of the home and always needing to wear her scarf. When she wore makeup at home, this caused conflict in the household when the father came home and questioned her behavior. The conflict was intense and the mother tried to commit suicide near the end of the relationship. The mother left and went back to Lebanon to be with her family. This instance showed how interpreting the behaviors that ACOD witnessed during adolescence must account for perspectives and behaviors that are unique to particular cultural experiences.

Research has also shown that children who have healthy relationships at home are likely to carry this through to relationships outside of the home (Steinberg, 2011). Only negative behaviors were discussed by the participants, but research is clear about the protective role of positive behaviors that establish closeness and support (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Future studies should look into the relationships ACOD have had with their parents to see if this impacts their communication behaviors in their own relationships.

While we know that a female's family history is more important than that of a male's in the prediction of future divorce for heterosexual couples (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), future studies can also replicate this study for male ACOD. Contributions can be made to the literature by further testing how the male ACOD may experience their own romantic relationships prior to marriage. In the last decade, the social expectations surrounding the familial role of the father have changed significantly. Rather than merely act as a friend to the child, fathers have come to assume an increasingly diverse range of responsibilities that once seemed part of the traditional role of the mother (Gottzen, 2011). The mother's role in the child's life is generally assumed, while the father's involvement in the family was historically optional (Gottzen, 2011). Society now promotes "responsible fatherhood" initiatives, as well as an increase in female participation in the job force (Perry & Langley, 2013). Such shifting gender roles display the need for further research on male ACOD.

### **Implications**

Findings from this study suggest that intergenerational transmission can occur for ACOD, thereby putting their own romantic relationships at risk of dissolution and divorce. Further, this study suggests several potential mechanisms of transmission (e.g. poor communication) that may respond well to prevention efforts like educational programming. Marriage education programs have existed for several decades to provide support, information, and knowledge about healthy marriages (Dion, 2005). Those who experience marriage and relationship education (MRE) are more likely to report higher

marital satisfaction, lower levels of conflict, and higher levels of commitment to their relationship (Parker, 2007). Taken together, this study suggests the need for early access, during adolescence to programs that can promote healthy relationships. It therefore provides empirical support for expanding the use of programs that specifically target the aforementioned factors of transmission among ACOD populations.

Thus, the information shared by ACOD can be used to create or extend relationship education programs for young adults and also for adolescents in the process of experiencing their parent's divorce. This can be incorporated in divorce education programs or even separate relationship education programs for adolescents. Adolescence is a time when relationships begin to change and develop (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). By providing such programs, we can best teach skills that help promote positive behaviors and strong relationships. Although multiple programs exist worldwide to provide adults with the skills and tools to build healthy relationships (Dion, 2005), programs do not exist to help adolescents learn the communication skills of healthy relationships that they may not be exposed to at home.

Conflict management and communication are two topics that need to be included in relationship education programs for adolescents, just as they are included in MRE programs for adults (Dion, 2005). These skills can be applied in relationships before marriage. The findings of this study show that many ACOD are entering relationships feeling hesitant to further develop the relationship or feeling hesitant to commit. The fear they displayed needs to be addressed in these programs. For example, we need to help

change their outlook on their future and help them believe that they are capable of maintaining healthy, successful relationships regardless of their parents' divorce. One way to do this would be to focus on their strengths in other relationships. For example, peers are crucial in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal development during adolescence (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Talking about how they function in their friendships with their peers can help them start to look at their own strengths in this type of relationship. If they start to recognize their success in these friendships, this can be a starting point to build success in other relationships.

The program also needs to address the topic of giving the participants a voice in their relationship. This study found that some ACOD may use submissive behaviors such as appeasement in their relationships. Even though participants eventually voiced their true feelings, they struggled to speak up for themselves. Programs can use a person-centered approach to help give ACOD the ability and confidence to pursue healthy relationships on their own terms (Corey, 2008). Encouraging personal empowerment is one way that program counselors can promote successful relationships (Hipilito-Delgado & Cortland, 2007). Creating a mutual relationship in which dialogue is valued can allow the students to fully express their own experiences to help realize empowerment (Hipilito-Delgado & Cortland, 2007). In the early 1940's, Carl Rogers developed a new non directive counseling approach that was grounded in the assumption that human beings can find their own direction (Corey, 2008). This approach can benefit ACOD in relationship education programs. We know that ACOD are more vulnerable to divorce in

their future, but we need to help them realize that their full potential in their own life journeys need not be limited by their parents' experiences.

All participants in the study had parents who divorced when they were between the ages of 12 and 17. These adolescents are creating their own sense of self during these years (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). This is also the period when adolescents begin to compare themselves to others (Petersen, Leffert, & Graham, 1995). Group programs can help these adolescents relate to others who have similar experiences. Group sessions have been found to be a highly successful process (Corey, 2008).

Adding relationship programs in schools where kids are free to learn would be invaluable. Counselors are readily available for children in schools and can be a way to easily access this population of adolescents. Adolescence is a stage where relationships are extremely important, as this is the age where the children are building independence and autonomy (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Researchers have found parental divorce to be a precursor to an initiation of dating in adolescence (Ivanova et al., 2014). By reaching this population in schools, we can provide them with safe outlets to learn communication behaviors as they start to enter their own romantic relationships.

Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage in life as relationships begin to change and romantic relationships begin to develop (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Relationship education programs for adolescents of divorce can help prevent the cycle of divorce from occurring by teaching the essential communication skills at this early age. By teaching proper communication behaviors for a healthy relationship, these



programs can support a healthy, sound marriage, should it happen in their future.

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Table 1

*Demographic profiles of undergraduate students at the large northeastern university*

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
White	49%
Hispanic	28%
Black/African American	12%
Asian	6%
Two or more races	4%
Non-Resident Alien	2%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.2%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.1%
Totals (N=16,336)	100%

*Note.* Demographics are based on December 2, 2015 data collected

Table 2

*Demographics of Participants*

Participant	Age	Age of parents' divorce	Hispanic/Latina	Race	Major	Length of previous relationship
Ann	19	12	Both	White	English	3 months
Rachel	20	13	Both	Other	Psychology	4 months
Jenny	20	17	Hispanic	White	Undecided	4 months
Ronnie	19	12	Hispanic	Black/African American	Family and Child Studies	6 months
Luna	20	14	No	White	Family and Child Studies	4-5 months
Jules	21	14	No	White	Biology	1 ½ years
Cari	20	12	Latina	White	Family and Child Studies	1 year
Marie	20	14	No	White	Family and Child Studies	1 year
Kami	20	13	Latina	White	Psychology and Education	8 months
Rose	20	13	No	White	Family and Child Studies	7 months



Table 3

*Background Information of Participants' Parents*

Participant	Year of parents marriage	Parents first marriage	Total years married	Number of siblings at time of divorce	Parents remarried	Number of siblings after divorce	Remarriage still together
Ann	1994	Yes	15	1	Both	1 half brother	Yes
Rachel	1991	Yes-mother No-father	18	4 half siblings	Neither	0	N/A
Jenny	1993	Yes	20	1 sibling	Neither	0	N/A
Ronnie	1993	Yes	16	2 half siblings	Dad	0	No
Luna	1994	Yes	16	2 siblings	Dad	1 step-sibling	Yes
Jules	1991	Yes	18	1 sibling	Dad	2 step-siblings	Yes
Cari	1992	Yes	16	1 sibling 1 half sibling	Dad	1 half sister	Yes
Marie	1996	Yes	14	2 siblings	Both	2 step-siblings	Yes
Kami	1995	Yes	14	1 sibling	Dad	2 step-siblings	Yes
Rose	1992	Yes	17	0	Both	1 half sister 3 step-siblings	Yes

Table 4

*Perceived Parental Conflict Communication While Divorcing*

Theme	Sub-themes
Boundaries	Fully open
	Semi-open
	Closed
Ugly and uncomfortable	Yelling
	Eye rolling
	Name calling
	Blaming
	Controlling behaviors
	Sarcasm
	Stonewalling
	Criticism
	Tension
Unspoken	Lack of communication

Table 5

*Research Question One Themes and Sub-Themes*

	Fully Open	Semi-Open	Closed	Yelling	Eye Rolling	Name Calling	Blaming	Stonewalling	Contr. Behav.	Sarcasm	Criticism	Tension	Lack of Comm.
Ann	X			X	X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Rachel	X			X	X	X	X				X		
Jenny	X			X		X			X				
Ronnie	X			X	X	X						X	X
Luna		X		X			X	X	X				
Jules		X		X				X				X	
Cari		X		X	X	X						X	X
Marie		X		X	X	X	X			X		X	X
Kami		X		X		X		X	X	X		X	X
Rose			X	X	X							X	X

Table 6

*ACOD Lived Experiences of Communication*

Theme	Sub-themes
Emotional hesitation	
Lost love	Eye rolling Stonewalling Sarcasm Pursuer Behavior Yelling Criticism Name calling Blaming Hiding emotions Controlling behaviors
Acts of submission	Appeasement Resentment

Table 7

*Research Question Two Themes and Sub-Themes*

Participant	Eye Rolling	Stone.	Sarcasm	Pursuer Behav.	Yelling	Criticism	Name Calling	Blaming	Hiding Emotion	Control. Behav.	Appeas.	Resent.	Emot. Hesita.
Ann		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rachel	X	X	X	X									X
Jenny	X	X											
Ronnie	X		X		X								X
Luna	X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X		
Jules	X	X											
Cari	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X
Marie	X	X	X					X			X		
Kami	X		X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X
Rose	X	X							X		X	X	

Table 8

*ACOD Communication Patterns That Indicate Possible Transmission*

---

Patterns

---

Do you see something familiar?

Love into hate

I miss the old you

---

Table 9

*Research Question Three Patterns*

Participants	Fully Open	Semi-Open	Closed	Tension	Lack of Commun.	Appeasement	Resentment	Emotional Hesitation
Ann	X			X	X	X	X	X
Rachel	X							X
Jenny	X							
Ronnie	X			X	X			X
Luna		X				X		
Jules		X		X				
Cari		X		X	X	X		X
Marie		X		X	X	X		
Kami		X		X	X	X	X	X
Rose			X	X	X	X	X	

## Appendix A

### Email to Department Chairs

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Carly Nacer and I am currently a PhD candidate in the Family Studies program. I am in the process of collecting data for my qualitative dissertation that examines the experiences of relational communication/conflict resolution among females with divorced parents.

I would like to get your permission to ask professors of XXX-XXX course if they would be willing to have me attend the end of their class for about 5 minutes to speak about the study and identify potential participants. I have attached a Site Approval form for you to sign. This form gives permission for my study to be shared with the students. This would need to be signed and returned as approval to submit my IRB application. If you would like additional information about the study, or if you have questions I would be happy to talk further. You may contact me through email [nacerc1@montclair.edu](mailto:nacerc1@montclair.edu) or phone at 973-727-6680. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, at [vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu](mailto:vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu).

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

*Carly Nacer, PhD (Cand)*

*Montclair State University*

*Family Studies Doctoral Program*

#### A Little About the Study

I am seeking participants who are female, aged 18-21, have parents who divorced when the participant was between the ages of 12 and 17, and have had at least one heterosexual romantic relationship in the past year that lasted at least three months. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews over Skype, in order to allow more flexibility for the participants. Interviews should take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Precautions will be made to protect the confidential information shared in the interview. Interviews will be recorded on a small hand-held recording device as well as an Mp3

Skype recorder, yet all information will be locked when not being used. Counseling services on campus, as well as a list of community counseling services, will be provided to each participant if they wish to further discuss their relationships and if they feel they need assistance in their current relationship. Although we expect no risks with this study.



**Appendix B**

**Site Approval Form**

Date: July 26, 2016  
Attn: Institutional Review Board  
Montclair State University  
1 Normal Avenue  
College Hall, Room 248  
Montclair, NJ 07043

Re: Relationship Communication Experiences Among Females with Divorced  
Parents - Carly Nacer

Dear Review Board,

This letter serves to give permission to Carly Nacer to complete her research  
project, Relationship Communication Experiences Among Females with Divorced  
Parents, during the 2016-2017 Year at our facility.

Carly Nacer will have access to our students to conduct her research project. The  
research project has been described to me to my satisfaction.

Sincerely,  
[\*Physical signature or verifiable electronic signature]

Name, Title  
Organizational Name

## Appendix C

### Email to Professors

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Carly Nacer and I am currently a PhD candidate in the Family Studies program. I am in the process of collecting data for my qualitative dissertation that examines the experiences of relational communication/conflict resolution among females with divorced parents. The study was approved by the IRB and measures are in place to maintain participant confidentiality.

I would like to come in to speak about the study towards the end of one of your class meeting times that worked best for your course schedule. I need about 5 minutes at the end of your class to speak with only the female students. During this time I will explain the study. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding this study. You may contact me through email [nacerc1@montclair.edu](mailto:nacerc1@montclair.edu) or phone at 973-727-6680. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, at [vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu](mailto:vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu).

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

*Carly Nacer, PhD (Candidate)*

*Montclair State University*

*Family Studies Doctoral Program*

#### A Little About the Study

I am seeking participants who are female, aged 18-21, have parents who divorced when the participant was between the ages of 12 and 17, and have had at least one heterosexual romantic relationship in the past year that lasted at least three months. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews over Skype, in order to allow more flexibility for the participants. Interviews should take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Precautions will be made to protect the confidential information shared in the interview. Interviews will be recorded on a small hand-held recording device as well as an Mp3 Skype recorder, yet all information will be locked when not being used. Counseling services on campus, as well as a list of community counseling services, will be provided to each participant if they wish to further discuss their relationships and if they feel they need assistance in their current relationship. Although we expect no risks with this study.

**Appendix D****In Person Plea Handout**

Date

Dear Student,

My name is Carly Nacer and I am currently in the PhD Family Studies program at Montclair State University. I would like to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a research study I will be conducting about relationship communication among females with divorced parents. This study will involve an interview, through Skype, at a time of your convenience. This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time.

I am seeking participants that are:

- Female
- Aged 18-21
- Have parents who divorced when you were between the ages of 12 and 1
- Have been in a heterosexual relationship in the past year that has lasted at least three months
- Have access to Skype, in order to complete the interview

If you fit the criteria listed above, you may be eligible to participate. The first 15 participants will receive a \$10 electronic Visa gift card to compensate for your time given to be a research participant, which will be e-mailed to you after the interview.

Additionally, all participants will be included in a \$50 electronic Visa gift card drawing at the end of the study.

If you are interested, please see me as you leave class so that we can set up an interview time. You may also contact me at [nacerc1@montclair.edu](mailto:nacerc1@montclair.edu).

Thank you for considering participation in this study.

Sincerely,

*Carly Nacer, PhD (Candidate)*

*Montclair State University*

*Family Studies Doctoral Program*

## Appendix E

### Informed Consent

#### CONSENT FORM FOR ADULTS

Please read below with care. You can ask questions at any time, now or later. You can talk to other people before you sign this form.

**Study's Title:**

Relationship Communication Experiences Among Females with Divorced Parents.

**Why is this study being done?**

The study is being done to explore the communication and conflict experiences in the romantic relationships of females whose parents divorced. The study will also explore any similarities or differences between the female's communication and conflict experiences in her relationship as compared to her parents' relationship.

**What will happen while you are participating in the study?**

You will be contacted via Skype at the time decided between you and the researcher. At the start of the Skype call, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym to use during the interview to help protect your privacy. Further, review of this form will take place at the start of the interview to help answer any questions you may have and for you to give verbal consent to participate.

Once your questions have been answered and you have agreed to participate, the researcher will ask questions regarding your prior relationship as well as your parents' relationship before they divorced. The questions will focus on communication styles used in those relationships. During the interview you will be recorded using a small hand held recording device and an Mp3 Skype Recorder. Recordings will be typed and used to identify similarities and differences across everyone who participates. All recordings and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked cabinet to protect your privacy. Further, review of this form will take place at the start of the interview to help answer any questions you may have and for you to give verbal consent to participate.

Once your questions have been answered and you have agreed to participate, the researcher will ask questions regarding your prior relationship as well as your parents' relationship before they divorced. The questions will focus on communication styles used in those relationships. During the interview you will be recorded using a small hand held recording device and an Mp3 Skype Recorder. Recordings will be typed and used to

identify similarities and differences across everyone who participates. All recordings and transcripts will be kept on a password-protected computer in a locked cabinet to protect your privacy. If, at any point in time, you do not wish to continue, you can withdraw from the study without penalty.

At the end of the interview, counseling services on campus will be shared with you, and a list of community resources will be emailed to you after the Skype call. These are provided if you wish to discuss your relationships further and/or if you feel you need assistance in your current relationship. You will also be asked if you can refer at least one person for this study. In addition, the researcher will ask you if you can be contacted again to verify any key points, if needed. This additional contact is not mandatory, and you are allowed to deny the request without penalty.

Once the interview is complete, the first 15 participants will receive an email with a \$10 electronic Visa gift card for participation in the study. All participants will be included in a \$50 drawing at the end of the study. If your name is chosen in the final drawing, you will receive a \$50 electronic Visa gift card via email. Your name and email will never be connected to your interview.

**Time:**

The interview will take around 60 – 90 minutes through Skype.

**Risks:**

Although we do not expect you to experience any risks, talking about memories of a family divorce or a previous relationship might make some people feel a little sad. Counseling services on campus, along with a list of community services, will be shared with you at the end of the Skype interview. A list of resources will also be emailed to you directly after the Skype session.

Data will be collected using the Internet; it is anticipated that your participation in this survey presents no greater risk than everyday use of the Internet. Please note that online communication is neither private nor secure. Though we are taking precautions to protect your privacy, you should be aware that information sent through email could be read by a third party.

Although your identity will be kept confidential as it relates to this research project, if we learn of any suspected child abuse we are required by NJ state law to report that to the proper authorities immediately.

**Benefits:**

Although there may not be a direct benefit to you for participating, we believe what we learn will help us better understand communication styles that might be related to

divorce. Healthy relationship education programs can teach positive skills and help people have better relationships. Information found as part of this study might help identify particular skills to teach in relationship education programs.

**Compensation:**

The first 15 participants will be provided a \$10 electronic Visa gift card for taking part in the interview. This Visa gift card will be emailed to you directly after the Skype interview. All participants will be included in a drawing for a \$50 electronic Visa gift card at the end of the study. If your name is picked in the \$50 drawing, you will receive a \$50 electronic Visa gift card via email. If you decide during the interview that you no longer would like to participate, you will still receive the gift card and be included in the drawing as long as you have answered at least 3 of the 5 main questions.

**Who will know that you are in this study?**

You will not be linked to any presentations. We will keep who you are confidential. A pseudonym will be used throughout all interviews and in all transcripts.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

You do not have to be in this study. You are a volunteer! It is okay if you want to stop at any time and not be in the study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you have answered at least 3 of the 5 questions asked, your payment of \$10 will not be affected.

**Do you have any questions about this study?**

Please feel free to ask any questions regarding this study. You may contact me, Carly Nacer, through email [nacerc1@montclair.edu](mailto:nacerc1@montclair.edu) or phone at 973-727-6680. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, through email [vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu](mailto:vaneedenmobr@montclair.edu) or phone at 973-655-4440.

**Do you have any questions about your rights as a research participant?**

Phone or email the IRB Chair, Dr. Katrina Bulkley, at 973-655-5189 or [reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:reviewboard@mail.montclair.edu).

**Study Summary**

I would like to get a summary of this study:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

As part of this study, it is okay to audiotape me during the interview:

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No

**This consent form is for you to keep.**

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. Its general purposes, the particulars of involvement, and possible risks and inconveniences have been explained to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. Upon discussion of this form, I will verify that I am 18 years of age or older and have received a copy of this consent form.

Do you agree to the Statement of Consent?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ No                      \_\_\_\_\_ Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Faculty Sponsor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

#### Demographic Questions

I would like to begin with a few basic questions about you and your family to get to you know better.

When were you born?

What is your current major at Montclair State University?

What year are you in your college program?

Are you Hispanic or Latina?(A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race)

The previous question was about ethnicity, not race. The next question will indicate what you consider your race to be.

How would you describe yourself? Choose one or more of the following racial groups that I will read aloud to you:

American Indian or Alaska Native- (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains a tribal affiliation or community attachment.)

Asian- (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.)

Black/African American- (A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa—includes Caribbean Islanders and other of African origin.)

Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander- (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.)

White- (A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.)

Non-Resident/Alien

The next few questions are about your parent's marriage and divorce.

When did your parents marry?

How long were your parents married?

Was this their first marriage?

In what year did your parents divorce?

How old were you when your parents divorced?

Did you have any siblings at the time your parents divorced?

Do you currently have any siblings?

Did either parent re-marry?



When did they re-marry?  
Are they still together?

**Main Interview Questions: Note that prompt questions are examples and may not be needed, or only 1 or 2 might be needed during the semi-structured interviews.**

1. One of the criteria for participating in this interview is that you had a recent relationship that lasted at least three months, but you currently are no longer together. Please tell me the story of that relationship.

Prompt question: How did you meet?

Prompt question: When did your relationship start?

Prompt question: Describe the beginning of your relationship.

Prompt question: What memories stand out to you the most?

Prompt question: How long did the relationship last?

Prompt question: When did it end?

Prompt question: Who initiated the start of the relationship?

Prompt question: Who initiated the break-up?

Prompt question: If I were to ask your significant other who initiated the break-up, how would their response be the same or different?

2. All couples have disagreements in their relationship. Sometimes they occur more often towards the end of a relationship. Tell me about a typical disagreement that occurred towards the end of your relationship.

Prompt question: How did the disagreement begin?

Prompt question: How long did a disagreement typically last?

Prompt question: How did the disagreement end?

Prompt question: How does it compare to the disagreements at the beginning of your relationship? At the middle?

Prompt question: If someone were listening to your disagreement, what would they typically hear?

Prompt question: Some behaviors such as mocking, name-calling, sarcasm, or humor can be used during disagreements. Can you recall either of you using any of these behaviors during a disagreement? Describe them.

Prompt question: Some behaviors such as eye rolling can be used during disagreements. Can you recall either of you using any nonverbal behaviors during a disagreement? Describe them.

Prompt question: How do you think your significant other may have viewed this disagreement?

3. Think back to a disagreement that stands out to you. Imagine that I am your boyfriend and you and I are in the disagreement together. Walk me through how the disagreement would look. Tell me how I should act during the disagreement.

Prompt question: If I were to ask your significant other to walk me through this disagreement, how would their interpretation be the same or different?

4. It is pretty common that parents have disagreements. Can you tell me about a typical disagreement you remember your parents having when you were in high school?

If yes:

Prompt question: How did the disagreement begin?

Prompt question: How long did a disagreement typically last?

Prompt question: How did the disagreement end?

Prompt question: Some behaviors such as mocking, name-calling, sarcasm, or humor can be used during disagreements. Can you recall either of your parents using any of these behaviors during a disagreement? Describe them.

Prompt question: Some behaviors such as eye rolling can be used during disagreements. Can you recall either of your parents using any nonverbal behaviors during a disagreement? Describe them.

If no:

Prompt question: Sometimes when two people have disagreements there can still be an uneasy feeling afterward. Was there ever a time when you felt as if your parents may have had a disagreement? Describe what made you feel this way.

If they did not experience this feeling:

Prompt question: Often times poor communication can lead to disagreements in a relationship. Ultimately, this can cause a relationship to end. Why do you think your parents may have ended their relationship?

5. If an outsider were to watch disagreements you had with your partner and disagreements your parents had with each other, how would the outsider compare them?

Prompt question: What similarities or differences might they notice/if any?

Prompt question: How do you think your parents viewed these disagreements?

6. Closing question: If you were able to give three pieces of advice to a couple your age about communication in relationships what advice would you give them?

Is there anything else you wanted to share but didn't get a chance to during the interview?

### Appendix G

#### Local Counseling Agencies

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Name	Location(s)	Telephone Number
Well Being Therapy Center	Montville, NJ	973-794-6888
	Millburn/Short Hills, NJ	
Specialized Therapy Associates	Hackensack, NJ	201-488-6678
	Short Hills, NJ	
	Ramsey, NJ	
New Jersey Counseling Center	Pine Brook, NJ	201-669-4674
Finding Hope Counseling	Springfield, NJ	973-493-1497
New Bridge	Parsippany, NJ	973-316-9333
	Haskell, NJ	
A Center for Therapy	Multiple locations in NJ	800-213-4673

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## **Appendix H**

### **Personal Reflexivity**

Before starting the interviews, I reflected on my position in this research. I grew up in a two-parent family with parents still married today. As most of us have, I learned ways of communicating by watching my parents and listening to the advice they shared with me over the years. All of my close local friends were also raised in two-parent families, none of whom had experienced divorce. I cannot recall hearing much about divorce growing up, but those around me viewed it negatively. A happy marriage was always perceived as the goal of a relationship. My parents have shown me the importance of communication with one another while also managing conflict successfully. They have taught me to show love and appreciation for family at all times. We have a small family, and our immediate family contains only four of us – my mother, my dad, and my older brother. We have always been close to one another, and when I think of memories in my past, I feel fortunate to have shared such wonderful times with them. I am grateful to not only have been raised by both parents but to still see them as a strong model of marriage that I hope to have as well.

Being raised Catholic, marriage has always been viewed as a lifelong journey. In church classes, I was always taught that couples are expected to work together through the hard times while also respecting one another. Pre Cana is initiated before the marriage to learn more about one another while also holding discussions about the future. Marriage marks a special moment in one's life, when they find a person with which they

intend to spend the remainder of their years. I look forward to my own wedding day, and remain committed to my Catholic beliefs in working together through life as a team.

While love and happiness have always been of value in my family, I have also been taught to value education to reach goals. When I was younger, I can recall playing *teacher* and always wanting to teach others. This became a professional goal, as I attended college to obtain my teaching license. I was fortunate to receive a job directly out of college at a middle school. As a middle school teacher, I started to bring those same lessons of appreciation and love for others into the classroom, wanting to teach children not only how to work well within the school setting, but how to use communication skills that extend beyond the classroom.

My school district is comprised of a majority of white students from upper-middle class families. This was the district that many of us always viewed as a competitor growing up, especially regarding sporting events and academics. Although I did not grow up in this town, I started to look at my privileges that I had been given. I am a white female from an upper-middle class family. I have been provided with numerous resources that others may not have been able to experience, such as an undergraduate experience living at the University of Delaware, a chance to attend a master's program, as well as an opportunity to pursue a doctorate. I started to see that my privilege was what helped shape who I am, as I made use of my resources and wanted to use them to help others.

As I began teaching, I entered the classroom assuming a majority had been raised in a similar environment, yet was surprised to learn that this assumption was incorrect. It was evident that some students were facing difficulties at home, and wanted a safe place. While teaching, I was also completing my masters of education in school and mental health counseling. I decided to complete my internship at the middle school where I was teaching. Within the first few weeks, a majority of the children I was working with had one similarity: their parents were going through a divorce or had just divorced. This prompted my interest in researching divorce as I entered MSU's Ph.D. program in family studies. Many of my close friends were surprised by my interest in this topic, with my limited experience with those who had suffered divorce. I can even recall contemplating this topic while worrying about what others may think. Divorce was never something I was around, and I worried that others may wonder how I could devote so much attention to it having never experienced it myself. I knew that I needed to ignore my worries and focus on the reward: helping others.

While interning as a school counselor, I ran a divorce group for children. Many of the difficulties they shared were the lack of communication they were feeling with their biological parents. Having grown up in a family where communication was important, I needed to allow them space to share, without imposing my beliefs on the importance of communication. I was able to assist the group by creating activities and strategies to help them cope with the transition of divorce while giving them a chance to communicate about their feelings. I quickly learned that my life experiences are not

universal, yet I wanted to help children at a young age by preparing them for a future with healthy relationships.

As I began to prepare for my interviews, I was aware that I needed to understand my values. I value marriage and hope to be blessed with one as strong as my parents. However, everyone's beliefs about marriage do not necessarily match my own. I need to be open to the idea that they may not have had the same models that I have had over the years, and that their future aspirations may be very different. Keeping an open mind, while also journaling throughout the process, helped me reflect upon my own values and ensure I am not imposing them in my work.

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