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# Exploring the Mechanisms of the Connection between Offspring's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict and their Current Relationship Functioning

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Jennifer Mary Willett entitled "Exploring the Mechanisms of the Connection between Offspring's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict and their Current Relationship Functioning." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Psychology.

Kristina Coop Gordon, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Paula J. Fite, Deborah P. Welsh

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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and recommend its acceptance:

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Paula J. Fite

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Deborah P. Welsh

Accepted for the Council:

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Carolyn R. Hodges  
Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

EXPLORING THE MECHANISMS OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN OFFSPRING'S  
PERCEPTIONS OF INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AND THEIR CURRENT  
RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jennifer Mary Willett  
August 2009

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## **ABSTRACT**

The effects of interparental conflict upon offspring's own relationships and marriages have been well-documented and current research has narrowed its focus to the examination of the mediators and moderators of this transmission of relational patterns across generations. Two hundred and thirty-nine undergraduate participants completed measures assessing their perceptions of their parents' conflict, social cognitions about relationships, their communication patterns in their relationships, and their current relationship satisfaction. Results showed that offspring's attitudes toward marriage mediated the relationship between interparental conflict and offspring's current relationship satisfaction, even while accounting for communication patterns in relationships. Further, it was found that attitudes toward marriage mediated the relationship between interparental conflict resolution and offspring's current relationship satisfaction, again, while controlling for communication patterns. Results emphasized the unique impact of social cognitions in relationships, and in addition, the powerful effects of observing parental conflict resolution for offspring, as it may reinforce positive view of marital relationships that offspring might then apply to their own relationships. Limitations and directions for future research are addressed.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since divorce has become a more visible and accepted option for couples and families in our society, increased attention has been paid to the lasting effects of parental divorce upon offspring. In addition to research that has shown negative effects of parental divorce upon offspring's immediate adjustment to the change in family structure and relationships (e.g., Hetherington, 1989), more recent investigations have found multiple long-term negative effects of parental divorce upon offspring that impact their physical and psychological health as well as their own interpersonal romantic functioning (Amato, 1996; Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Emery, 1999; Buehler, Anthony, Krishnakumar, Stone, Gerard, & Pemberton, 1997; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000; Wolfinger, 2000; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). These studies have concluded that many of these "children of divorce" are more likely to marry earlier (Amato, 1996) and divorce later in life (Amato, 1996; Wolfinger, 2000). However, recent studies have found more positive and neutral effects of parental divorce; for example, Riggio (2004) found that parental divorce was associated with positive outcomes in offspring, such as higher quality mother-child relationships, better social support, increased independence facilitated by both parents, and reduced anxiety in relationships, regardless of the sex of the offspring, parental remarriage, and parental socio-economic status. Researchers have called for further exploration of the mechanisms behind these differing outcomes (e.g., Amato, 2000; Hetherington & Elmore, 2002; Hetherington, 1991b).

How does parental divorce lend itself to both positive and negative outcomes in offspring? Amato and Keith (1991b) have suggested that the majority of the negative effects upon offspring that have previously been attributed to parental divorce are actually due to the conflict that often accompanies parental divorce; however, one of the shortcomings of the

methodology of many studies focusing on the effects of parental divorce upon offspring is that they do not assess for levels of marital conflict along with divorce (e.g. Amato, 1996; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Zill et al., 1993). In fact, an increasing number of studies have stressed the negative effects of parental conflict upon children rather than the blanket variable of “divorce,” with parental conflict’s effects upon offspring including greater adjustment difficulties (Turner & Barrett, 1998), child attachment insecurity and maladjustment (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002), lower self esteem, fear of intimacy, and lower romantic relationship satisfaction (Kirk, 2002), and higher perceived risk in intimacy, particularly for female offspring (Morris & West, 2001).

### *Theoretical Support*

Several theories have been presented as ways to conceptualize the intergenerational transmission of relational discord. Most foundational research has adopted a “behavioral-modeling” perspective, which focuses on behaviors that offspring learn from their parents’ relationships, such as communication behaviors (Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) and maladaptive interpersonal behaviors (Amato, 1996). The premise behind the behavioral-modeling framework is that children observe maladaptive behaviors that their parents display toward each other and then later imitate these same maladaptive behaviors in their own relationships, leading to negative relationship outcomes such as decreased relationship satisfaction, decreased commitment, and potentially divorce. Amato and Booth (2001) describe this theory as the observational learning hypothesis.

Most research that supports this theory of transmission of relational discord focuses upon communication patterns that offspring learn from parents and later display in their own relationships. For example, Sanders and colleagues (1999) investigated whether a history of

parental divorce predicts negative communication behavior in a pre-marital sample and found that women with a developmental history of parental divorce were more likely to display high levels of verbal and non-verbal negative communication behaviors than those without a history of parental divorce. Additionally, Amato (1996) found that offspring's reports of their own problematic interpersonal behaviors in their marriages were significantly related to parental divorce. Unfortunately, neither of these studies controlled for levels of parental conflict in addition to divorce.

Studies that have assessed for parental conflict have found further links between parental marital behavior patterns and offspring's own adjustment and behavior in their own relationships. Using longitudinal data, Caspi and Elder (1988) found that parental marital conflict was associated with a problematic interpersonal style in offspring that later became problematic in their own marriages and parenting behaviors. Levy, Wamboldt, and Fiese (1997) found that women's and men's reports of conflict in their family of origin were most predictive of their own and their partner's perceptions of their communication patterns and observer ratings of their actual behaviors; however, these results did not consider family structure (such as parental marital status) and relied upon retrospective data. More recently, Whitton, Waldinger, Schultz, Allen, Crowell, and Hauser (2008) found that levels of hostility and positive engagement displayed by parents and adolescents in families were linked with levels of hostility and positive engagement in those same adolescents' marital interactions later in life. Hostility was a strong predictor of marital communication patterns, particularly for men.

A weakness of research that follows observational learning theory is that it fails to address another explanation of the relationship between parental and offspring relational discord, such as the cognitions that offspring develop from observation of their parents' behavior and

from their own interactions with their parents. Research has shown that offspring who have parents with conflictual relationships are likely to engage in maladaptive behaviors in their own relationships, but the mechanics of why this association exists are unclear. Perhaps in response to this disconnect, a theoretical framework that has received increased support is Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory and its predecessor, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). When applied to the intergenerational transmission of relational discord, social cognitive theory emphasizes the goals that individuals have for their interactions with partners and the beliefs that they hold about relationships in general. These social cognitions may mediate the effects of parental conflict upon offspring's relationship functioning. Segrin, Taylor, and Altman (2005) have applied social cognitive theory to the relationship functioning of offspring of parental divorce in terms of inhibitory and disinhibitory effects learned through vicarious experience. These researchers found that parental divorce could have one of two effects on adult offspring: it could have an inhibitory effect by encouraging a belief that marriage is a negative experience, leading to avoidance of marriage as well as pessimism and fear of relationships, or it could have a disinhibitory effect by creating a sensitization to divorce, perhaps leading to earlier and more impulsive marriages with divorce considered an accepted option. In their study, Segrin and colleagues (2005) found that divorce was associated with offspring's reports of increased conflict in their family of origin, more negative attitudes toward marriage, a greater likelihood of marriage to a previously divorced person, and a decreased likelihood of currently being in a close relationship. Interestingly, they found that family-of-origin conflict or negative marital attitudes mediated many of these effects. These negative marital attitudes can be considered forms of social cognitions that offspring might hold about relationships.

### *Social Cognitions as Mediators*

Thus, much of the recent research on the intergenerational transmission of relational discord has begun to focus on social cognitions that may explain the effects of parental conflict (in addition to divorce) upon offspring relationship functioning. Of popular interest have been attitudes toward marriage and commitment (e.g., Segrin et al., 2005; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1991; Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001), optimism (e.g., Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006; Carnelly & Janoff-Bulman, 1992), and self-efficacy and relationship confidence (e.g., Segrin & Taylor, 2006; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

*Attitudes toward marriage.* Multiple studies have found links between parental relationship characteristics and offspring's cognitions and expectations about their own future marriages and relationships. A study focusing on cognitions about marriage in offspring of highly conflictual parents have found that they view marriage less favorably than those from homes without conflict (Jennings et al., 1991) and, similarly, a study that examined offspring from divorced and multiple-divorced homes found they had more negative expectations about marriage compared with children from intact homes (Boyer-Pennington et al., 2001). Additional research has centered on optimism and its role in offspring's relationships; Franklin and colleagues (1990) found that college-aged children whose parents had divorced were less optimistic about the success of their own future marriages compared to those with still-intact families. They conducted a second study where they explored benevolent (e.g., more positive) beliefs in the context of trust: college-aged children with divorced parents were compared with a matched group of children from intact families and were found to differ only on marriage-related beliefs but were more likely to trust a future spouse less than those from intact families. To illustrate how optimism may affect relationships, Srivastava and colleagues (2006) explored

optimism in dating couples and found that both optimists and their partners reported greater relationship satisfaction, a relationship that was mediated by the optimists' greater perceived support from his or her partner. When engaged in conflict conversations, optimists and their partners saw each other as engaging more constructively during the conflict, leading them to feel as if it were better resolved one week later. This finding emphasizes the importance of positive beliefs in resolving conflict in relationships, as they may instill a greater sense of dedication to the relationship. Lastly, Carnelly and Janoff-Bulman (1992) reported that experiences in dating relationships predicted optimism about future love relationships, and that participants' parents' relationship with each other predicted optimism about marriage in participants.

Further, studies have found that parental conflict and/or parental divorce encourage disrupted and pessimistic beliefs and attitudes in offspring toward not only the idea of marriage, but also commitment once part of a marriage. Parental divorce has been associated with lower levels of commitment in engaged women (Whitton et al., 2008), however, research has also found an interaction effect between parental divorce and conflict upon offspring's relationship commitment. Amato and DeBoer (2001) found that children from divorced homes with low levels of conflict were significantly more likely to divorce themselves when their own marriages were distressed, concluding that children who experience parental divorce without the precursors of parental conflict (or in other words, without much warning) experience a disruption in their beliefs in the stability and permanence of marriage which then weakens their beliefs in commitment by sensitizing them to the option of leaving a dissatisfying marriage, much like the disinhibitory effects described by Segrin and colleagues (2005). In contrast, experiencing high levels of parental conflict sends the message to offspring that it is only acceptable to leave a marriage when under much distress and discord. Additionally, parental conflict and divorce may

serve to make offspring feel more ambivalent about intimate relationships, as Jacquet and Surra (2001) found when comparing a sample of young women from divorced homes to young women from intact homes.

*Relationship efficacy.* Self-efficacy and relationship confidence also have been implicated as potential mechanisms in the association between parents' relationships and offspring's relationships. Segrin and Taylor (2006) found that parental divorce was predictive of lower appraisals of partner relational efficacy for men and diminished beliefs in the feasibility of lifelong marriage for both men and women. Similarly, Whitton and colleagues (2008) assessed links between relationship confidence and parental divorce and conflict in engaged couples and found that women's parental divorce was associated with lower relationship confidence. These effects remained even after controlling for parental conflict levels and premarital relationship adjustment. Whitton and colleagues (2008) also found that women with divorced parents entered into relationships with lower levels of confidence in the future of those marriages, perhaps leading to lower levels of commitment in those relationships compared with women with continuously-married parents.

### *Current Study*

A missing ingredient in this field of literature examining intergenerational relationship patterns is a study that simultaneously investigates both cognitions and learned behaviors to determine their relative influence upon offspring relationship functioning. Exploring how such cognitions might influence relationship functioning relative to the role of communication behaviors in those who have witnessed interparental conflict may lead to more targeted interventions for such individuals.

Thus, the current study contributes to existing literature in its unique examination of the

relationships between interparental conflict, offspring's cognitions about relationships, learned communication behaviors, and current relationship functioning in an all-inclusive model. This model also examines the moderating roles of offspring gender, parental divorce, and offspring's attachment style as additional potential influences upon offspring's relationship functioning.

Thus, as illustrated in Figure 1<sup>1</sup>, this study hypothesized that, firstly, offsprings' attitudes toward marriage and perceived degree of control over their own future marriage (or feelings of self-efficacy over relationship success) will mediate the relationship between perceived interparental conflict and current relationship satisfaction and secondly, that this relationship will hold true while controlling for current communication patterns in the offsprings' current relationship, an example of behaviors potentially learned from parental interactions. Finally, the third purpose of the current study was to explore whether these relationships are robust across gender and parental marital status (divorced vs. continuously married). Specifically, it was hypothesized that the relationships between parental conflict, cognitions, behavior, and offspring's current relationship satisfaction would remain the same regardless of gender and parental marital status.

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<sup>1</sup> All table and figures appear in the appendix.



## CHAPTER 2: METHOD

### *Participants*

Data were drawn from a sample of 389 undergraduate students participating in the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce and Relational Discord study at the University of Tennessee. Participants were excluded from analyses if they were not romantically involved at the time of data collection, leaving a final  $n$  of 229 participants. The average length of participants' relationships was 17.9 months. Participants' ages ranged from 18-27 years of age. The sample was predominately female (78.9%) and of Caucasian descent (84.2%). Other ethnicities represented in the sample included participants of African-American descent (8.8%), Asian descent (2.6%), Hispanic descent (2.2%), and those who identified as "other" (.9%). The average family-of-origin yearly income for participants was approximately \$75,000. Participants' average accumulated years of education at the time of study participation was 13.6 years (or a little over one year of college). 28.4% of participants' parents were divorced (including those that reported their parents were currently separated), and of those with divorced parents, the average age at parental divorce was 8.4 years of age, with 75% of participants reporting that they were age 13 or younger at parental divorce.

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited to participate in a study of beliefs about relationships and relationship functioning from introductory psychology classes in exchange for research credit. Participants completed questionnaire packets at a single time point in our research lab. The questionnaires took an average time of 45 minutes to complete. This study was approved by the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board.

### *Measures*

*Children's Perceptions of Interparental Conflict Scale* (CPIC, Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). This 48-item scale assessed participants' views of nine dimensions of interparental conflict: frequency, intensity, resolution, content, perceived threat, coping efficacy, self-blame, triangulation, and stability. The CPIC has demonstrated adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's alphas for its three scales of Conflict Properties, Threat, and Self-Blame well over the .70 recommended for research use. Test-retest correlations over a two-week period are also acceptable, ranging from .68 (Threat) to .76 (Self-Blame). The acceptable concurrent and criterion validity of the CPIC have also been demonstrated in comparison to measures of parent-rated marital conflict and child adjustment. For the current study's purposes, the Conflict Properties scale was used as a measure of offsprings' perceptions of interparental conflict. This scale is made up of interparental conflict dimensions of frequency, intensity, and resolution, which, in the current study, had Cronbach's alphas of .85, .88, and .90, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha for Conflict Properties scale in the current study was .96. The CPIC has been validated for use with an older adolescent population (tested with individuals 17 to 21 years of age) where it was found to have a factor structure similar to that of a younger sample, with good reliability and external validity (Bickham & Fiese, 1997).

*Marriage Expectations Survey* (Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001). This survey was used to assess participants' expectations and optimism regarding marriage. Nine items used in the survey are from the Attitudes Toward Marriage Scale (ATMS), a self-report questionnaire that measures the expectations regarding the quality of one's own future marriage (Wallin, 1954). Two items used in the survey are from a revised version of the 1954 ATMS (Kinnaird & Gerrard, 1986). The revised version of the ATMS has a Cronbach's alpha of .88 and a test-retest reliability score of .87. The Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .83.

*Perceptions of Relationship Control Questionnaire* (Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001). This 6-item questionnaire measured the degree of control participants felt over their own future marriage. Three of the items were worded such that agreement indicated greater perceived control (e.g., “If I work at my marriage hard enough, it will not end in divorce”), and three were worded such that agreement indicated less perceived control (e.g., “If my marriage is successful, it will probably be a matter of luck”). Responses to the six items were made using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The three low control items were reverse scored. Higher total scores reflected greater perceived control. The Cronbach’s alpha for this scale in the current study was not strong (.58).

*Communication Patterns Questionnaire, Constructive Communication Subscale* (Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996). This 7-item scale is taken from the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), which is a 35-item questionnaire that measures the communication patterns of participants and their romantic partners during conflict. Each item is rated on a Likert-type scale that ranges from *very unlikely* (1) to *very likely* (9). The Constructive Communication subscale of the CPQ consists of the sum of three items assessing constructive communication behaviors minus the sum of four items assessing destructive communication behaviors. The three items assessing constructive communication behaviors were 1) mutual discussion, 2) mutual expression, and 3) mutual negotiation. The four items assessing destructive communication behaviors were 1) mutual blame, 2) mutual threat, 3) verbal aggression committed by the male, and 4) verbal aggression committed by the female. Heavey et al. (1996) found high internal consistency for both male and female reports (.84 and .81, respectively) and a high level of spousal agreement ( $r(70) = .67, p < .001$ ). High criterion validity and construct validity also were found. The Cronbach’s alpha for the Constructive

Communication subscale in the current study was .74.

*Satisfaction Index* (Simpson, 1987). This 11-item questionnaire measured participants' satisfaction with their current romantic partner across 12 domains: the partner's financial resources, physical attractiveness, ability to provide emotional support, reliability/trustworthiness, similarity of attitude and values, ability to be kind and understanding, activity interests, stability and pleasantness of personality, social status, ability to be close and intimate, and his/her sexual attractiveness. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unsatisfactory) to 7 (very satisfactory). Taken together, these items form a reliable index of relationship satisfaction, as indicated by its Cronbach's alpha of .85 (Simpson, 1987). The Cronbach's alpha for the Satisfaction Index in the current study was .82.

## CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

### *Data Analytic Strategy*

Study hypotheses were examined using a path analysis within a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework estimated in AMOS. Out of the 389 participants, 229 participants completed the Relationship Satisfaction measure, and therefore our sample size for the path analyses was limited to an  $n$  of 229, which remains a large sample for SEM (Kline, 2005). Fit indices used to evaluate the path models included  $\chi^2$ , Comparative Fit Index (*CFI*), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (*RMSEA*). A model is considered a good fit when  $\chi^2 / df < 2.0$ , *CFI*  $> .95$  and *RMSEA*  $< .06$  (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1999). An *M*-test of the indirect effects further evaluates significant mediation effects (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). Pearson correlations, means, and standard deviations of all study scales are presented in Table 1.

### *Mediation*

The current study's first model examined perceived degree of control over relationship success, attitudes toward marriage, and communication patterns as mediators of the relationship between perceived interparental conflict and current relationship satisfaction. The estimated model provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 (1) = .29, p = .59, CFI = 1.0$ , and *RMSEA*  $< .01$ ).<sup>2</sup> As illustrated in Figure 2, perceived interparental conflict was negatively associated with attitudes toward marriage ( $\beta = -.10, p < .05$ ), which was in turn positively associated with current relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ) (see Figure 2). An *M*-test of the indirect effects supported this mediation pathway ( $\beta = -.04$ , 95% confidence limits =  $-.001 - -.07$ ).

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<sup>2</sup> To provide a more stringent test of mediation, an additional model was estimated which included the direct path between the independent variable of perceived level of interparental conflict and the dependent variable of current relationship satisfaction, which resulted in a just-identified model. Therefore model comparisons could not be made. However, the perceived level of interparental conflict was not significantly related to current relationship satisfaction, suggesting full mediation.

Perceived interparental conflict did not predict degree of control over relationship success or communication patterns. Perceived degree of control over relationship success did not significantly predict current relationship satisfaction. However, both attitudes toward marriage ( $\beta = .36, p < 0.01$ ) and communication patterns ( $\beta = .38, p < 0.01$ ) significantly predicted current relationship satisfaction. Thus, path analyses showed that attitudes toward marriage accounted for the relationship between perceived interparental conflict and current relationship satisfaction, even after accounting for communication patterns.

To decompose these relationships further, the interparental conflict scale was broken down into its three components (resolution, frequency, and intensity of interparental conflict) and three additional path models were estimated with these as individual predictors. Of these three components of interparental conflict, only resolution predicted attitudes toward marriage and communication patterns. As seen in Figure 3, path analyses showed that both attitudes toward marriage ( $\beta = -.33, p = .01$ ) and communication patterns ( $\beta = -.29, p < .05$ ) were negatively associated with interparental conflict resolution and were positively associated with current relationship satisfaction (attitudes toward marriage:  $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ; communication patterns:  $\beta = .38, p < .01$ ) (see Figure 3). An *M*-test of the indirect effects showed that only attitudes toward marriage accounted for the relationship between parental conflict resolution and offspring's current relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.12, 95\%$  confidence limits =  $-.01 - -.23$ ). Therefore, attitudes toward marriage accounted for the relationship between perceived interparental conflict resolution and current relationship satisfaction, even after accounting for communication patterns.

### *Moderation*

A multiple group model strategy was used to examine whether relationships varied across

gender and parental marital status (divorced versus continuously married). First, models were run with paths free to vary across groups. Then, paths were constrained to be equal across groups. Constraining paths to be equal across groups did not cause a significant decrement in model fit in all models, suggesting that the findings were similar across gender and parental marital status (gender:  $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 12.68, p > .05$ ; divorce:  $\Delta\chi^2(9) = 5.85; p > .05$ ).

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

These results show that offspring's views of relationships appear to be just as important as learned behaviors in understanding the intergenerational transmission of relational discord; offsprings' attitudes toward marriage predicted their current relationship satisfaction even while controlling for the influence of a learned behavior such as communication patterns. These results attest to the significance of social cognitions in relationships and their influential role in current relationship functioning for individuals, particularly for those with discordant parents.

### *Roles of Relationship Cognitions and Behaviors*

The relationship between interparental conflict resolution and offspring's current relationship satisfaction was also mediated by attitudes toward marriage, while controlling for communication patterns. Therefore, it seems (at least in this current study) that the *resolution* of interparental conflict, as opposed to the frequency and intensity of conflict, is what may be most influential to offspring relationship functioning. Observing constructive conflict resolution in parents is likely to reinforce positive views of marital relationships and may also lead offspring to model positive behavioral skills in relationships. Thus, offspring would learn that conflict can be effectively managed in relationships and that relationships can survive disagreements. However, as this finding was assessed in post-hoc analyses, replication is required for confidence in its accuracy.

Interparental conflict frequency and intensity were not associated with offsprings' reports of their communication patterns in their own relationships; strikingly, this finding is not congruent with previous research that has found overall interparental conflict to be related to offsprings' relationship communication behaviors (e.g., Whitton, Waldinger, Schulz, Allen, & Crowell, 2008). However, Segrin and Taylor (2006) also found a lack of association between



parental divorce and offspring communication behaviors. It is highly likely that this difference could be due to methodology, as the current study and Segrin and Taylor's (2006) study used self-report measures of communication patterns whereas many previous studies coded observed behavioral interactions between both couple members. However, the self-report measure used in this study to assess constructive communication has been found to be strongly associated with observer ratings of actual constructive communication during videotaped problem-solving discussions between couples and was found to be significantly related to couples' self-reported marital adjustment (Heavey, et al., 1996).

Offspring's perceptions of control over relationship success were not associated with either interparental conflict or their own relationship satisfaction. One of the more prominent reasons for this disconnect may very well be the disorganization of the measure used in the current study, as evidenced by its poor internal reliability. The six items of the measure, meant to form a continuum of scores for individuals who perceive a great deal of control over their relationships versus individuals who feel very little control, instead may pinpoint two very different but not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts—the beliefs that relationships succeed due to “luck” versus relationships that succeed due to “hard work.” These potentially coexisting constructs might prevent this questionnaire from measuring the specific construct of perceptions of control over the future of relationships, which might then preclude meaningful associations with other constructs. Newer measures, such as the Relationship Efficacy Questionnaire developed by Whitton and colleagues (2008), may more accurately pinpoint the cognition of relationship efficacy.

It is likely that relationship cognitions and behaviors are interwoven and mutually influence one another. Future research should investigate these bidirectional pathways and

determine any specific routes of influence within these pathways. For example, do parental relationships impact cognitions about relationships which then shape relationship behaviors later in life, or are behaviors learned from observing parents, displayed in the offspring's own relationships, thereby shaping their relationship cognitions? Alternatively, are both pathways active in the intergenerational process? Further, research by Conger, Cui, Bryant, and Elder (2000) shows that parent-child nurturance predicted offspring's interpersonal competence in romantic relationships. Many parents, especially mothers, are able to maintain close and supportive relationships with their children even in the midst of marital conflict and divorce; these solid relationships may serve as protective and consistent models for offspring, reminding them of the potential stability of relationships (thus reinforcing positive and optimistic cognitions about relationships) and serving as foundations for positive and constructive interpersonal skills (thus modeling the necessary behavioral skills for maintaining healthy relationships).

#### *Gender and Parental Marital Status*

The findings did not provide evidence of moderation by gender or parental marital status. This lack of moderation indicates the robustness of these results, as they do not appear to differ for offspring despite variations of these important variables in this sample. Particularly remarkable is the lack of moderation by parental marital status; as argued earlier in this paper, this study adds to other recent research that emphasizes the influence of interparental conflict, rather than the occurrence of parental divorce, upon offspring relationship beliefs and outcomes. These results differ from those reported by Amato and Deboer (2001), which suggested that there is something unique about the combination of parental divorce and parental conflict.

When taken together, some previous studies suggest that parental divorce and discord paint a bleak picture for the future of offspring's own relationships, but this study contributes to

noteworthy research that focuses on the protective and adaptive role of interparental conflict for some offspring. Amato (2003) states that Judith Wallerstein's well-known claims that parental divorce usually results in psychologically troubled individuals that find it difficult to maintain stable and satisfying relationships is misleading and countered by those who believe the effects of divorce to not be as strong as Wallerstein claims. A number of studies provide evidence in agreement with this assertion. Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, and Maurer (2001) portray social cognitions formed as a result of parental divorce as protective factors in that integrative perceptions of parental divorce in young Israeli adults were related to fewer problems in their own relationships and predicted higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, and intimacy in their own relationships. Similarly, Segrin and Taylor (2006) found that couples with a history of parental divorce appeared more accurate in appraising each other's relational efficacy in comparison with couples without a history of parental divorce.

This phenomenon may be explained by Antonovsky and Sourani's (1988) assertion that a sense of coherence (or an integrative understanding of why an event, such as parental divorce, happened) may buffer individuals from relational stressors, thereby providing a sense of manageability of stressors because they are understandable and predictable. This assertion corresponds well with this current study's finding of the significance of interparental conflict resolution in our mediation model of attitudes toward marriage and relationship satisfaction; these results suggest that viewing the effective resolution of interparental conflict presents the parents' conflicts as *understandable* and *predictable* to offspring, thereby potentially decreasing fear and trepidation of their own future relationships and marriage. This integrative understanding of parental relationships may play a role in determining the neutral and/or positive consequences for offspring of divorced parents found in studies such as Riggio's (2004) which

explore positive outcomes for offspring with divorced parents.

### *Limitations*

There were several limitations to this study. In addition to those discussed above, data were collected at a single time point, which only enabled a snapshot view into the potential complexity of how offspring's cognitions and behaviors interact and are influenced by parental relationships. Additionally, interparental conflict was measured by offspring's self-report of their own recollections of their parents' interactions. A more accurate measurement of interparental conflict would include the parents' own input on their own relationships and the addition of their perception of conflict exposed to their offspring, and if possible, the observance of parental interactions during the offspring's childhood and adolescence. Also, the current study lacks data on offspring's partners' views of their relationships and thus how their relationship behaviors and cognitions are influential in within the context of their relationship as a whole. Finally, relationship behaviors were not directly observed but examined through participants' self-reports, which may be inherently biased.

Further, the characteristics of our sample demographics should be noted. While the race distribution and family-of-origin income distribution were representative of the geographical area in which the study took place and the average level of education was consistent with the college-student sample obtained, the sample is not necessarily representative of an average young adult living in the United States. This caution is strengthened by the fact that the majority of the sample was female, and though moderation by gender was explored, the limited number of male participants prevents a confident conclusion of applicability of the results to both genders.

### *Future Directions*

The study of the intergenerational transmission of relational discord still has quite a bit of

ground to cover in its examination of the mechanisms of intimate relationship patterns between parents and their children. Research trends have progressed from examining the effects of parental divorce upon children to the more focused effects of parental conflict upon children and accompanying that shift are more detailed perspectives on how and why offspring may repeat or break free from the fate of their parents' relationships. There is room for much improvement in the methodology of how these questions are currently being explored, including in this study; many of these studies fail to account for parental conflict when examining the effects of parental divorce upon offspring, and too often divorce is treated as a negative, static variable. In fact, divorce is multi-faceted and has diverse effects upon offspring depending on each family's situation and characteristics of the offspring themselves. Variables such as the amount of parental conflict to which the offspring is exposed, the comparison of familial conditions both before and after parental divorce, and characterological qualities the offspring possess, such as type of attachment style and level of coherence regarding their parents' relationship, all might interact to produce a multitude of effects upon families and offspring that are both positive and negative.

Past studies have also relied heavily upon self-report data, again, including this study, which is problematic when considering that much of the information gathered about parental conflict is from participants' recollections of their childhood rather than from longitudinal designs or from actual behavioral observations of both parental interactions and offspring relationship interactions. Additionally, our understanding of why offspring with histories of parental marital discord tend to have increased relational discord in their own relationships would benefit from the integration of how social cognitions and learned behaviors interact and mutually influence relationship outcomes in such individuals, and more precisely, the

directionality of these associations. It is unlikely that cognitions are the sole mediators of the relationship between parental discord and offspring relationship functioning just as it is unlikely that offspring are simply repeating learned behaviors without cognitively processing their parents' relationships. The more we learn about mediating and moderating relationships within the intergenerational transmission of relationship discord, the more we will understand the development of romantic relationships in general and the origins of relationship conflict and problems.

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**APPENDIX**

Table 1

*Pearson Correlations between Interparental Conflict, Conflict Intensity, Conflict Frequency, and Conflict Resolution, Attitudes toward Marriage, Perceived Relationship Control, Communication Patterns, and Current Relationship Satisfaction with Means and Standard Deviations*

	Mean	S.D.	Conflict	Intensity	Freq.	Resol.	Attitudes	Control	Comm.	Satis.
Conflict	32.56	10.48								
Intensity	11.81	4.07	.92**							
Freq.	10.79	3.49	.94**	.81**						
Resol.	9.96	3.76	.92**	.74**	.81**					
Attitudes	34.01	7.27	-.15*	-.13	-.11	-.17*				
Control	22.98	3.49	-.07	-.04	-.08	-.08	.40**			
Comm.	11.79	7.86	-.10	-.08	-.06	-.14*	.35**	.16*		
Satis.	66.20	7.27	-.13	-.15*	-.08	-.11	.52**	.25**	.54**	

Notes: \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \* =  $p < .05$

Figure 1

*Model representing the relationships between variables in the current study*

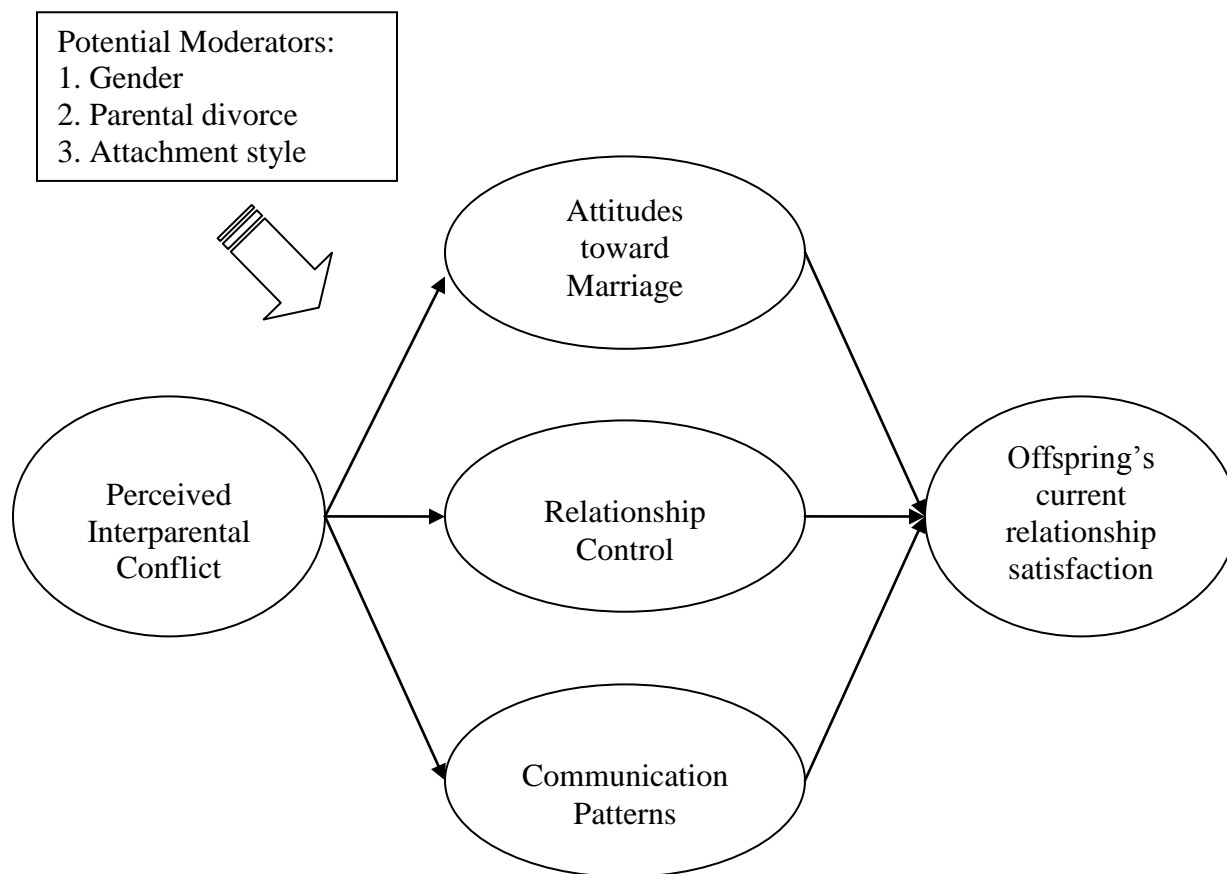
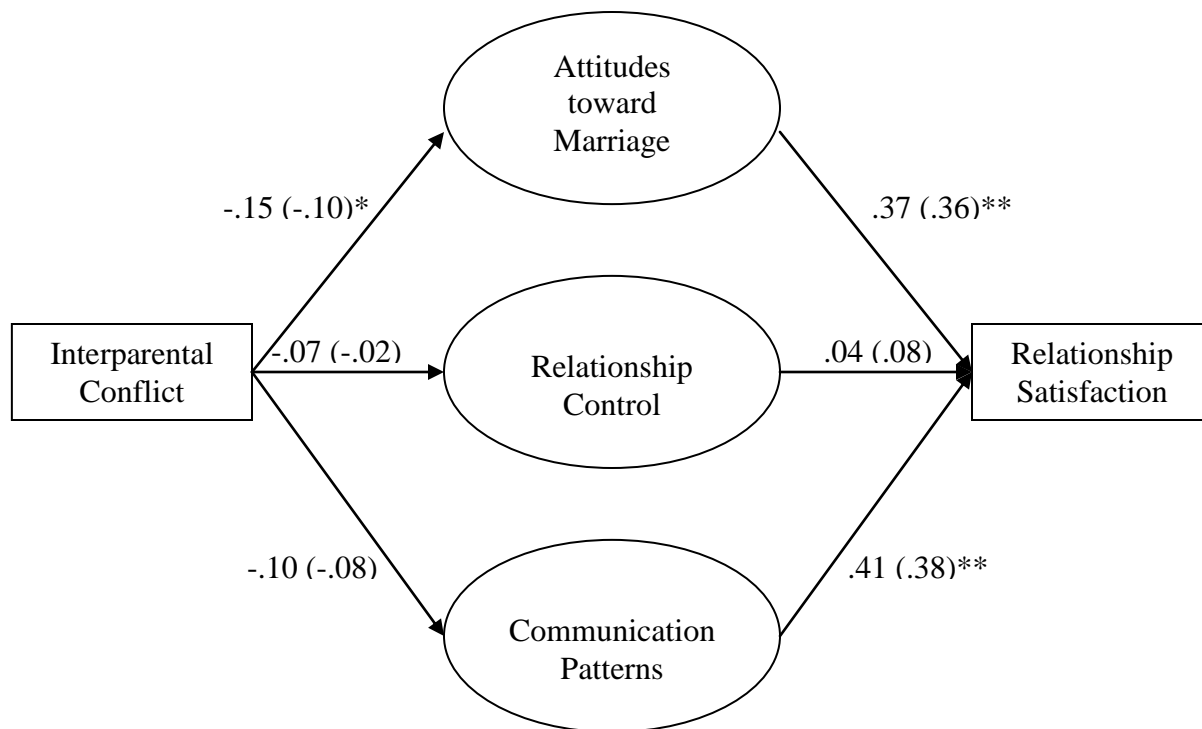




Figure 2

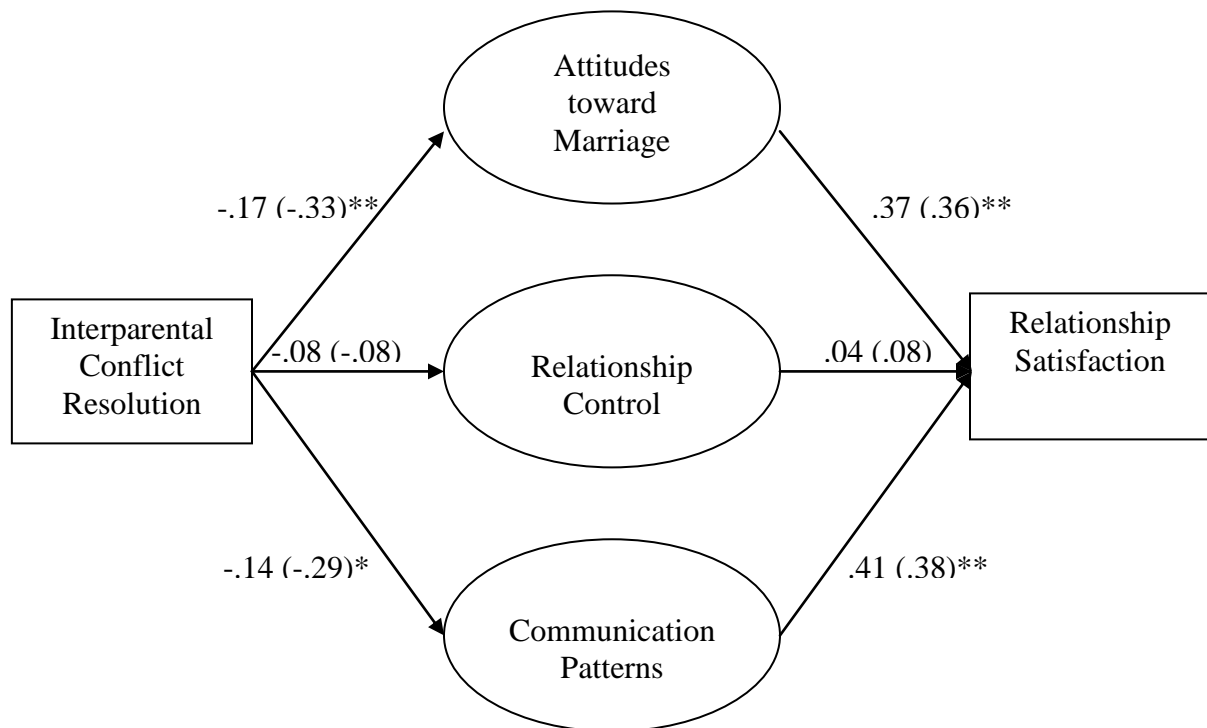
*Model of the Mediational Relationships between Interparental Conflict, Attitudes toward Marriage, Perceptions of Control in Relationships, Communication Patterns, and Current Relationship Satisfaction*



Notes:  $** = p < .01$ ,  $* = p < .05$ ; standardized (unstandardized); residual covariances not included for clarity purposes

Figure 3

*Model of the Meditational Relationships between Interparental Conflict Resolution, Attitudes toward Marriage, Perceptions of Control in Relationships, Communication Patterns, and Current Relationship Satisfaction*



Notes:  $** = p < .01$ ,  $* = p < .05$ ; standardized (unstandardized); residual covariances not included for clarity purposes

## VITA

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