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Relational Uncertainty Management in Adult Children of Divorce

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Abstract

Utilizing uncertainty management theory (UMT) and a multiple goals theory of personal relationships (MGPR) the present study examined how adult children of divorce (ACOD) manage relational uncertainty following parental divorce. In-depth, semistructured interviews with 25 adult children who had experienced parental divorce when they were 18 years of age or older revealed two broad types of information acquisition strategies: deliberate (i.e., information-seeking and information-avoiding) and incidental (i.e., incidental information acquisition). Deliberate information acquisition strategies were animated by several goals, including reducing and maintaining uncertainty, avoiding feeling caught, and protection. Alongside goals, various constraints (e.g., target efficacy, coping efficacy) played a role in ACOD's relational uncertainty management. We discuss these results in relation to their theoretical and practical applications.

Keywords: parental divorce, multiple goals, relational uncertainty, parent-adult child relationships, uncertainty management, adult children of divorce (ACOD)

Despite the negative socioemotional consequences associated with parental divorce (e.g., identity, relational outcomes, happiness; Amato, 1999, 2010; Cookston & Remy, 2015), scholars have identified communication as a key resource for mitigating detrimental outcomes

and promoting resilience. Within the parent-adolescent relationship, open communication tends to promote coping, sense-making, and positive post-divorce adjustment (Afifi, Huber, & Ohs, 2006; Morrison, Fife, & Hertlein, 2017). Although studied to a lesser extent, communication is likely important for another demographic grappling with parental divorce—adult children—as it has unique, family-level implications stemming from the intersection of adult children’s and parent’s life stages (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). The bulk of scholarship examining *adult children of divorce* (ACOD), adult children who were 18 years of age or older when their parents divorced, has focused on how demographic or geographic factors, such as parent sex and coresidence, impact adult children’s filial responsibilities, including support provisions to aging/ailing parents and intergenerational relational maintenance following parental divorce (Kalmijn, 2013; Lin, 2008). Illuminating the role of communication as a valuable resource that could help buffer ACOD and their parents from these potentially negative ramifications could further enrich scholars’ and practitioners’ understanding of parental divorce in later life.

One aspect of post-divorce communication that may be particularly impactful is how ACOD manage relational uncertainty stemming from their parents’ divorce. Although some adult children may experience positive (or neutral) outcomes as a result of their parents separation (e.g., Greenwood, 2012), adult children overwhelmingly report difficulties following parental divorce occurring in adulthood, such as questioning long-standing and formative relationships, behaviors, and memories (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Mikucki-Enyart, Wilder, & Barber, 2017). Additionally, the intersection of parental divorce and ACOD’s normative stressors, such as marriage, parenting, and perhaps their own divorce, creates an atmosphere of interwoven doubt, interference, and relational strain (Cooney, 1994). Unfortunately, relational uncertainty often complicates relationships, stanching effective conversations, obfuscating meaning, and reducing satisfaction and a sense of family connection (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009; Mikucki-Enyart, Caughlin, & Rittenour, 2015). These negative consequences may weaken family solidarity (Ganong & Coleman, 2006), resulting in ACOD being less inclined to provide support to aging/ailing parents (Amato, Rezac, & Booth, 1995) and facilitate relational maintenance between generations (Westphal, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2015). Given these potentially serious consequences, it is important to illuminate communicative strategies that may help ACOD successfully manage relational uncertainty. The present study achieves this aim by utilizing uncertainty management theory to understand how ACOD manage relational uncertainty following parental divorce. Elucidating how ACOD manage doubts following parental divorce may reveal communication strategies that can help adult children and their parents navigate the post-divorce terrain successfully.

Relational uncertainty management

Despite a lengthy relational history, family relationships are not immune from periods of doubt. In fact, *relational uncertainty*, relational partners’ degree of confidence about involvement within the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), infiltrates even the most established familial bonds (e.g., siblings, parent-child; Bevan, Stetzenbach, Batson, & Bullo, 2006; Mikucki-Enyart, 2012). Relational uncertainty may center on questions regarding one’s

own involvement (*self uncertainty*) or the partner's involvement (*partner uncertainty*) in the relationship, or the relationship in general, including the future of the relationship or norms for interaction (*relationship uncertainty*). Although ambiguity may arise at any turn, periods of flux, both anticipated and unexpected, tend to amplify the experience of relational uncertainty (Solomon & Theiss, 2011).

The dissolution of a family unit understandably generates a multitude of relational questions as children confront concerns about the redefinition of family roles and boundaries (e.g., Hetherington, 1999). Although the negative effects of parental divorce are generally weak for adult children (Amato & Keith, 1991), recent research has revealed myriad uncertainties ACOD experience after parental divorce (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017), such as concerns about the parent-child relationship, the parent as an individual, the future of the family system, and the divorce itself. Similar to adolescents, ACOD wrestle with "feeling caught" (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) and renegotiating family rituals (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017). However, other uncertainties reflect nuance of the ACOD context, such as uncertainty regarding family and individual identity (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017). For instance, ACOD reported experiencing doubt over their family's history in the wake of parental divorce, making them question who they *were* as a family and who they *are* going forward. Additionally, ACOD have to balance the dissolution of their family-of-origin alongside other normative developmental stressors, such as their own journey into marriage and parenthood, resulting in a cacophony of uncertainties and patterns of interference (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986). Mikucki-Enyart et al. (2017), for instance, found that adult children's uncertainty over post-divorce family dynamics interfered with their ability to plan family celebrations, such as their own weddings or their birthday parties.

Unfortunately, the experience of relational uncertainty impedes effective communication (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). As a result, individuals wrestling with doubts may find themselves unable to communicatively manage their uncertainty (Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009). The inability to effectively manage uncertainty may prevent ACOD from effectively coping and adapting following the divorce. Illuminating strategies adult children employ to manage relational uncertainty may illuminate patterns of "adaptive uncertainty management" (Brashers et al., 2000, p. 66). Additionally, identifying effective uncertainty management behaviors may isolate strategies that can buffer adult children and divorced parents from the negative effects of divorce such as decreased filial obligation (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Sutor, 2012), which can have implications on support provision for aging parents and intergenerational bonds.

Uncertainty management theory

In contrast to seminal theories of uncertainty (e.g., uncertainty reduction theory, Berger & Calabrese, 1975), which argued that uncertainty was negative and needed to be reduced, uncertainty management theory (UMT; Brashers, 2001) reasoned that uncertainty is not always detrimental and could, in fact, be beneficial. Individuals appraise uncertainty as either positive or negative and this evaluation, not the uncertainty itself, shapes if and how they acquire information related to the uncertainty provoking phenomenon or event (Brashers, 2001). In other words, the valence of uncertainty shapes *information acquisition behaviors*

(Hogan & Brashers, 2009). A corpus of research has identified two primary information acquisition strategies—*information-seeking* and *information-avoiding* (Brashers, 2001; Hogan & Brashers, 2009). When uncertainty is appraised negatively, it is cast as a danger that needs to be attenuated and inspires a hunt for information via information-seeking behaviors. When evaluated positively, *uncertainty* is preferable to certainty and encourages information-avoidance strategies, which are employed to maintain or increase uncertainty (Brashers, 2001).

Families grappling with divorce tend to embrace both strategies (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Clarity provided from information-seeking can help children cope and reduce uncertainty around key post-divorce tasks like renegotiating family bonds and boundaries (Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995; Westberg, Nelson, & Piercy, 2002). Additionally, open communication about uncertainty may increase intimacy between ACOD and their parents (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), an outcome that appears critical to continued support exchange between generations (Fingerman et al., 2012). Too much information, however, such as the impetus for divorce or slanderous disclosures regarding the other parent, may do more harm than good and damage the parent-child relationship (Afifi, Schrodt, & McManus, 2009). In fact, similar to adolescents, unfettered openness surrounding parental divorce leads to ACOD “feeling caught” (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2017). As a result, adult children often find themselves forming an alliance with one parent, typically the mother, resulting in estrangement from their fathers (Kalmijn, 2017; Shapiro, 2003). This relational distance is worrisome as it may preclude fathers from receiving various forms of support as they age (Kalmijn, 2017). Distant parent-adult child bonds also affect adult children and their offspring. A weakened (or estranged) parent-adult child relationship may eliminate a key source of support for adult children (e.g., babysitting, financial help; Block, 2002; Landry-Meyer, 1999) and deprive grandchildren of the benefits associated with rich intergenerational bonds (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Given the role uncertainty management plays in coping and adaptation (Brashers et al., 2000) and the potential family-level consequences associated with ineffective uncertainty management, elucidating the information acquisition strategies ACOD employ to manage relational uncertainty may prove to be useful in helping them and their families regain equilibrium after an unexpected detour in the family trajectory. Therefore, a first research question attends to ACOD’s relational uncertainty management:

RQ1: How do ACOD utilize information acquisition strategies to manage relational uncertainty?

Goals and information acquisition

Although appraisals of uncertainty play a central role in guiding information acquisition, Hogan and Brashers (2009) argued that “uncertainty or lack of information may be necessary, but not sufficient, to stimulate information seeking” (p. 51) and by extension, we argue, information avoidance. Hogan and Brashers further asserted that information acquisition—both seeking and avoiding information—is goal-oriented. Previous UMT research provides indirect evidence to support this claim. Colaner and Kranstuber’s (2010) study of adoptees’ uncertainty management hints that decisions to seek or avoid information are animated by their interaction goals. For instance, adoptees desired information about their

birth mothers but were apprehensive to seek information for fear of hurting their adoptive parents. In other words, information avoidance was utilized as a way to achieve the aim of other protection. Research by Mikucki-Enyart and Caughlin (2018) provides more direct evidence for the goal-oriented nature of information acquisition decisions and demonstrated that under conditions of relational uncertainty in-laws' interaction goal of maintaining rather than reducing uncertainty was a more proximal predictor of their topic avoidance than relational uncertainty alone. Taken together, these results suggest information acquisition behaviors are strategic and purposeful.

As a result, we nominate a multiple goals theory of personal relationships (MGPR; Caughlin, 2010) as a useful lens for examining ACOD's information acquisition. MGPR (Caughlin, 2010) notes that all communication is strategic with goals, or "desired end states" (Berger, 2004), operating both within and outside of conscious awareness (Chartrand & Bargh, 1996) to shape communication behaviors (Dillard, 2008; Wilson, 2002). As such, ACOD's goals may be accessible and salient to them or they may be unaware that their approach to information acquisition is driven by a desire to attain aims. ACOD likely have myriad goals when seeking or avoiding information following their parents' divorce. Seeking information, for instance, may help ACOD attain instrumental goals (Clark & Delia, 1979), such as gaining clarity about the divorce process or future family functioning (e.g., rituals, holiday celebration). Avoiding information may be prudent when identity and relationship goals are salient (Clark & Delia, 1979; Mikucki-Enyart & Caughlin, 2018). Similar to adoptees (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010), adult children may avoid information in an effort to protect their (or their parent's) identity and to buffer the relationship from potential harm resulting from an information search (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005). Furthermore, given that goals often occur in concert, adult children likely wrestle with multiple aims simultaneously (Berger, 2005; Caughlin, 2010; Dillard, 2008). For instance, adult children may want to reduce uncertainty about an upcoming holiday celebration (instrumental goal), but the desire to preserve the parent-child relationship (relationship goal) or not tarnish their own image by bungling the search for information (identity goal) may prompt them to avoid information despite a desire to clarity. Thus, numerous aims likely undergird ACOD's information acquisition.

Understanding the goals that animate specific information-acquisition strategies can help isolate situations in which information-seeking or information-avoiding would be most appropriate and beneficial. As such, a second research question examines the aims underpinning ACOD's information acquisition:

RQ2: What goals do ACOD report as animating their information acquisition strategies?

Method

Situated within a larger investigation on ACOD this study focuses on adult children's relational uncertainty management. Participants engaged in semi-structured, in-depth interviews which afforded a situated understanding of participant's relational uncertainty management following parental divorce (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Spradley, 1979).

Participants

ACOD ($N = 25$) were recruited through snowball sampling, advertising on social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), and an email sent to university staff, faculty, and students. Participants were eligible for participation if (a) their parents divorced when they were 18 years of age or older, and (b) they were living independently from their parents at the time of divorce, in an effort to minimize potential issues presented by co-residency (Cooney, 1994; Troilo & Coleman, 2013). Ultimately, 18 women and 7 men participated in one-on-one interviews. During the interview process, it was revealed that two participants provided inaccurate information during their prescreening interview and were ineligible for participation. These interviews were completed and participants received their incentive, but data from these individuals were omitted from analysis. Thus, the final sample consisted of 23 ACOD ($n = 17$ women, $n = 6$ men).

At the time of the interview, participants were on average 30 years old (*range* 21–55 years, $SD = 9.02$ years). The sample was entirely White (100%) and highly educated, with most participants either currently attending college (30%) or having earned a bachelor's or master's degree (66%). At the time of their parents' divorce, participants were, on average, in their early 20s ($M = 23.65$ years old, *range* 18–43 years, $SD = 5.67$ years) and were either married (44%) or seriously dating (44%) when their parents divorced, while a small percentage reported being single (12%). The majority of participants were childfree at the time of parental divorce (83%).

On average, it had been 6.32 years since participants' parents divorced (*range* 1 month–12 years, $SD = 5.79$) after a long marriage ($M = 27.37$ years, *range* 19–47 years, $SD = 6.17$ years). Mothers were, on average, 50 years old at the time of divorce (*range* 37–67, $SD = 7.50$) and fathers were 51 years old (*range* 41–68, $SD = 8.00$). At the time of the interviews, participants' mothers were 56 years old (*range* 41–79 years, $SD = 10.01$ years) and fathers were 57 years old (*range* 44–80 years, $SD = 9.88$ years). Parents were white (mothers, 100%; fathers, 100%) and had diverse educational backgrounds, with the majority of mother and fathers possessing a high school diploma (56%) or a college or advanced degree (30%). The majority of parents were not currently remarried (mothers, 17%; fathers 26%), while others were described as being in a committed, monogamous relationship (mothers, 13%; fathers, 9%).

Data collection

A team of three research assistants and the first author conducted interviews. Interviews took place in person, either at participants' homes or at a private room at the university, and over the phone. Once participants consented to participation, they provided demographic information about themselves and their parents (e.g., age, time since divorce, relationship status, etc.). Interview questions pertinent to the present study examined adult children's information acquisition strategies and their goals for employing said tactics. Specifically, participants reflected on their relational uncertainty management *during* the divorce process when answering the following questions: "How did you deal with the questions you had during your parents' divorce?"; "Did you want answers to your questions?"; and "Why did you (or didn't you) talk to them [parents] about these concerns?" Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary. Interviews lasted

between 45 minutes to 2 hours and were digitally recorded. All participants received \$20 in appreciation of their participation.

Data analysis

After transcribing the interviews verbatim, 486 pages of single-spaced, deidentified transcripts with pseudonyms assigned to ensure confidentiality, were uploaded into NVivo⁹ 10 (2012), a qualitative analysis software program. The NVivo software helped facilitate the constant comparative method, which allowed the authors to generate, collapse, and refine themes throughout the data analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Data analysis occurred in four stages. As an initial step, the first author created a preliminary codebook utilizing an *a priori* framework reflecting preexisting information acquisition strategies and potential goals undergirding these strategies. More specifically, following Brashers (2001) two primary information acquisition behaviors were identified—information seeking and information-avoiding—and used, in part, to code responses pertaining to the first research question (*RQ1*). Additionally, to assist in coding responses relevant to the second research question (*RQ2*) several potential goals for seeking and avoiding information, as identified in previous research, were delineated: uncertainty management (reduce or maintain; Brashers, 2001); communication efficacy (Afifi & Weiner, 2004); and protection (self, other, relationship; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b).

Next, the first author read the entire set of transcripts two times utilizing analytic induction (Bulmer, 1979) and constant comparison methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to determine if, and how, the initial *a priori* codebook needed to be modified based on participants' responses. At the same time, the second author, who was not part of the data collection process, read half of the transcripts independently to identify categories of information acquisition strategies and goals. The authors then met to discuss their codes. At this time, categories were defined, refined, and collapsed collaboratively (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A category was retained (or created) if more than 50% of participants reported experiencing that theme at least once. Following this criterion, all of the initial codes were retained. However, based on the first and second authors' readings of the transcripts additional categories were added to capture participants' experiences that were not reflected in the initial categorization scheme, specifically the theme of "incidental information acquisition" and the goals of "facilitate coping" and "avoid feeling caught." Analyses revealed two additional concerns affecting ACOD's relational uncertainty management—target efficacy and coping efficacy. Following the goals literature and our participants' experiences, these issues represented *constraints on* rather than *goals of* uncertainty management. Therefore, a new category was created and the initial coding scheme revised.¹ During the fourth phase, the second and third author (who was also not part of the data collection process) used the collaboratively created framework to code all 23 transcripts. The final phase of coding did not reveal any additional categories, suggesting verification and trustworthiness of the finalized coding scheme.

Results and discussion

Although separate research questions examined information acquisition strategies (*RQ1*) and goals undergirding these behaviors (*RQ2*), adult children's aims were inextricably linked to their experiences of enacting specific information acquisition strategies. Furthermore, in numerous instances ACOD reported constraints that influenced their relational uncertainty management process. Therefore, rather than artificially separate information acquisition strategies, goals, and constraints, we report them together as they not only reflect participants' experiences but also illustrate the rich tapestry that is relational uncertainty management.

Deliberate information-seeking, goals, and constraints

Participants ($n = 20$; 87%) reported engaging in *deliberate information-seeking*, the purposeful and intentional pursuit of information (Hogan & Hogan, 2009), when managing relational uncertainty. Adult children reported two goals for seeking information: (a) reduce uncertainty ($n = 15$; 65.2%) and (b) facilitate coping ($n = 20$; 87%). Echoing experiences of other participants, Ralph noted that acquiring information helped *reduce uncertainty* surrounding divorce-related doubts:

Like knowing for myself like curiosity, like, what did happen? Why did the relationship fail? How does this affect us? Like just getting basic questions answered and having the knowledge available if I wanted it, it just really put me at like, ease of mind and it let me focus on the more direct issue, which is my parents are getting divorced, and not focus on what going to happen to the house so on and so forth.

Like many participants who actively sought information, Ralph perceived relational uncertainty as a threat requiring attention (Brashers, 2001). Additionally, a lack of information obscured his ability to cope with his parents' divorce (Brashers, 2007). Thus, seeking information not only reduced uncertainty but also helped *facilitate coping* by providing emotional solace or closure (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Thomas et al., 1995; Westberg et al., 2002). Rose recounted a similar experience, noting that uncertainty regarding the reason for her parents' divorce was having a negative effect on her life and she was ". . . projecting a lot of their stuff into my own life," which motivated her to seek answers regarding why her parents were divorcing, "So I, wanted to umm, kind of know that so I could learn how to deal with it and move past that. Umm, so that someday I could find my own happiness." Thus, uncertainty reduction provided information that helped facilitate coping.

These exemplars also highlight another aspect of information acquisition that was salient for ACOD—emotional appraisals (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Brashers, 2001). Ralph's recollection that information "put me at like, ease of mind . . ." suggests that his uncertainty produced anxiety (Afifi & Weiner, 2004; Brashers, 2001), whereas Rose's uncertainty appeared to elicit sadness, which prompted a search for information in hopes of alleviating sorrow and finding happiness (Afifi & Morse, 2009). Consistent with tenets outlined by UMT and the theory of motivated information management (TMIM; Afifi & Weiner, 2004),

ACOD's uncertainty and emotional appraisals appeared to work together to shape information acquisition strategies. Although Ralph's and Rose's emotional appraisals were self-focused, the emotional valence of family-level uncertainties, such as continuing family rituals or sustained co-parenting of younger children, was important to ACOD as well. Margo, for instance, recalled, "I was always asking questions relating to parenting and how they were gonna make parenting work after the divorce, that was my main concern." Margo went on to say, "Most times they made sure to tell me that they had things planned out or that they were taking my brothers into account. So it made me feel better that they were thinking about that." Echoing other participants' experiences, uncertainty about family functioning provoked anxiety resulting in a quest for answers. The resultant information provided by Margo's parents not only reduced uncertainty and facilitated coping but also appeared to assuage her anxiety. Collectively, these results provided qualitative evidence to support the revised TMIM's supposition that uncertainty provokes myriad emotional responses and these appraisals work alongside uncertainty evaluations to shape information acquisition (Afifi & Morse, 2009).

Information-seeking and constraints

In addition to the explicit goals that animated information searches, ACODs reported additional considerations that guided their information-seeking behaviors—specifically, communication efficacy and target efficacy. Despite the aim to reduce uncertainty, not all participants were successful at achieving this goal. In fact, a lack of *communication efficacy* ($n = 12$; 52.2%), the ability to effectively search for information (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), was a recurrent theme among participants. Reflecting the experiences of others, Jane shared:

I wanted to talk to them about it [reason for the divorce], but I just didn't have the tools in my head to do it. You know, there is never an opportune time. So, it was frustrating that I, that I couldn't approach the subject with them.

Consistent with TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), participants' doubts about their ability to effectively seek information prevented them from engaging in direct searches for answers (Afifi & Weiner, 2006; Fowler & Afifi, 2011), and subsequently influenced their ability to attain goals, such as reducing uncertainty (Hogan & Brashers, 2009; Palomares, 2014). Similar to Jane who "didn't have the tools," Margo noted ". . . I didn't really know how to talk about it [the divorce]." The inability to achieve the aim of uncertainty reduction appeared to hamper adult children's ability to cope with the divorce. As Jane continued, she noted that if she would have been able to talk to her parents about questions she had regarding their divorce ". . . it wouldn't have, it wouldn't have been so bad, I think it still would've hurt, but I would have understood more what was going on." In goals parlance, a lack of communication efficacy would be viewed as a *constraint*, a behavioral expectation or guide (versus desired end state) that occurs across communicative encounters, influences goal pursuit behaviors, and are satisfied (rather than attained, like goals) to varying success (Kellerman, 2004; Palomares, 2014). Effectively seeking information, for instance, is an expectation of competence communication (McNeilis, 2001). The inability to satisfy this expectation prevented ACOD from seeking information even when desired. Moreover, these

results hint at the power of constraints given that they superseded emotional appraisals and the attainment of goals (e.g., reduce uncertainty or facilitate coping) that would help ACOD's post-divorce adjustment.

Interestingly, whereas communication efficacy stanchoned information-seeking, even when information was desired, another constraint, *target efficacy* ($n = 16$; 69.6%), parent(s) ability to provide detailed and truthful information (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), did not dissuade attempts at uncovering information. In fact, even when participants expected their parents to be less than forthright in their responses (*target honesty*, Afifi & Weiner, 2004; $n = 11$; 47.8%) they engaged in information seeking anyway, like Eddie who noted, "I felt like I asked the questions I needed to ask, like, like why? And they gave me an answer and even if it wasn't the whole answer it was sufficient," and Fiona who recalled information searches with her father "I could ask him and he would tell me, even if it was, mmm, kinda a worked around, walked around answer, he would still give me an answer." In these cases, it appears that acquiring some information was better than no information. Moreover, even if uncertainty was not fully reduced the sheer act of seeking information appeared to provide solace, as Carrie noted, "I don't think I got answers, but I got comfort and support." Reminiscent of studies on topic avoidance and emotional support which demonstrate that perceptions of behaviors are, at times, more powerful than enacted behaviors (e.g., I can discuss a topic but elect not to, or social support is available if I need it; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990), our results suggest that the veracity of information received was irrelevant and what was most important was that adult children were able to engage in information searches. For ACOD, feeling like they *can* engage in information-seeking may be viewed as a form of social support that helps facilitate coping (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004; Fisher et al., 2017).

Deliberate information-avoiding, goals, and constraints

Similar to information-seeking, adult children's *information avoidance* ($n = 19$; 82.6%) was active, deliberate, and "goal-oriented" (Hogan & Brashers, 2009, p. 52). Adult children reported purposefully evading conversations that would result in the revelation of unwanted information for three reasons: (a) maintain uncertainty, (b) avoid "feeling caught," and (c) protection. ACOD avoided seeking information to *maintain uncertainty* ($n = 19$; 82.6%) and prevent learning undesirable information about their parents, such as their role in the divorce or their behavior as a spouse. Kelly recalled wanting to be ". . . blissfully ignorant" regarding her parents' divorce. Additionally, Hannah recounted a desire to maintain uncertainty regarding allegations of domestic violence as the root of her parents' separation:

Uhhh, my dad's never mentioned it to me, my mom's never mentioned it to me. And so I kind of don't want to know about it because I can't do anything about it at this point. So I just would be curious, part of me wants to know, part of me doesn't . . . Those questions I don't think I'll ever really bring up. I think I'll just leave him alone and just move forward.

In these instances, uncertainty was preferred to certainty (Brashers, 2001) and adult children strategically avoided engaging in conversations that would reveal unwanted information. However, as noted by Hannah, the aim of maintaining uncertainty was not always straightforward and was often balanced against a desire to know information. When explaining her information avoidance, Fiona noted, "I don't know if I actually wanted to hear answers, like I want the answers, but I don't want to hear them." Similarly, Mary stated, "I did want answers, but in a sense, I didn't." That is, ACOD grappled with a dialectical tension of certainty/uncertainty (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), highlighting the competing goals that are often inherent in uncertainty management (Brashers, 2001). Interestingly, when competing goals arose, ACOD trended toward maintaining uncertainty (via information-avoiding) as a way to achieve additional goals, such as avoid "feeling caught" and protection, concurrently.

The desire to escape "*feeling caught*" ($n = 19$; 82.6%) prompted ACOD to evade discussions that would force them to display loyalty toward one parent over the other or be placed in the middle of their parents' conflict (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Jane recalled:

Umm, I think when my dad started to talk about this other guy and how my mom was friends with him, I kinda didn't want to know any of that. I didn't want to have, I didn't want to pick a side, you know. I had different feelings toward both of them, but I didn't want to pick a side. So I think when started talking about that I closed off a little because I didn't want to know.

Hannah relayed a similar sentiment noting that she "felt so caught in the middle" and avoided conversations because she ". . . didn't want, you know, to kind of be tricked into saying something that might be turned against them later or say something that might affect my dad." Some participants were indirect when avoiding "feeling caught" like Jane who "closed off a little bit," whereas others used explicit avoidance as a way to simultaneously maintain uncertainty and not be put in the middle, like Mary, "I said, I am not picking sides here. You know, you can vent to me all you want, but I don't want to hear those details, you know, I don't want to know," and Carrie, who said, "He would, like, first talk trash about my mom and I would have to ask him to stop." Unlike adolescents, who tend to withdraw from interactions in their attempts to bypass feeling torn (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003), adult children appear to be comfortable, for the most part, directly expressing their wishes to not be put in the middle.

An additional utility of avoidance was its ability to serve a *protective function* ($n = 16$; 69.6%). More precisely, information avoidance insulated adult children and/or their parent(s) from embarrassment, vulnerability, or emotional harm. Multiple participants reported information avoidance as form of *self-protection* ($n = 12$; 52.2%; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b), such as Meredith:

It [seeking information] didn't change the situation for me at that point. The divorce was happening, there's not really anything I can do to stop it. It would just, you know, it would probably hurt more for that kind of stuff [uncovering information], I think, is what I was doing to just protect myself.

Other participants' aim of self-protection prompted avoidance about their parents' new romantic relationships like Donna who recalled, "Yeah, I didn't ask my mom if she was dating anyone, and I didn't want to know if she was having sex with anyone either. Like, I don't want to know about my mom that way." Additionally, participants evaded information-seeking as a form of *other protection* ($n = 12$; 52.2%), or to shield their parent(s) from distress (e.g., Afifi et al., 2005). For instance, Ginger noted, "I think it was because she [mother] was just so fragile anyway and I didn't want to do anything or say anything that would make anything worse and so that's why I never, you know, said anything." Fred's avoidance surrounding information about the reason for his parents' divorce, which was rumored to be due to infidelity, appeared rooted in *relationship protection* ($n = 7$; 30.4%; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a, 1995b), "Well, I think because, I guess, I'm just more afraid for a lack of a better term, like, pissing everybody off. I kinda like to keep everyone on, you know, good terms, with me anyways." Thus, avoiding topics helped insulate family relationships from potential damage.

Information-avoiding and constraints

Similar to information-seeking, constraints played a role in information-avoidance. More precisely, target efficacy and coping efficacy appeared to engender avoidance. As noted earlier, when ACOD aimed to reduce uncertainty, target efficacy did not dissuade their pursuit of information. However, when participants' goal was to maintain uncertainty, target efficacy appeared to bolster their decision to avoid information. In some instances, *target honesty* surfaced as a constraint that not only prevented information searches but promoted information avoidance like Helen who talked about "bullshit answers" from her dad, or Ralph who noted that, "Honestly, I felt right off the bat that they weren't being honest with me . . ." In these instances, participants engaged in information-avoidance, as remaining uncertain was preferred to receiving duplicitous information. For other participants, *target ability* ($n = 12$; 52.2%), their parents' ability and willingness to provide sought-after information (Afifi & Weiner, 2004), resulted in them actively avoiding seeking answers. As Joel noted:

You know, it stemmed from, you know, it really got to a point where it felt like he didn't either, either understand what happened and why, or would just never admit it. Or, he really somehow, fundamentally, didn't understand what happened or why.

In this instance, Joel avoided because he did not believe that his dad possessed the information we would have liked to know. Lynn shared a similar experience noting that despite being encouraged to ask questions she actively avoided due to her mother's inability to provide answers: "She just, she wasn't living in, she wasn't grasping what was going on, so it was not something I would ever talk about." In these instances, participants believed that an information search was futile. As a result, they continued to maintain their uncertainty and purposefully avoided asking divorce-related questions.

Coping efficacy ($n = 15$; 65.2%), possessing the resources or ability to deal with the outcome of information acquisition (Afifi & Morse, 2009), emerged as a final constraint that

animated participants' information-avoiding. Participants, for instance, often felt unable to emotionally handle information, like Rose, who avoided seeking information about how the family was going to handle their first post-divorce holiday celebration: "And holidays, I wanted to do things as if nothing changed so I didn't want to know or talk about how it would be now, I just wasn't ready for that." Her inability to cope with that conversation and the emotional ramifications stemming from it prompted Rose to engage in information-avoidance. Additionally, ACOD noted that their inability "to do anything about it [situation and/or information]" or the notion that "nothing's gonna change" prompted them to avoid seeking-information. Donna, for instance, did not want to know information about her mother's financial situation:

Certain lines of conversation I didn't like to talk about. Like, I didn't want to know if my mom was behind on her bills because it stresses me out and I can't do anything about it, and I can't bring my brothers into my home because I live in a studio apartment and I can't provide any financial support for anyone because I'm going to school. So, I just kind of avoid it because otherwise I'd get hopeless and I don't like that sense of hopelessness, helplessness. That's awful.

Like many participants, Donna's recollection of coping efficacy and information-avoidance was multilayered. First, Donna's perceived inability "to do anything" with information about her mother's finances prompted her to actively avoid conversations. Additionally, Donna's response reinforces the role of emotional appraisals in information acquisition decisions. The resultant emotional assessment (i.e., anxiety and hopelessness) of uncovering information coalesced with her lack of coping efficacy and appeared to guide her decision to engage in information avoidance. Moreover, Donna's avoidance appeared to be a reaction to pressure to assume a caregiver role. Although the "sandwich generation" typically refers to adults needing to provide care to aging parents and their own offspring (Fingerman, Nussbaum, & Birditt, 2004), participants in this study appeared "sandwiched" between providing support to their family and fulfilling normative, developmental tasks, such as attending college. Joel recounted a similar experience as he struggled with his mom's chronic illness and attending college following his parents' divorce, "As far as worrying about you know my siblings or helping take care of my mom and that kind of stuff, I never really, it was kind of left unspoken with my family." Thus, ACOD appeared to engage in information-avoidance when they lacked coping efficacy and the inability to provide instrumental care to their parents as it conflicted with normative stressors.

Incidental information acquisition

Contrary to deliberate information-seeking, in which adult children purposely pursued information, ACOD reported gleaning information inadvertently. In these instances, adult children recollected an experience similar to that reported by Williamson (1998) of "being informed" rather than "seeking information" (p. 35). Thus, consistent with Williamson's (1998) conceptualization, we labeled these experiences as *incidental information acquisition* ($n = 18; 78.2\%$). In most cases, incidental information acquisition resulted from unprovoked

and, in ACOD's opinions, inappropriate parental disclosures (Afifi et al., 2009). As Meredith remembered:

. . . One time I came home for a weekend and my mom said, "Well, I'm going to tell you some stuff about your dad and you probably don't want to hear it, but I just have to tell you." And so she told me about this whole story . . . and just all these really terrible things and I thought, well, if you knew I didn't, like, why are you telling me this? I have no reason that I need to know any of this.

Unfortunately, adult children appraised all episodes of incidental information negatively and were displeased with the incident, as it revealed information that was undesired and unfitting. Kelly recalled:

And my mother, I think everything she told me about my dad is completely inappropriate. I know that now, and even then, I had a disgusting feeling in my stomach while she was talking to me about it. I couldn't look at her, you know, because it was *so* [participant's emphasis] uncomfortable.

Additionally, participants perceived unsolicited parental disclosures to be selfishly motivated and manipulative, designed to create an alliance between the parent and adult child, which resulted in participants "feeling caught" (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Amato & Afifi, 2006), as noted by Meredith above and echoed by Emily:

Well, and I explained this to her to the way she was looking for me to support her was not a way that I was comfortable supporting her, I'm not gonna get in the middle if you want my support, then . . . I will support you because you're my mother, I'm not gonna support you in a divorce against my father. Issues and things like that are things that need to be discussed with your counselor or your friends.

Interestingly, unlike adolescents who may ". . . lack cognitive complexity or the communicative competence" (Afifi et al., 2009, p. 405) to confront their parents regarding their dislike of these disclosures, many adult children explicitly expressed their discomfort with their parents' inappropriate disclosures and a desire for these conversations to halt, like Ginger, ". . . he tried to tell me, he was, he tried to tell me, you know, his side of it and I told him I didn't want to hear it," and Meredith, who recalled ". . . after a few times I would just say to her, you know, 'I'm your daughter and I'm not your friend and you can't talk to me about these kind of things, I don't want to know them.'" However, not all adult children were comfortable with explicitly expressing their desire to avoid incidental information acquisition and, similar to adolescents, relied on more tacit and potentially face-saving (Goffman, 1967) means of avoidance. For instance, when Hannah's dad tried to talk about her mom, a topic she wanted to avoid, she tried to change the direction of the conversation "Um, I just try and not talk about it, like I try to steer the conversation away from my mom." Similarly, Mary often sidestepped conversations by ignoring her mother's attempt

at engaging in an unwanted conversation: “Umm, I usually don’t address it. I usually say, okay, well you know, I’m glad that you’re talking to your counselor about those things.” Whether communicated indirectly or explicitly, it appears that adult children reacted to incidental information acquisition by purposefully avoiding further conversations.

Theoretical applications

First, our study serves as a foundational step for understanding *relational uncertainty management*. Despite demonstrated associations between relational uncertainty and an array of communication outcomes, including avoidant communication (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Mikucki-Enyart & Caughlin, 2018), if, and how, these behaviors reflected attempts at *managing* relational uncertainty remained unclear. Extending current literature, results revealed that avoidant communication was often employed as a way to maintain relational uncertainty. Our findings also contribute to a body of work demonstrating that relational uncertainty may ignite, at times, more direct communication (e.g., Theiss & Solomon, 2006), including information searches. Acquiring answers and reducing ambiguity may help delimit boundaries and clarify roles (Brown & Robinson, 2012). Additionally, engaging in direct communication may promote sustained intimacy and affection among parents and adult children, which is a key factor in promoting filial support (Fingerman et al., 2012).

Second, and relatedly, our findings have implications for prominent theories of uncertainty management—UMT (Brashers, 2001) and TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004)—and highlight two interwoven and, often, overlooked aspects of UMT: incidental information acquisition² and the collaborative nature of uncertainty management within social networks (Brashers et al., 2004; Hogan & Brashers, 2009). Similar to adult children grappling with a parent’s terminal lung cancer diagnosis (Caughlin, Mikucki-Enyart, Middleton, Stone, & Brown, 2011), participants in our study demonstrated that information acquisition was not always deliberate, strategic, or within their control and was, at times, influenced by family members. For ACOD, divorce-related information was often thrust upon them even when they made active attempts to avoid it. Unfortunately, incidental information acquisition may prompt additional uncertainties rather than assuage doubts (Hogan & Brashers, 2009) as well as impede coping and tarnish the parent-child bond. Additionally, our qualitative results contribute to the scholarship of TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). Similar to previous research, participants indicated that a lack of perceived communication efficacy not only dampened their pursuit of information (e.g., Tian, Schrod, & Carr, 2016) but also ignited strategic avoidance (Afifi & Afifi, 2009). Combined with a corpus of quantitative work, these results further demonstrate the utility and importance of studying the role of communication efficacy in information acquisition. Moreover, target efficacy played a unique role in information acquisition. Target efficacy, at times, blunted information searches (Afifi & Weiner, 2006; Tian et al., 2016), yet, in other instances did not deter ACOD from seeking information. Our data suggest that the impact of target efficacy on information acquisition may be contingent on ACOD’s interaction goals. When ACOD’s goal was to reduce uncertainty, for instance, target efficacy did not prevent them from pursuing their goal. Conversely, when maintaining uncertainty was the aim, a lack of perceived target efficacy appeared to reinforce and even legitimize adult children’s goal and bolster their

use of avoidance. Collectively, our results suggest that information acquisition is purposeful and “goal directed” (Hogan & Brashers, 2009, p. 41), and these aims play an important role in the information management/acquisition process (Afifi & Weiner, 2006). Examining the role of goals within TMIM and UMT appears to be a promising line of continued research. Additionally, extending this research to understand often overlooked aspects of uncertainty management—information handling and information use—(Hogan & Brashers, 2009) can illuminate additional utility of integrating goals within the TMIM and UMT frameworks.

Practical applications

Our results highlight the importance of examining the nuanced experiences of ACOD. Although parallels arose between ACOD and adolescents, several differences are worthy of consideration. First, and perhaps not surprisingly, ACOD are managing additional normative and developmental life stressors (e.g., marriage, child rearing) that complexify uncertainty and uncertainty management. Similarly, as expected, ACOD are part of the “sandwich generation” (Fingerman et al., 2004) managing support to parents, selves, and children, but have increased challenges due to balancing uncertainty and communication with parents as separate, instead of one unit, which should be acknowledged. Another factor to consider is ACOD’s ability and willingness to directly express wishes to not be put in the middle and to confront parents regarding inappropriate disclosures. Finally, although adolescents experience emotional and instrumental parentification (Jurkovic, 1997), ACOD more easily escape this due to no longer residing with their parents. These communicative differences have implications for managing uncertainty as an adult learning of parental divorce unique to those of adolescents managing uncertainty.

Pertinent to the current research, despite participants spanning two life-stages—emerging adulthood (i.e., 18 years of age to 29) and young/middle adulthood (i.e., 30–50; Arnett, Zukauskienė, & Sugimura, 2014)—participant experiences across both life stages were similar in reports of relational uncertainty management and easily themeatized together. For each theme reported by emerging adult participants, at least half or more of the young/middle adult participants reported experiencing the theme as well. Thus, despite different normative stressors that may coincide with parental divorce for emerging adults (e.g., leaving the nest) and young/middle adults (e.g., “sandwiched” caretaking; Fingerman et al., 2004), participants in the present study appeared to approach uncertainty management similarly regardless of life stage. Though any potential differences would need to be more directly addressed via quantitative analysis, these commonalities give us confidence that the following practical recommendations have utility for ACOD across the lifespan.

ACOD are erroneously thought to be largely unaffected by their parents’ divorce due to their independence and ego maturity (e.g., Cooney, 1994; Greenwood, 2012). However, adult children, including our own participants, often report that parental divorce in adulthood is a serious emotional trauma (e.g., Cooney et al., 1986; Reed, Lucier-Greer, & Parker, 2016). In fact, over half of our participants (61%; $n = 14$) mentioned that seeking professional help, such as counseling, was an important tool for coping with parental divorce. Unfortunately, guidance for practitioners working with this population is sparse (Schwartzhoff, 2013). Utilizing our participants’ experience, we advance preliminary evidence-based

recommendations for clinicians working with ACOD to help them tackle one of the many challenges facing this overlooked, yet growing population (Brown & Lin, 2012)—relational uncertainty management.

First, ACOD reported a desire to uncover divorce-related information but often lacked confidence in their ability to seek answers and cope with the information they uncovered. Clinicians working with ACOD may find it helpful to bolster ACOD's efficacy through role-playing exercises that allow them to practice asking potentially difficult questions (Corsini, 2017) as well as developing skills to help them cope with the difficult answers, such as the impetus for divorce (Meichenbaum, 2007). Second, ACOD recounted balancing a desire for knowing and not knowing. That is, sometimes they wanted information and at other times they wanted to avoid information. Relatedly, ACOD expressed a strong dislike for learning information incidentally, especially when they had made (or attempted to make) their preference for avoidance clear. Taken together, these results hint that ACOD could use guidance and training in establishing uncertainty management boundaries with their parents.

Given their age, adult children may be more susceptible to emotional parentification (Hughes, 2007; Jurkovic, 1997). In fact, Campbell (1995) noted that ACOD are often faced with an expectation to “. . . not only survive it [parental divorce] without scarring but to heal the wounds of their parents, a task too great to be achieved” (p. 200). Thus, adult children may engage in intense emotional labor to help their parents, while sacrificing their own self-care and coping (e.g., Greenwood, 2012; Reed et al., 2016). Clinicians should help ACOD learn how to communicatively establish and maintain boundaries regarding divorce-related information management (Colapinto, 1991), even if it means upsetting the parent. Clear boundary management can reduce ACOD's experiences of “feeling caught” and attenuate the psychological damage resultant from parental divorce (Reed et al., 2016). Additionally, establishing clear boundaries surrounding information management may buffer the family unit from negative effects of inappropriate divorce disclosures (e.g., anxiety, stress; Afifi et al., 2009); resulting in ACOD feeling more connected and satisfied with their parents. This sense of continued connection has family-level implications, including ACODs caregiving obligations and intergenerational relational maintenance.

Third, although parents and their adult children likely do not attend therapy together, late in life divorcees often seek post-divorce counseling (Bogolub, 1991). Although these sessions primarily focus on the divorcee's coping and adaptation process, our results hint at family-level suggestions parents might find helpful as they navigate the post-divorce terrain. Drawing from our participants' experiences, clinicians should encourage parents to establish and respect information management boundaries with their adult children. Parents should be encouraged, for instance, to ask their children if they would like to receive information before engaging in unprompted divorce disclosures. Additionally, counselors should help parents establish alternative networks of support. As previously noted, adult children often are seen as peers by their divorcing parents, resulting in emotional parentification. Unfortunately, these types of disclosures lead to adult children feeling caught (e.g., Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood, 2012). ACOD experiencing loyalty conflicts tend to withdraw from the parent-adult child relationship. Given the potentially serious ramifications resultant from a weakened parent-adult child relationship (e.g., lack of care-

giving, reduced intergenerational contact; Fingerman et al., 2012), parents would benefit from respecting their adult children's information boundaries.

Collectively, our results highlight the need for practical guidance and assistance in learning to communicatively manage relational uncertainty. The ability to effectively manage uncertainty while simultaneously attaining interaction goals may insulate parents and adult children from potentially devastating effects of bungled uncertainty management, including decreased intergenerational contact and absence of filial support exchanges.

Concluding thoughts

The contributions of this study must be considered alongside its limitations. First, uncertainty management strategies reported by participants may reflect cultural bias. Our sample was entirely Caucasian, highly educated, and composed primarily of women. Future research should explore the role of culture in relational uncertainty management. Additionally, given that women are often socialized to prioritize relational maintenance, understanding how sons manage relational uncertainty would be important to ensure practical advice is applicable to both sons and daughters. Finally, although emerging and young/middle adults reported parallel information acquisition strategies and goals, our sample was skewed toward emerging adults. As a result, some implications of ineffective relational uncertainty management (e.g., decrease in filial support exchanges) were not prominent. Furthermore, participants were highly educated; as a result, caretaking repercussions may not be very salient to participants as they may have the means to enlist paid help to assist with caretaking behaviors that are typically exchanged between parents and adult children. Future research should pay particular attention to young/middle adults who find themselves firmly rooted in the "sandwich generation" (Fingerman et al., 2004) and those from more varied socioeconomic and educational backgrounds to fully flesh out the family-level consequences of relational uncertainty management.

Despite these limitations, our findings reveal that relational uncertainty management following parental divorce is a complex process for adult children. Deliberate attempts at information-seeking and avoiding appear to be motivated by interaction goals and, at times, circumscribed by constraints. These results lay the foundation for future work that integrates a multiple goals theoretical perspective into theories of uncertainty and information management.

Notes

1. When these new categories echoed findings from previous research, existing labels were used in an effort to promote meaningful comparisons across contexts. For instance, participants' recollections of "being told" as opposed to "seeking information" paralleled Williamson's (1998) notion of "incidental information acquisition" (p. 35). Additionally, participants' reports of avoiding information to avert "being stuck in the middle" mapped neatly onto the notion of "feeling caught" (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003).
2. The present study was focused on information acquisition. As such, we couched our findings within uncertainty/information management scholarship. However, we would be remiss if we did not highlight the parallels between incidental information acquisition (Williamson, 1998)

and a similar construct rooted within the broader interpersonal communication landscape—reluctant confidant outlined by communication privacy management theory (CPM; Petronio, 2002). Adult children’s experiences seem to straddle these two ideas as they were told what was often private information against their wishes. This similarity suggests a potentially important intersection between privacy management and uncertainty management that warrants future scholarly attention.

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