

Mid- and Late-Life Divorce and Parents' Perceptions of
Emerging Adult Children's Emotional Reactions

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Divorce is a common family transition in the United States (Cherlin, 2010). Recent estimates have suggested nearly 50% of marriages will end in divorce or permanent separation (Amato, 2010). Rates of relationship disruption are even greater in second or higher order marriages (Sweeney, 2010). Interestingly, divorce rates among younger cohorts have stabilized since the 1980s (Cherlin, 2010) whereas divorce rates for those in mid- and late-life have dramatically increased (Brown & Lin, 2012; Montenegro, 2004). Between 1990 and 2010, the divorce rate doubled for those 50 years old or older; in 2010, nearly 1 in 4 divorces involved an adult in this age group (Brown & Lin, 2012). Unfortunately, mid- and late-life divorced adults and their children remain understudied (Amato, 2010; Brown & Lin, 2012; Sweeney, 2010).

The influence of divorce on child well-being and adjustment has been a frequent area of empirical examination for the past several decades (see Amato, 2010, for a review). Research has consistently shown that as compared with children from intact families, children of divorce fare moderately worse on measures of academic, psychological, social, and emotional well-being (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). The impact of divorce on children can also unfold over time (Ahrons, 2007), both pre- and post-divorce, and the adverse effects can reach across multiple generations, as family processes stemming from a grandparent's divorce can influence children and grandchildren (Amato & Cheadle, 2005). Yet, divorce can also be a source of relief for those involved (Amato, 2000). Family and parenting practices and resources available to the family tend to influence child outcomes more so than family structure (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Papernow, 2013).

The divorce literature is replete with studies focusing on the postdivorce adjustment of *younger* parents and their children. Unlike divorce occurring earlier in the family life cycle, mid- and late-life divorce is more likely to affect children who have reached late adolescence or adulthood. Moreover, given the increase in divorce rates for those in mid- and late-life, a greater number of children who are 18 years old or older will experience parental divorce now than in times past. Yet, little empirical knowledge exists about the postdivorce adjustment of older children at the time parental divorce takes place.

The literature would profit from the exploration of risk and protective factors as they relate to older children's emotional adjustment to mid- or late-life parental divorce. Such factors could serve as potential leverage points (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010) that could be targeted by intervention or prevention programs for families experiencing mid- or late-life divorce. In this context, we explored potentially relevant factors associated with parents' perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions to parental divorce using a dataset obtained from the AARP (formerly, the American Association of Retired Persons) study, *The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at Midlife and Beyond* (Montenegro, 2004).

Divorce and Child Adjustment

As mentioned earlier, the divorce literature has consistently reported that the well-being of children with divorced parents is moderately worse than children with continuously married parents (Amato, 2001, 2010; Amato & Keith, 1991). Some have attributed differences in well-being to selection (e.g. Aughinbaugh, Pierret, & Rothstein, 2005; Capaldi & Patterson, 1991). The selection perspective posits that the pre-existing characteristics of divorced adults and their marriages are tied to child well-being following a divorce—not the divorce itself. However, substantial evidence supports the notion that divorce, along with the stressful circumstances

surrounding divorce, also account for differences in child well-being (see Amato, 2010; Gennetian, 2005; Gruber, 2004).

Common outcomes used to capture the construct of child well-being include academic achievement, social relations and adjustment, conduct problems, self-concept, and psychological and emotional adjustment (see Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). Specifically, psychological and emotional adjustment has often incorporated measures of child anxiety, depression, and happiness (Amato, 2001). The secondary data available to the current study included measures of children's emotional reactions to their parents' mid- or late-life divorce as perceived by the parents at the time of the divorce. Thus, for the purposes of this study, we focus on children's emotional reactions as perceived by a parent—an approach congruent with the divorce literature.

Mid- or Late-Life Divorce and Emerging Adult Children

Unlike studies of divorce among younger adults, studies of mid- or late-life divorced adults and their children are scarce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Sweeney, 2010). The actual age parameters of mid- or late-life divorce vary across studies. For example, researchers in the 1980s conceptualized late-life divorce as a divorce including at least one partner who was 60 years or older (e.g., Deshane & Brown-Wilson, 1982; Weingarten, 1989). However, late-life divorce has also been conceptualized as a divorce including at least one partner who was 50 years or older (Brown & Lin, 2012), whereas Montenegro's (2004) groundbreaking study (i.e., source of our study data) used the term "mid-life divorce" to describe divorces including those who divorced in their forties. Clearly, mid- and late-life divorce has undergone conceptual redefinition over time. Because of the scarcity of research in the area of mid- and late-life divorce, we chose to err on the side of inclusiveness with respect to eligible participants. Thus, for the purposes of this study we included participants who were 40 years or older at the time of their most recent

divorce. Notably, the term mid- or late-life divorce does not imply the presence of long-term relationships; mid- or late-life divorces can dissolve long-term relationships as well as short-term relationships.

Relatively few studies have examined the postdivorce adjustment of older children exposed to mid- or late-life parental divorce (Greenwood, 2012). However, research conducted in the 1990s consistently showed that older children were not immune to the effects of parental divorce. Specifically, parental divorce in mid-life and beyond has been tied to older children's reports of disrupted family rituals (i.e., celebrations, traditions, important life events, day-to-day family contact; Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992) and reduced relationship quality and contact with parents (Aquilino, 1994; Greenwood, 2012). Swartzman-Schatman and Schinke (1993) found striking similarities between young adult children and adolescent children in their reactions to mid- or late-life parental divorce: both groups reported similar levels of discontent. However, more research is needed to provide a clearer picture of how older children react to parental divorce.

Consistent with a life course perspective, we emphasize that "the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in a person's life" (Elder, 1998, p.3). Thus, the timing of parental divorce relative to a child's age or stage in life could be an important feature in determining a child's developmental trajectory. The late teens and twenties, specifically, have become an increasingly formative time in an individual's life as a result of increases in the age at first marriage and parenthood, and other demographic shifts (Arnett, 2000). Age 18 generally marks the time when individuals graduate from high school, enroll in college or university courses, pursue jobs and careers, are legally permitted to vote, and so forth. Moreover, Arnett (2000) describes the period of time between age 18 and 25 as

emerging adulthood—a stage in which “various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews are explored” (p.469). Although a half century ago this time period consisted largely of individuals settling into long-term adult roles, these years are now “more typically a period of frequent change and exploration” (Arnett, p. 469). Arnett also stated,

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course (p. 469).

Overall, emerging adulthood is a formative stage in which life trajectories remain malleable. Features of emerging adulthood, together with research demonstrating the influence of family transitions on children, suggest emerging adult children might be particularly vulnerable to parental relationship changes in terms of how these changes influence the children's worldviews and perceptions of romantic relationships. Thus, the examination of emerging adult reactions to parental divorce, along with potential predictors of these reactions, is warranted.

Theoretical Background

We drew from recent theoretical developments in the divorce literature to frame the current study. Specifically, we employed Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, which conceptualizes marital dissolution as a process unfolding over time, rather than as a discrete event. As a process, *uncoupling* (i.e., an anodyne or alternative term for the more painful and stigmatized terms of *divorce* or *separation*) can induce stressors that influence the adjustment of adults and children. In addition, the influence of stressors on adjustment can be influenced by a number of risk and protective factors.

First, the stressor-adjustment relationship can be moderated by demographic characteristics such as gender and race/ethnicity (Amato, 2000). Indeed, past research indicates mothers are more likely than fathers to acquire primary custody of children, which can result in weakened father-child relationships over time (Aquilino, 1994; Stewart, 1999). Further, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) have described the notion of “his” and “her” divorce, highlighting differences in how men and women perceive their marriages, approach relationship dissolution, and pursue postdivorce relationships. Perceptions associated with the reasons for divorce have also been shown to vary on the basis of gender (Amato & Previti, 2003). Previous research also suggests that the postdivorce experiences and adjustment of children can vary between racial/ethnic groups, although the reasons for differences are not clear (Amato, 2000; 2010; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

Second, the stressor-adjustment association can be influenced by resources at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels, including self-efficacy, coping skills, social skills, social support, and employment (Amato, 2000). Interpersonal resources and social support acquired and maintained from parents might be particularly beneficial to children as they adjust to family transitions (e.g., Jensen & Shafer, 2013, Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011). However, coparental conflict can undermine the emotional security and well-being of children, reduce parents' emotional availability, and increase inconsistency in parenting practices (Amato, 2000; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Sturge-Apple, Davies, and Cummings, 2006). Generally, research has also shown that children fare better following parental divorce under joint physical custody arrangements rather than sole father or mother custody arrangements (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbush, 1996). The presence of negative contact between coparents might be tied to asymmetric custody arrangements, and thus, poorer emotional reactions to a divorce among

children. Interestingly, one recent study found that the perceived adjustment of children, ages three to 18, did not significantly vary between cooperative and involved, moderately engaged, and conflictual postdivorce coparenting relationships (Beckmeyer, Coleman, & Ganong, 2014); however, it is less clear how emerging adult children respond emotionally to postdivorce coparenting relationships.

Third, perceptions of the divorce can serve as moderators (Amato, 2000). The partners in a divorcing couple might have similar or disparate individual perceptions of the divorce, including perceiving the divorce as a tragedy, an opportunity for personal growth, or an escape from a dysfunctional marriage, among other perceptions. The timing of a divorce, the amount of time contemplating the divorce, and the number of past divorces might influence how family members perceive, and emotionally react to, a current divorce (Elder, 1998; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; e.g., the end of a long-term first marriage might be perceived as relatively more tragic, and be more emotionally disruptive, than the end of short-term remarriage). The main reason for a divorce might also influence how it is perceived. Infidelity, drug use or drinking, differences, and growing apart are among the most common reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003). Whereas some reasons for divorce can diminish the emotional well-being of family members, some research suggests the dissolution of high-conflict marriages (potentially manifesting various forms of abuse or control) can yield positive emotional and psychological dividends for adults and children (Booth & Amato, 2001). Overall, the reported reason for parental mid- or late-life divorce could potentially influence how emerging adult children perceive their parents' divorce, and thus influence their emotional reactions to the divorce.

Although we did not explicitly analyze variables as moderators, we used Amato's divorce-stress-adjustment framework to (a) organize available and relevant variables within our

secondary dataset, and (b) assess how each of these variables served as either a risk or a protective factor in the context of the perceived emotional reactions of emerging adult children of mid- or late-life divorced parents.

Current Study

Research on divorce has failed to keep pace with the increasing incidence of mid- and late-life divorce, leaving a substantial knowledge gap around divorce for those 40 years old and older and its consequences for emerging adult children. Thus, the current study sought to answer the following research questions:

Q1: What types of emotional reactions do parents perceive from their emerging adult children of parental divorce at the time of divorce?

Q2: What demographic factors, resource factors, and perceptual factors influence parents' perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions following mid- or late-life divorce?

Method

Data and Sample

The data for the present analysis were obtained from an AARP (formerly, the American Association of Retired Persons) study, *The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at Midlife and Beyond* (Montenegro, 2004). Data collection for this AARP project was conducted in 2003 via Knowledge Networks. Knowledge Networks used a research panel recruited using random digit dialing, with the sample frame being comprised of all U.S. telephone numbers. Once recruited, members of the panel received computer equipment and internet access so communication could be conducted via email. A total of 11,495 panel members between the age of 40 and 79 received emails about the survey. Nearly 70% (N = 8,070) responded to contact;

however, the final sample for the project included only those panel members who reported a divorce between the ages of 40 years and 69 years. This criterion resulted in a total sample of 1,147 participants, aged 40 to 79 years. Data were weighted to match U.S. Census information with respect to gender, age, race/ethnicity, and region (for more details see Montenegro, 2004).

For the purposes of our investigation, we limited our analytical sample to those with only children 18 years or older at the time of divorce. The dataset only contained rough measures of child age, with the upper bound response option indicating the participants' children (or child) were "18 years or older" at the time of the divorce. Thus, we were unable to provide greater descriptions with respect to specific child ages, living arrangements, and family sizes. The child age criterion reduced the sample to 291 participants. We then used list-wise deletion to eliminate a statistically negligible group of participants ($n = 8$) who were missing information on the variables used for analysis. Fifty-seven percent of the participants in the final sample were female, 86% were White, 31% had attended some college, and 28% had completed a bachelor's degree or more. The mean age for this group was 61.37 years ($SD = 8.06$); the modal level of annual household income fell within the range of \$40,000 and \$59,999. The average age at which late-life divorce occurred among this group of participants was 50.77 years ($SD = 6.27$), and the average duration of marriage before divorce was 20.66 years ($SD = 10.44$). The most frequent reported reason for divorce was infidelity (19%), followed by abuse or control (17%). See Table 1 for more details.

Measures

In the context of the secondary data analyses, we were limited in terms of available measures. With adherence to Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, we carefully selected available variables that were congruent with the constructs of demographic

characteristics, resources, and factors influencing divorce perceptions. Special consideration was also given to the temporal order of measures. For example, the participant's current age should not be predictive of a child's emotional reaction at the time of divorce, which was a past event (i.e., retrospective reports). Thus, variables such as current relationship status, current age, current income, and current educational attainment were not included in analyses.

Child emotional adjustment. Emerging adult children's emotional reactions to parental divorce served as our key dependent measure. We used a single item that asked, "What do you think was your children's reaction to the divorce?" The four response options included, *children were supportive of it* (scored as 1), *children did not support it but were "OK"* (2), *children were somewhat upset about it* (3) and *children were very upset about it* (4). We dichotomized this variable by coding the three latter responses as 1 (i.e., *not supportive but "OK", somewhat or very upset*), and the remaining response as 0 (*supportive*). This approach was compatible with a logit link function (see Data Analysis section) and avoided cell counts with too few cases (< 10) among all predictors in our models. For descriptive analyses we used an item that asked those reporting their children as being *somewhat/very upset* to indicate whether the children were *sad, angry, devastated, or in some other emotional state*.

Demographic characteristics. Demographic variables captured characteristics of participants that might influence their perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions to the divorce. We incorporated measures for gender and race/ethnicity. Gender was binary, and coded such that 1 = *female* and 0 = *male*. Because nearly 86% of the total sample was White, we included a variable for race such that 1 = *other race*, 0 = *White*.

Resources. As discussed earlier, coparental conflict can undermine the emotional security and well-being of children, reduce parents' emotional availability, and increase

inconsistency in parenting practices (Amato, 2000; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Sturge-Apple et al., 2006), thus reducing the social/emotional resources available to children following a divorce. We used one available measure that captured the interpersonal climate between coparents. Specifically, contact with an ex-partner was measured with a single item that asked, "What type of relationship did you have with your spouse immediately after and up to several years after your divorce?" Response options used a 6-point scale ranging from *no contact with spouse at all* (1), *not friendly, but talked once in awhile* (2), *friendly afterwards* (3), *had sex with spouse occasionally* (4), *had sex with spouse often* (5), and *remarried the same person* (6). On the basis of preliminary analysis that examined several strategies for coding this variable, we created a dummy variable to represent those who explicitly indicated negative contact (i.e., *not friendly, but talked once in awhile*), and those who either explicitly or implicitly had positive contact (i.e. all other options aside from *no contact with spouse at all*) or those who had no contact at all with the ex-partner.

Perceptual factors. Based on available measures, we included items representing marriage duration, length of time spent contemplating a divorce, whether participants had divorced more than once in their lifetime, and the main reason for the late-life divorce. Although these items do not explicitly capture divorce perceptions, they could influence divorce perceptions and lead to a variety of emotional reactions. The variable for *marriage duration* was a continuous measure of the years married before divorce. The measure for *time contemplating divorce* was an ordinal item that asked, "How long did you contemplate getting a divorce before finally deciding to do so?" Response options used a 10-point scale ranging from *did not contemplate; divorce came as a surprise* (1) to *20 years or longer* (10). We use a binary measure to assess the *divorced more than once* variable, with responses of *yes, divorced more than once*

coded as 1, and *no, just once* coded as 0. To assess the main reason for divorce, we used an item that asked, "Of all the reasons listed below, which was the most significant reason for your last divorce?" Participants could choose one of 21 response options. We organized these response options to capture one of six main reasons for divorce (most of which have been specifically identified in the divorce literature; Amato & Previti, 2003), and created a dummy variable for each: *unfaithful*, *abuse/control*, *drug/alcohol abuse*, *differences (religious, cultural, parenting, values)*, *partner always away/abandonment*, and *other reasons* (e.g., stepchildren, in-laws, money). The reasons for divorce could implicate the participant, his or her partner, or both. Those indicating there were no obvious problems in their marriage prior to the divorce served as the reference group. Taken together, these items helped capture whether a divorce could be perceived as sudden, tragic, unplanned, strategic, expected, preventable, attributable to a particular individual, and so forth.

Data Analysis

We first analyzed the descriptive nature of all study variables (see Table 1), and graphed proportions of various emotional reactions of emerging adult children as perceived by parents (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). We then used binary logistic regression to assess the extent to which parental perceptions of emerging adult children emotional reactions to their parents' divorce were influenced by demographic factors, a resource factor, and factors affecting the perceptions family members might have about divorce. We carried out logistic regressions using a logit link function:

$$\log_e \left(\frac{P}{1-P} \right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots + \beta_n X_n$$

where $\log_e \left(\frac{P}{1-P} \right)$ indicates the log odds of an event occurring versus the odds of the event not occurring. The remaining portion of the function represents the predictive model. In the present

analysis, log odds were transformed into odds ratios (*OR*) to clarify the interpretation of coefficients.

Analyses were conducted in a hierarchical fashion. We first analyzed a model that included only demographic characteristics (Model 1). Model 2 added the resource variable, and Model 3 added the factors of potential influence on divorce perceptions. Results from Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test indicated the logistic response function was appropriate for all models. Likelihood ratio tests were used at each stage of model building to indicate the joint significance of added blocks of variables (similar to partial F-tests in ordinary least squares regression). Based on theory and prior research, we were comfortable interpreting coefficients with *p* values less than 0.10 (i.e., one-tailed significance tests). All analyses were conducted in Stata 13.0.

Results

Descriptive Results

Figure 1 displays results from descriptive analyses regarding parental perceptions of children's emotional reactions to parental divorce. Regarding our first research question (i.e., What types of emotional reactions do parents perceive from their emerging adult children at the time of divorce?) we found that 49% of participants perceived their children *as supportive of the divorce*; 18% perceived their children *as not supportive but "OK"*; 22% perceived their children *as somewhat upset*; 12% perceived their children *as very upset*.

Figure 2 displays results from descriptive analyses regarding the specific types of emotional reactions among children who were perceived as being somewhat or very upset in response to parental divorce (*N* = 94). Among parents who reported their children as upset about their parents' divorce, nearly 67% perceived their children *as sad*, 43% perceived their children

as *angry*, 19% perceived their children as *devastated*, and 5% perceived their children experiencing *some other negative emotion* (children could be perceived as exhibiting more than one of these emotions; thus, the percentages reported exceed 100%).

Multivariate Results

Table 2 displays results from binary logistic regression analyses used to explore our second research question (i.e., What demographic factors, resource factors, and perceptual factors influence parents' perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions following mid- or late-life divorce?). Overall, the likelihood-ratio tests for the full model (i.e., Model 3) indicated the best model fit. The final model accounted for approximately 26% of the variance in parents' perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions (pseudo $r^2 = 0.26$).

Results of Model 1 (demographic characteristics only; pseudo $r^2 = 0.10$) indicated that mothers were 79% less likely than fathers to perceive their children as upset following mid- or late-life divorce ($OR = 0.21, p < .001$). After adding the resource factor (i.e., contact with ex-partner) in Model 2 (pseudo $r^2 = 0.11$; non-significant improvement of model fit), parents' gender remained significant ($OR = 0.20, p < .001$). Negative contact with an ex-partner approached marginal significance. After adding perceptual factors in Model 3 (pseudo $r^2 = 0.26$; significant improvement to model fit: $\chi^2(9) = 59.60, p < .001$), parents' gender remained significant and matched the coefficient from Model 1. Negative contact with an ex-partner became marginally significant ($OR = 1.69, p = 0.089$) such that parents who had negative contact with their ex-partners following the divorce were 69% more likely to perceive their emerging adult children as unsupportive or upset in reaction to the divorce relative to parents with positive or no contact with an ex-partner. Further, a one-year increase in marital duration was associated with an 8% increase in the likelihood of parents perceiving their emerging adult children as

unsupportive or upset ($OR = 1.08, p < .001$); a one-unit increase in the time parents spent contemplating the divorce was associated with a 16% decrease in the likelihood of emerging adult children being perceived as unsupportive or upset ($OR = 0.84, p < .01$); parents divorced more than once were 49% less likely than parents divorced only once to perceive their emerging adult children as unsupportive or upset ($OR = 0.51, p = .086$); parents involved in divorce resulting primarily by some form of abuse or control were 61% less likely to perceive their emerging adult children as unsupportive or upset relative to parents involved in a divorce stemming from no obvious problems ($OR = 0.39, p = .070$).

Discussion

One key purpose of this study was to examine the types of emotional reactions emerging adult children experience as perceived by their parents at the time of parental divorce. We found that just over half of emerging adult children were perceived as being unsupportive, somewhat upset, or very upset in response to their parents' divorce. Moreover, among children perceived as somewhat or very upset, nearly two-thirds were perceived as being sad, almost half were perceived as being angry, and nearly one-fifth were perceived as being devastated in reaction to their parents' divorce. Given the nature of our data and the sampling methods used to collect them, these are fairly generalizable results which suggest emerging adult children in the United States are not emotionally immune to the divorce of their parents, at least, as perceived by their parents.

Another key purpose of this study was to assess the influence of potential risk and protective factors on emerging adult children's emotional reactions to parental divorce as perceived by parents. In the context of our final model, demographic characteristics, resources, and perceptual factors were all influential, with perceptual factors yielding the greatest relative

explanatory power in terms of outcome variance. This suggests that emerging adult children might be particularly sensitive to the constructed meaning and causes of their parents' mid- or late-life divorce in terms of how they react emotionally and as informed by the timing, sequence, and rationale of divorce-related processes.

In terms of demographic factors, mothers were less likely than fathers to perceive their children as emotionally maladjusted due to the divorce. One explanation of this finding could be that fewer fathers than mothers have primary custody of their children following divorce, potentially resulting in less time spent together and weakened father-child relationships (Aquilino, 1994; Stewart, 1999). Alternatively, mothers might maintain greater emotional connections with their children following a divorce, which could result in mothers perceiving emotional maladjustment among their children less frequently than fathers. Just as there is a "his" and "her" divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), our study suggests the existence "his" and "her" perceptions of the postdivorce emotional adjustment of emerging adult children. Race/ethnicity, on the other hand, did not appear to influence parents' perceptions of emerging adult children's emotional reactions to the divorce.

In the context of Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment perspective, either no contact or positive contact between ex-partners, a resource factor, might buffer the negative influence of mid- or late-life parental divorce among emerging adult children. On the other hand, negative contact between ex-partners might undermine the emotional security of emerging adult children, alter their perception of family safety and connection, reduce parents' ability to allocate social and emotional resources to their children, and produce more negative emotional reactions to the divorce (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Further research is needed to unpack the reasons for this finding.

Among the perceptual factors, longer parental marriages were a postdivorce risk factor in terms of the perceived emotional adjustment of emerging adult children. The longer partners are married the more likely they are to grow social networks together, draw closer with in-laws, and create new routines, norms, and traditions. Thus, the end of a longer versus shorter marriage could lead family members to perceive the divorce as more tragic and more emotionally or socially disruptive. Longer periods of time taken to contemplate a divorce, however, served as a protective factor for emerging adult children. Perhaps more time allowed parents and children to better prepare for the divorce. Emerging adult children from families in which parents have experienced more than one divorce also appear to be less vulnerable to mid- or late-life parental divorce than children of parents who divorced for the first time. Children from the former have more opportunities to acquire and use coping skills amid family transitions than children from the latter. Finally, parents experiencing a divorce resulting primarily from abuse or control issues were less likely to perceive poor emotional reactions among their emerging adult children than parents experiencing a divorce stemming from no obvious problems. This finding is consistent with past research showing that psychological and emotional benefits for children can result from the dissolution of a high-conflict marriage, whereas the dissolution of a low-conflict marriage can be harmful to children (Booth & Amato, 2001). The end of an abuse-ridden marriage might be perceived as a positive outcome, ushering in a sense of relief among family members.

Implications for Practice

As mid- and late-life divorced families become more common, so will the likelihood of helping professionals being asked to work with these families as they adjust to life changes. Based on the results of our study, helping professionals should be mindful that emerging adult

children of parental divorce are vulnerable to this family transition and might experience profound emotional reactions. Although nearly 49% of older children were perceived as supportive of their parents' divorce, 51% were perceived as either being unsupportive or upset by the divorce. In other words, a little over half of the older children were perceived by their parents as either disapproving or emotionally maladjusted. This percentage might even be an underestimation because it relies on parental perceptions.

Other important implications center on the risk and protective factors identified in this study. Because the dissolution of longer-term marriages appears to place emerging adult children at greater risk of emotional maladjustment, helping professionals should be particularly attentive to these families and their needs. Moreover, given that a greater length of time spent contemplating divorce appears to place emerging adult children at less risk of emotional maladjustment to their parents' mid- or late-life divorce, helping professionals should assist parents to thoroughly evaluate the condition of their marriage before initiating a divorce, and, if the couple chooses to divorce, counselors or therapists should help the couple prepare their children for the divorce.

Helping professionals should also be aware that mothers and fathers might offer different accounts of the well-being and adjustment of their emerging adult children in response to mid- or late-life divorce. Further, mid- or late-life divorce resulting primarily from abuse or control issues is tied to the perceived emotional adjustment of emerging adult children. These children demonstrate less emotional maladjustment risk than children of parents who divorce despite having no obvious problems. Overall, helping professionals should be mindful of the reasons a divorce took place, as family members likely respond differently to the divorce as a function of those reasons.

Limitations and Future Research

Unfortunately, the secondary dataset used for this study did not include data on the number of children in the household. Consequently, we did not know whether the parents' perception involved one child or more than one child. However, we did know that parents had no children younger than 18 years of age. In addition, the dataset lacked descriptive information pertaining to the children, such as self-reports of postdivorce reactions, custody arrangements, gender, precise age, or other characteristics. Although the lack of children's precise ages represents a limitation, research has shown that individuals in different stages of adult development (e.g., emerging adulthood vs. young adulthood) respond similarly to late-life parental divorce (Kersting, 2003). The secondary dataset was also retrospective and cross-sectional, allowing us to conduct correlational research only, rather than analyses that allow for greater causal inference. Given our use of this secondary dataset, we were also limited in the number of relevant variables we could incorporate in our analyses. In particular, additional research is needed to identify the substantive processes associated with marriage duration, time contemplating divorce, and having divorced more than once that account for the predictive validity of these variables in the model. Unfortunately, this was not possible with the current dataset.

Future research in this area would benefit from longitudinal data, which would enable researchers to examine the emotional reactions of children as it is taking place, rather than relying solely on parents' retrospective reports. In the context of panel designs, comparative research is needed that examines the consequences for children who have reached late adolescence or emerging adulthood of parents staying in a low quality or high conflict relationship versus divorcing. In addition, future efforts should strive to incorporate the voice of

children into this area of research to more accurately represent children's emotional reactions to parents' mid- or late-life divorce. This type of inclusive approach is an important direction to pursue because children likely know more about their emotional reactions to parental divorce than outside observers, even when those observers are the child's parents. Research that compares parents' perceptions versus children's actual reports about their reactions to divorce would also have important implications for examining the accuracy of parents' observations.

Despite these limitations, our analyses used a nationally representative secondary dataset, which provided a reasonable amount of external validity. In addition, because the divorce literature has few studies focused on mid- or late-life divorce and its influence on emerging adult children, our study contributes to closing this information gap and provides a foundation upon which researchers can build. Overall, features associated with mid- or late-life parental divorce appear to meaningfully influence the perceived emotional reactions of emerging adult children.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 283)

Variable	mean	SD	min.	max.
Outcome				
Child reaction (1 = unsupportive but OK / child somewhat upset / child very upset)	0.51	0.50	0	1
Demographic characteristics				
Female	0.57	0.50	0	1
Other race	0.14	0.35	0	1
White (reference)				
Resources				
Negative contact with ex-partner	0.33	0.47	0	1
Positive or no contact with ex-partner (reference)				
Perceptual factors				
Years married before divorce	20.66	10.44	1	44
Time contemplating divorce	4.63	2.49	1	10
Divorced more than once (1 = Yes)	0.42	0.50	0	1
Unfaithful	0.19	0.39	0	1
Abuse/control	0.17	0.38	0	1
Drug/alcohol abuse	0.11	0.31	0	1
Differences	0.16	0.37	0	1
Away/abandonment	0.07	0.26	0	1
Other reason	0.13	0.33	0	1
No obvious problems (reference)				

Table 2. Binary Logistic Regression of Perceived Children's Reaction on Parental Demographic Factors, Resources, and Factors Influencing Divorce Perceptions ($N = 283$)

Variable	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
	OR	SE		<i>p</i>	OR	SE		<i>p</i>	OR	SE		<i>p</i>
Demographic characteristics												
Female	0.21	0.05	***	<0.001	0.20	0.05	***	<0.001	0.21	0.07	***	<0.001
Other race White (reference)	0.88	0.32		0.729	0.88	0.32		0.726	1.85	0.79		0.149
Resources												
Negative contact with ex-partner Positive or no contact with ex-partner (reference)					1.55	0.43		0.109	1.69	0.52	†	0.089
Perceptual factors												
Years married before divorce									1.08	0.02	***	<0.001
Time contemplating divorce									0.84	0.05	**	0.006
Divorced more than once (1 = Yes)									0.51	0.20	†	0.086
Unfaithful									1.25	0.62		0.652
Abuse/control									0.39	0.20	†	0.070
Drug/alcohol abuse									1.43	0.83		0.542
Differences									0.64	0.32		0.373
Away/abandonment									0.90	0.58		0.870
Other reason									0.61	0.33		0.359
No obvious problems (reference)												
Constant	2.66	0.55	***	<0.001	2.34	0.52	***	<0.001	1.55	1.04		0.510
<i>Pseudo R</i> ²	0.10				0.11				0.26			
Likelihood ratio	-176.05				-174.75				-144.95			
-2 Log likelihood	352.10				349.50				289.90			
Likelihood-ratio test					2.59 (1)				59.60 (9)***			

Note: † $p < .10$. * $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$. Values in parentheses represent degrees of freedom. Coefficients significant at the $p < .10$ level are considered significant in the context of one-tailed significance tests.

Figure 1. Children's Reaction to Divorce as Perceived By Parents (N = 283)

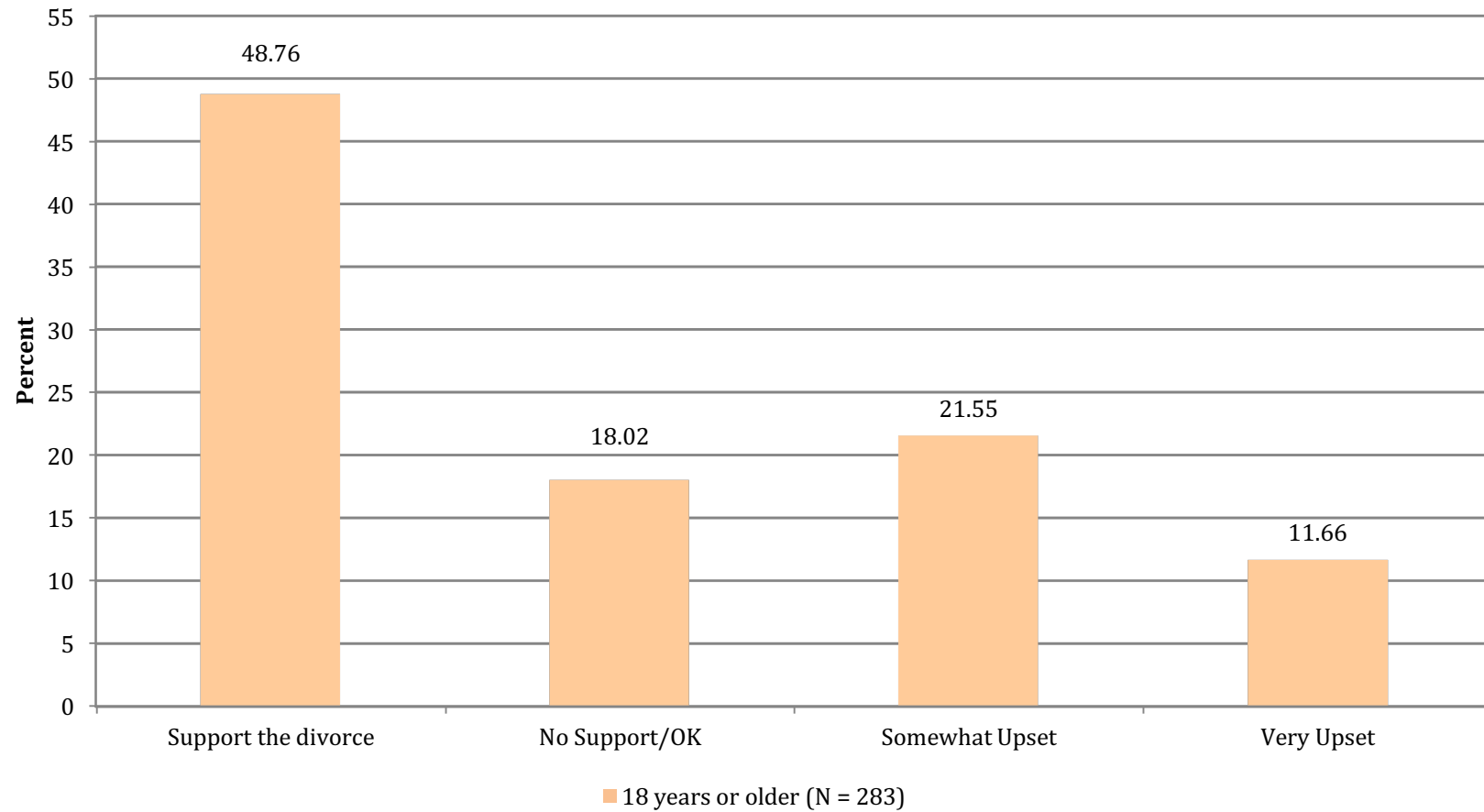
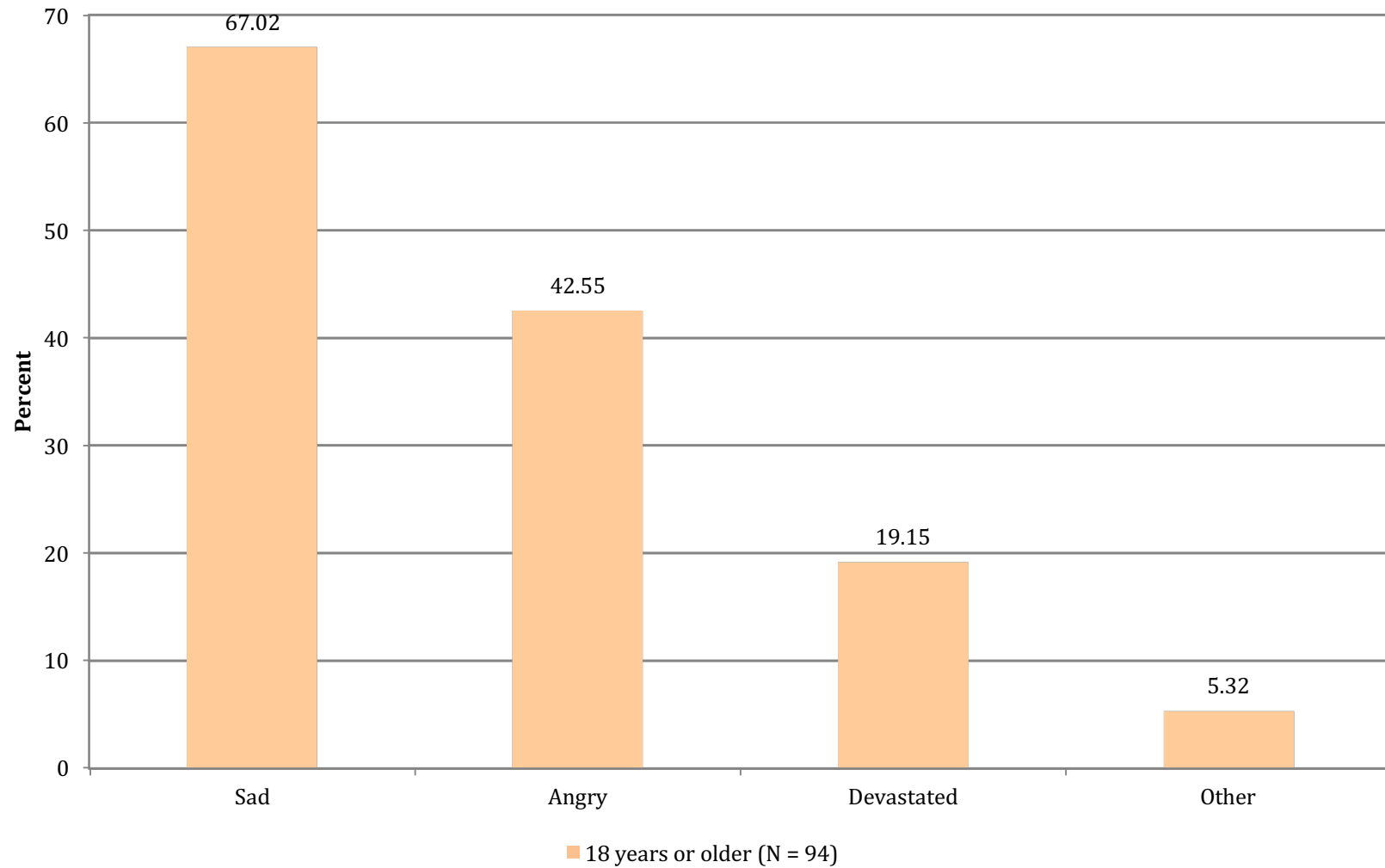


Figure 2. Specific Emotions Among Upset Children as Perceived By Parents ($N = 94$)



Note: Children could be perceived as experiencing several emotions; thus, total percentages exceed 100.