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# Adjustment to Parental Divorce and Remarriage: An Examination of the Impact of Gender and Temperament in Children

## Abstract

Throughout the extant literature on parental divorce and remarriage, researchers have studied the behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes in children adjusting to family transitions. Overall, researchers have found these outcomes to be largely negative, emphasizing that children of divorced parents are generally less socially, emotionally, and academically well-adjusted than children in non-divorced families (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, there is also a growing recognition of the great diversity in children's responses to divorce and remarriage. Although many children experience more adverse consequences in adjustment, showing more intense and deleterious outcomes, some children have been found to be more resilient in response to parental divorce and to display an ability to cope constructively with the changes and challenges of the new family situation (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan). The vulnerability of some children and the resiliency of others have led researchers to question and explore what factors may influence individual differences in adjustment. According to Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, and Cui (1999), stable child characteristics, such as gender and temperament are believed to have the greatest effect on adaptive outcomes. This critical literature review elucidates the impact of gender and temperament in relation to other variables, in predicting children's adjustment during and after marital family transitions. Conclusions from this review indicate that individual characteristics, such as gender and temperament do greatly contribute to children's adjustment and either protect or increase their vulnerability to long-term adverse effects following parental divorce and remarriage. In other words, the results of the present review suggest that the effects of gender and temperament can help predict children who are at risk for developing adjustment problems and with further research, can improve our ability to identify the children who would most likely benefit from targeted preventive interventions.

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Thesis

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ADJUSTMENT TO PARENTAL DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE: AN  
EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF GENDER AND TEMPERAMENT IN  
CHILDREN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF

SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

FOREST GROVE, OREGON

BY

MICHAEL RYAN SHRIFTER

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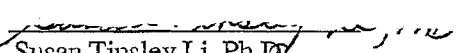
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### Abstract

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## Introduction

Since the 1960s, the rate of children raised during their childhood and adolescent years in homes by their biological, married parents has declined from 85% to nearly 45% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Although there has been a reasonable decrease in the divorce rate over the past few decades, nearly 49% of marriages will result in divorce in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau).

Following divorce, most children initially are thought to reside, typically in a single-parent home with their mother; however, this is generally a temporary situation (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). This is attributable to high rates of remarriage, where roughly 60% of women and 70% of men remarry following divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Due to higher rates of divorce in remarriages than in first marriages, many children experience a series of changes in their family relationships and roles.

Specifically, researchers have found that roughly half of all children whose parents divorce will have a stepfather within four years of parental separation, and 1 out of every 10 children will experience at least two divorces of their residential parent before turning 16 years old (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Consequently, children who are exposed to multiple marital transitions experience the most adverse negative consequences during adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan).

Undoubtedly, most family members are exposed to multiple stressors, attributable to both divorce and remarriage. The transition following divorce or remarriage both involve the restructuring of the household and changes in family roles and relationships.



During the initial period of adjustment, most children experience emotional distress and disrupted functioning, while coping with conflict, separation and loss, and the changes and challenges in their new family situation (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). The process of separation, learning to alternate between households, and possibly moving homes or schools can be very stressful and challenging for children (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2005). In addition, the majority of children appear to have little emotional preparation for their parents' separation, resulting in distress, anxiety, anger, shock, and disbelief (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Complicating their efforts to cope with the major changes in their lives, children are often inadequately informed by their parents about the separation and divorce. As a result, children may struggle with the meaning of this event, resulting in a sense of isolation and cognitive and emotional confusion. Lastly, for children with strong attachments to their parents, their stress may be intensified by the abrupt departure of one parent, usually the father (Kelly & Emery). Consequently, children may be without contact with their nonresident parent for an extended period of time due to the absence of temporary court orders, resulting in additional stress and pain.

A majority of researchers interested in the effects of parental divorce and remarriage have examined the behavioral, emotional, and academic outcomes in children adjusting to family transitions. Such studies have found the outcomes to be largely negative. Researchers have found higher levels of misbehavior and aggression, less competence, more under-controlled behavior, and poorer academic performance in children from divorced and remarried families (Ruschena et al., 2005). Specifically, significant effects of divorce on child adjustment involve externalizing problems, including antisocial, aggressive, noncompliant behavior and lack of self-regulation

(Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Additionally, children's adjustment to divorce and remarriage may also result in internalizing problems, including anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as, difficulty in social relationships. Although problems diminish over a period of adjustment for many children, children of divorced parents are generally less socially, emotionally, and academically well-adjusted than children in non-divorced families (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan).

In contrast, researchers have also found some children to be more resilient in response to parental divorce and may actually enhance their well-being in the long-term by coping with these family transitions. Moreover, children who transition out of a conflictual, abusive, or neglecting family situation through divorce may actually experience more positive effects and show diminished problems following divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Children may also benefit from the introduction of a new supportive step-parent (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Researchers have cautioned their emphasis on resilient children by stating that it is not meant to disregard the distress experienced by most children, yet it is important to note the adaptability of some children in coping with their parents' marital transitions.

Despite the numerous studies emphasizing the negative outcomes in children adjusting to family transitions, there is a growing recognition of the great diversity in children's responses to divorce and remarriage. As previously discussed, most children experience an initial period of emotional distress following divorce. Some children experience more adverse consequences in adjustment, showing more intense and deleterious outcomes, whereas, others appear to adapt well in the early stages of adjustment but experience problems or disrupted functioning that emerge later in life

(Hetherington, 1989). Lastly, a minority of children display an ability to cope constructively with the changes and challenges of the new family situation and become emotionally, socially, and psychologically enhanced individuals.

### *Purpose*

The vulnerability of some children and the resiliency of others when adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage have led researchers to question and explore what factors may influence individual differences in adjustment. Specifically, researchers have proposed that some characteristics of children may influence their vulnerability to adversity (Hetherington et al., 1998). That is, children possess attributes that may increase their vulnerability or protect them from adverse consequences as they adjust to the changes and challenges during and after a divorce. According to Lengua, Sandler, West, Wolchik, and Curran (1999), stable child characteristics are believed to have the greatest effect on adaptive outcomes. Among the majority of studies, researchers most frequently have examined age, gender, and temperament as important stable child characteristics. Thus, although research has consistently demonstrated that many individual characteristics contribute to children's adjustment and either protect or increase their vulnerability to long-term adverse effects following their parents' marital transitions, my focus will primarily involve the child's gender and temperament. The main purpose of the present review, then, is to extend our understanding of the impact of gender and temperament in either facilitating or disrupting the development and adjustment of children experiencing divorce, remarriage, or both. If different psychological and psychosocial qualities can be described for children who respond

differently to divorce and remarriage, perhaps reactions can be predicted, prevented, or ameliorated.

### *Description of Studies*

Within the present review, 23 articles are presented that form the basis of this review. A comprehensive search was conducted using available psychology databases to identify studies that focused on the effects of gender and temperament in children adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage. Studies that focused primarily on the effects of gender in children adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage were included first in the review of the literature. Studies that focused mainly on the effects of temperament in children adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage were included next in the present review. However, in areas where the literature was sparse, studies involving other child variables or characteristics, such as age, were also selected for inclusion.

Conclusions from this review will hopefully improve our understanding of the role of individual differences in adaptive processes and facilitate identification of children at risk for developing adjustment problems. The following discussion is organized around an initial review of the impact of children's gender in relation to their adjustment to family transitions.

### *Review of the Literature on the Impact of Gender in Children Adjusting to Family Transitions*

#### *Overview of Gender*

Few studies have investigated the impact of gender in isolation of other variables in children of divorce and remarriage. Instead, researchers have more frequently examined the interactive effects of gender in relation to the time of adjustment since the

family transition occurred, the custodial parent, and parental remarriage. In an attempt to present an overall synthesis of existing material on gender, in this section I will present some overall findings that are relatively consistent across the extant literature as a whole. Then, in three subsequent sections, I will focus primarily on gender in relation to the other variables listed above.

As previously discussed, earlier research has established that negative effects, including conduct and behavior problems, academic difficulties, emotional distress and problems in coping, are more prevalent in children adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage. More recent studies have focused on whether there are significant gender differences in children adjusting to family transitions. As will be discussed, studies have consistently demonstrated that boys and girls tend to show different kinds of reactions to parental divorce and remarriage.

In earlier research, boys were found to react longer and more intensely in their adjustment to parental divorce than were girls. That is, researchers proposed that divorce was more deleterious for boys than their female counterparts (Reinhard, 1977; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). According to Zill and colleagues, boys were more apt to respond to their family transitions with conduct problems and other acting out behaviors at home and in school. In addition, boys were more likely to drop out of school, and continued to display high behavioral problems in the future. In contrast, girls were more likely to respond to their family transitions with depression and "overcontrolled" behavior.

Although previous literature has emphasized the more deleterious effects of divorce on the adjustment of boys, some researchers have more recently noted a

considerable progression of behavior problems for girls over the life span of their adjustment to family transitions (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In fact, some of these problems have been found to be more detrimental and have resulted in more adverse consequences for girls than for boys. For example, young male and female adolescents of divorce have been found to be similarly vulnerable and affected in the likelihood of becoming teenage parents; however, research has indicated that girls experience more adverse effects of single parenthood than do their male counterparts (Hetherington et al., 1998). According to findings illustrated by Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, young female adolescents, then, are believed to be more likely to drop out of high school and college. Thus, single parenthood is believed to produce more deleterious consequences on the education attainments and well-being of adolescent girls. Given these findings, along with earlier findings presented by Zill et al. (1993), it appears boys may be more likely to drop out earlier in school, whereas girls may be more likely to drop out of school as they become older. Furthermore, higher rates of adolescent childbearing and school dropout in girls have been found to be associated with a lower socio-economic status (Hetherington et al.).

Although studies presented thus far have illustrated specific gender differences with regard to the development of behavior problems, depressive symptoms, and problems in interpersonal relationships in children of divorce, some researchers have acknowledged a minority of girls who have shown exceptional competence in response to divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Specifically, researchers have discovered that some girls emerge as resilient individuals, enhanced by confronting the responsibilities and challenges associated with divorce. However, such resiliency has not

been found for boys following marital transitions. It should be noted that these findings of such enhancement only occurs for girls adjusting to parental divorce in a supportive environment, in the presence of a caring adult, and under moderate levels of stress (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan).

#### *Gender, and Age/Time since Family Transition*

As previously discussed, most children experience an initial period of emotional distress, psychological health and behavioral problems following their parents' marital transitions (Hetherington, 1989). However, as numerous researchers have emphasized, there is great diversity in children's responses throughout their adjustment to parental marital transitions. For instance, some children are more resilient than others and fully recover within a 2-3 year period if the family transition is not compounded by continued stress and adversity (Hetherington et al., 1998). In contrast, other children appear to experience delayed effects, where problems in adjustment may emerge or intensify later on, yet they exhibit an ability to adapt well or without much complication in the early stages of the family transition (Hetherington, 1993). As the effects of gender have been of particular interest to prominent researchers in this area, a few longitudinal studies have focused on the impact of gender in children at various periods of adjustment following their family transitions. Although the number of longitudinal studies is limited, researchers have noted significant findings in some studies.

In one prominent longitudinal study, Hetherington (1993) examined 144 families, of which half of the families were divorced and half were nondivorced. The study included both sons and daughters, who were approximately 4 years of age at the onset of the study. The study was designed to examine children during a 10-year post-adjustment

following their parents' divorce. Hetherington found that in the first year after divorce, both boys and girls displayed more anxious, demanding, and noncompliant behavior in comparison to children in nondivorced families. These problems were found to increase throughout the initial year following the divorce, and then slowly decline in the second year.

By 2 years following the divorce, young girls were found to experience no more emotional distress or disrupted functioning than did girls from nondivorced families, whereas, young boys continued to show more behavior problems at home and in school, than boys in nondivorced families (Hetherington, 1993). However, by age 10, young girls were showing an increasing number of problems, including problems in school and social competence. In addition, Hetherington found girls to be exhibiting less prosocial behavior and more externalizing and internalizing behaviors.

Researchers have acknowledged that the delayed development of externalizing, norm-breaking, and internalizing behaviors in girls is likely attributable to the effects of maturation and maturational timing. In general, these difficulties appear to onset for girls between the ages of 10 and 15 years old (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Furthermore, female early maturers appear to experience more problems than late maturers. These overall findings are consistent with other longitudinal research. Research supports the conclusion that while in younger children, boys exhibit more externalizing behaviors than girls, such problems become fewer for boys and increase for girls as adolescence is approached (Bolgar, Sweig-Frank, & Paris, 1995). For instance, researchers in a similar longitudinal study found that girls experienced higher overall levels of behavioral



problems, and more internalizing problems, including anxiety and depression throughout subsequent periods of adjustment (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson, & Smart, 2004).

### *Gender and the Custodial Parent*

Of particular interest to researchers has been the role of gender in relation to the custodial parent, in predicting children's adjustment following parental divorce (Copeland, 1985; Hetherington et al., 1989; Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, Lee & Escalante, 2004). In one particular study, Hetherington and colleagues (1989) examined the role of gender in children in relation to the custody of either parent, and its effects on the quality of their relationships. Although research in this area is sparse, Hetherington et al. proposed that school-aged children may be more likely to adapt better in the custody of a parent of the same sex. As predicted, boys as compared to girls, in the custody of their fathers were found to be more independent, social, and mature, and exhibited higher self-esteem. Conversely, girls in the custody of their fathers were found to display more behavioral problems and exhibit higher levels of aggression.

Although further research is needed, it appears that the effects of gender in children and the gender of the custodial parent may be important predictors of children's post-divorce adjustment. However, there are nuances in these findings, in that, a majority of children reside with their mothers following parental divorce. Thus, researchers have considered mother to child relationships as an important variable in predicting children's adjustment following parental divorce. As will be discussed, researchers have more specifically suggested that mother-to-child disclosures may be potential stressors for children during adjustment.

Although research has been somewhat inconclusive, some researchers have suggested that mother-daughter relationships are closer, and more intimate than mother-son relationships in divorced families (Koerner et al., 2004). In one particular study, the researchers examined the extent of mother-to-child disclosures following divorce, and were interested in whether differences existed between sons or daughters (Koerner et al.). The researchers acknowledged that mothers might be more inclined to talk to daughters than to sons regarding sensitive topics. More specifically, the researchers revealed that divorced mothers disclose more frequently and in more detail about their personal thoughts and feelings to daughters rather than sons. As researchers have considered sensitive mother-to-child disclosures as potential stressors for children, Koerner and colleagues have suggested that daughters might be more vulnerable to deleterious consequences in adjustment due to characteristics of the mother-daughter relationship (Koerner et al., 2004).

#### *Gender and Remarriage/Stepfamilies*

Similar to that of divorce, studies have also focused on the effects of gender in children adjusting to parental remarriage. Although the adjustment for children following divorce and remarriage may appear similar, there are several differences that researchers have acknowledged. Most notably, during the adjustment to remarriage, children have previously experienced life in their family of origin, and typically, a period of time in a single-parent household. Consequently, their experiences in earlier family situations affect their responses to new family situations. As supported by research, children typically reside with their mother following divorce (Guttman & Lazar, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Thus, the majority of researchers have focused

their efforts on children adjusting to maternal remarriage, and the introduction of a stepfather.

According to Hetherington (1993), both boys and girls are initially resistant to the entrance of a stepfather, resulting in more externalizing and internalizing behavior, and displaying less prosocial behavior. However, following the initial period of adjustment, research in this area has consistently demonstrated that over time, boys in stepfamilies have been found to show improvement on measures of adjustment in response to the introduction of a stepfather (Hetherington et al., 1989). Moreover, in a study conducted by Bolgar et al. (1995), researchers illustrated that maternal remarriage resulted in a decrease in behavioral problems in boys, but an increase in behavior problems for girls. In a similar study, researchers have found that, generally, antisocial behavior is reduced and achievement is enhanced in boys who develop close, supportive relationships with their stepfathers (Hetherington et al., 1998). On the other hand, according to Hetherington et al., girls are more likely to exhibit lower achievement and poorer adjustment in a family situation involving either a stepfather or stepmother.

As prominent researchers have noted, such as Hetherington, Bridges, and colleagues, the overall findings in this area of research suggest that over time, boys are likely to be more accepting of the introduction of a stepfather into their family situation than are girls (Hetherington et al., 1998). These researchers, among others, have argued that in the early stages of adjustment to maternal remarriage, many children may perceive stepfathers as intruders to the family, or competitors for their mother's attention and affection (Hetherington, 1989). However, due to conflictual, and often ambivalent relationships between sons and their mothers following divorce, boys may, in fact,

benefit by the entrance of a warm, caring, and supportive stepfather. In contrast, for daughters who often develop close relationships with their mothers following divorce, and hold more responsible, meaningful roles in the family, they may feel threatened by a stepfather and hold resentment toward their mother for remarrying (Hetherington et al.). As emphasized by other researchers, such as Kasen, Cohen, Brook, and Hartmark (1996), the presence of a stepfather may result in daughters feeling a psychological loss in terms of divided time, attention, and loyalty from their mothers.

#### *Summary of Gender*

One of the goals of the present review was to examine the literature regarding the impact of gender in children of parental divorce and remarriage, to highlight the varying differences in adjustment. As evidenced in extant literature, researchers have more frequently studied the impact of gender in relation to other interactive variables in children's adjustment. As has been demonstrated throughout this review, boys and girls have shown different kinds of reactions to both parental divorce and remarriage. Specifically, boys were found to react longer and more intensely to parental divorce than were girls in the early stages of adjustment. For example, researchers concluded that boys were more apt to respond to family transitions with conduct problems and exhibit more externalizing behavior at home and in school. As discovered in more recent studies, researchers have emphasized that these gender differences are not consistent throughout ensuing periods of adjustment. Unfortunately, the current literature base is limited with regard to longitudinal research focused on children during the life-span of adjustment following their parents' family transitions. However, some prominent researchers have acknowledged a steady progression of more externalizing and internalizing behavior

problems in girls during subsequent periods of adjustment, particularly once adolescence is reached. Conversely, boys have shown a considerable decline of such problems throughout later stages of adjustment.

As previously discussed, researchers have found that roughly half of all children whose parents divorce will have a stepfather within four years of parental separation. Thus, researchers have frequently examined the effects of gender in children adjusting to parental remarriage. Specifically, researchers have found that boys may actually be enhanced by the entrance of a stepparent, whereas girls may feel threatened, particularly by the introduction of a stepfather. Consequently, research in this area has consistently demonstrated that over time, parental remarriage resulted in a decrease in behavioral problems in boys, but an increase in such problems for girls.

Researchers have also studied the interactive effects of gender in relation to the custodial parent, in predicting adjustment problems in children of divorce. As previously discussed, research suggests that children may be better able to adapt in an environment with a parent of the same sex. More specifically, researchers have emphasized that boys, as compared to girls, were found to be more independent, mature, socially-adjusted, and exhibited higher self-esteem in the custody of their fathers; whereas, girls in the custody of their fathers displayed more behavioral problems and exhibited higher levels of aggression. Furthermore, researchers have specifically considered mother-to-child relationships as an important factor in children's post-divorce adjustment. Researchers have concluded that mother-daughter relationships are closer, and more intimate, resulting in mothers feeling more inclined to talk to daughters than to sons regarding sensitive issues. Moreover, researchers referred to a mother's disclosure as a potential

stressor for children that may place daughters at an increased risk for developing adjustment problems. Despite the gaps within the extant literature, the research presented in this review provides a foundation for understanding the role of gender in relation to other variables, in predicting the children at greatest risk for developing adjustment problems following their parents' family transitions.

## Review of the Literature on the Impact of Temperament in Children Adjusting to Family Transitions

### *Overview of Temperament*

In addition to gender, temperament is an important individual characteristic that has been examined in relation to children's adjustment to family transitions. Few researchers have examined the effects of temperament exclusive of other variables in children of divorce. That is, studies have more frequently investigated the interactive effects of temperament and other variables, in predicting children's adjustment following divorce. As will be discussed in three succeeding sections, researchers have focused primarily on temperament in relation to the following variables: psychological symptomatology, parent-child relations, and threat appraisals and coping. In the current section, the objective will be to present a synthesis of the extant literature on temperament by presenting some overall findings that are reasonably consistent across research as a whole.

As previously discussed, there is a growing recognition among researchers that stable child characteristics greatly contribute to the vulnerability of some children and the resiliency of others in response to their parents' marital transitions. Thus, numerous researchers have more recently studied the effects of temperament in an attempt to

describe individual differences of children adjusting to parental divorce and remarriage. More specifically, some researchers in this area have focused on the impact of temperament on the threat appraisals and coping styles of children of divorce. In other words, researchers have hypothesized that temperament plays an important role as a predictor of children's appraisal and coping processes, which in turn affect the adjustment outcomes of children (Lengua et al., 1999; Reynolds, 1996).

Researchers have conceptualized temperament as an important factor in the development of symptomatology in children of divorce (Kasen et al., 1996; Lengua, West, & Sandler, 1998; Lengua, Wolchik, Sandler, & West, 2000). That is, some researchers have proposed that temperament contributes directly and indirectly to the onset of children's psychological symptomatology. Recent studies have also focused on the role of temperament on the social development of children of divorce (Hetherington, 1989; Lengua et al., 2000; Ruschena et al., 2004). For example, the nature and quality of parent-child relationships is believed to be significantly influenced by the effects of temperament (Lengua et al., 2000).

There are several approaches to conceptualizing temperament in the literature on divorce. The majority of researchers have generally defined temperament as "the physiological basis for the affective arousal, expression, and regulation components of personality (Lengua et al., 1998, 2000, pp. 15-16)." This definition reflects a theoretical model of temperament proposed by Rothbart (1989), where temperament is viewed as heritable, physiologically-based individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation. As proposed by Rothbart, reactivity consists of two separate reactive systems, negative emotionality and positive emotionality. Negative emotionality refers to the arousal of

negative affect, such as fear, frustration or sensitivity to negative environmental cues. In contrast, positive emotionality refers to the arousal of positive affect, such as smiling, laughter, pleasure, and sensitivity to positive environmental clues. Furthermore, Rothbart conceptualized self-regulation as involving processes that control or modulate reactivity, either facilitating or inhibiting the affective response, including attention, impulsivity, approach, withdrawal, and behavioral inhibition.

Numerous researchers have emphasized the importance of Rothbart's theoretical approach to temperament in that it serves as a foundation for understanding the effects of temperament on children's adjustment to family transitions. In other words, individual differences in reactivity, emotionality and self-regulation may be important predictors of children's post-divorce psychological adjustment. Indeed, research in this area has consistently demonstrated that the diversity of children's responses in patterns of adjustment is due in part to the individual attributes of the child, such as temperament. The following sections review the effects of temperament on children's adjustment to divorce, both directly and indirectly. For example, temperament may have direct effects on symptoms by increasing or decreasing the presence of psychopathology. Alternatively, temperament may have indirect effects on adjustment through its effect on the coping styles of children, as well as interactive effects with parenting. In other words, the combined effects of temperament with coping styles and parenting are hypothesized as important for children's post-divorce adjustment.

Many prominent researchers, including Hetherington and colleagues (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999), have attempted to address the ways in which temperament may influence



children's vulnerability to adversity, or conversely, lead to greater resiliency. In several reviews presented by Hetherington and colleagues, differences in adjustment outcomes were compared between temperamentally difficult children and temperamentally easy children of divorce (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). As predicted by Hetherington, temperamentally difficult children were found to be less adaptable to change, resulting in an increased vulnerability to stress and adversity. Children who exhibited a difficult temperament were found to experience decrements in later coping skills, and to show an increase in behavior problems. In contrast, temperamentally easy children were found to cope constructively with the changes and challenges of a new family situation (Hetherington et al.). According to Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, children who have an easy temperament are more likely to elicit positive responses and support and to fully utilize their available resources to help moderate stressful experiences. On the other hand, temperamentally difficult children are more likely to evoke aversive responses and be the target of criticism and displaced anger by their parents and step-parents. In fact, temperamentally easy children who have previously experienced moderate levels of stress and adversity in a supportive environment have been found to be enhanced in future situations requiring adaptive processes (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan).

#### *Temperament and Psychological Symptomatology*

As evidenced in present research, the role of temperament may influence children's adjustment in a number of ways. As stated by Lengua et al. (1998, pp. 164-165), "temperament may influence key socialization experiences, exacerbate or buffer the effects of other risk factors, or may represent a diathesis, or vulnerability, that increases

the likelihood of adjustment problems under adverse conditions." One such condition, as discussed throughout the present review, is the stress associated with experiencing family transitions, including parental divorce and remarriage. Thus, a major goal of recent divorce research has been to identify which children may be at greater risk for developing psychological problems or may be protected from the impact of divorce, depending on their temperament.

Although research is limited, some studies have conceptualized temperament as an important predictor of children's psychological symptomatology, and thus, have attempted to identify certain temperament characteristics, which are believed to greatly contribute to the development of psychological symptoms and/or problems (Kasen et al., 1996; Lengua et al., 1998, 1999, 2000). Thus, in one study, researchers examined this relationship by obtaining reports of both temperament and symptomatology from a large, community-based sample of children of divorce (Lengua et al., 1998). Children aged 9 to 12 years old who had experienced divorce within the past two years reported on their own temperament during an interview with a trained professional, while also being assessed for the nature and intensity of their current symptomatology. In the current study, the researchers predicted that negative emotionality and impulsivity would be related to higher levels of symptoms, whereas positive emotionality and attention-focusing would be related to lower levels of symptoms. Children with high levels of negative emotionality were hypothesized to be more vulnerable to the development of psychological problems due to their greater emotional experience of negative arousal. Moreover, children characterized by low self-regulation were expected to also be at greater risk, as they are likely to be unable to adapt to negative arousal or modulate

behavioral expressions of negative arousal. Consequently, Lengua and colleagues hypothesized that negative emotionality would be related to both internalizing and externalizing problems, whereas impulsivity was expected to be an important predictor of externalizing problems. Conversely, children with high levels of positive emotionality were hypothesized to be less likely to develop adjustment problems, due to an ability to maintain positive emotions in the presence of divorce related stressors.

As predicted, according to Lengua and colleagues (1998), there were significant effects of temperament on symptomatology. Based on reports from children in the study, high levels of negative emotionality were found to be associated with an increased risk for developing symptoms of depression, whereas children high in impulsivity were more likely to develop conduct problems. Furthermore, children with higher levels of positive emotionality were found to be more resilient, despite experiencing the adverse conditions of divorce, and as a result, exhibited less adjustment problems. These findings were supported by results in a follow-up study by Lengua and colleagues (1999). Positive emotionality was significantly related to both lower depression and conduct problems. In addition, these children were found to have more positive social relationships, and were more likely to evoke positive feedback from their peers in social interactions. In contrast, children with low positive emotionality were found to be more likely to experience the apathy and anhedonia symptoms of depression, and exhibited more adjustment problems.

In an earlier study that also focused on temperament and symptomatology, Kasen and colleagues (1996) investigated the effects of temperament and divorce on psychiatric disorders in children. The researchers found that children who exhibited more vulnerable characteristics of temperament were at an increased risk of developing affective and

anxiety disorders, depression, and conduct problems, including oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder. Similar to the research in this area, vulnerable temperamental characteristics in this study were defined as children with high levels of negative emotionality and impulsivity. These findings suggest that children's temperament may be a significant risk factor for developing psychological problems following divorce and other major life stressors.

#### *Temperament and Parent-Child Relations*

Similar to extant research on gender, researchers have also studied the interactive effects of temperament and parenting in predicting adjustment problems of children of divorce. Researchers have suggested that a child's temperament may in fact have a powerful effect upon the type of relationship he or she has with a parent, which would in turn affect adjustment outcomes for the child. Specifically, in one study, researchers examined the extent of temperamental variables, including positive emotionality and impulsivity, and negative parenting characteristics, including maternal rejection and inconsistent discipline, in attempting to identify children at greatest risk for developing adjustment problems following divorce (Lengua et al., 2000). Moreover, inclusion of these parenting dimensions was suggested to help differentiate the children most strongly affected by negative parenting. In this study, the researchers utilized a sample of 231 mothers and children who had experienced divorce within the past 2 years. The mothers and children of the study were interviewed by well-trained, professional interviewers, where reports on parenting, temperament, and adjustment variables were obtained.

In overwhelming fashion, Lengua and colleagues found that children characterized with a difficult temperament were more likely to develop significant

adjustment problems in the presence of negative parenting. In other words, for children high in impulsivity who were unable to regulate their emotions and behaviors on their own, the effects of parental inconsistency was greatly detrimental. These children were more likely to develop both depression and conduct problems than children low in impulsivity or parental inconsistency. In contrast, the researchers also found that children high in positive emotionality showed more resiliency in the presence of maternal rejection. These children appeared to demonstrate an ability to concentrate on the positive aspects of their environment and to maintain positive affect despite parental rejection. Thus, the researchers concluded that positive emotionality may serve as a protective factor for children in the presence of maternal rejection. These findings are consistent with findings of a few other studies focused on the interactions of temperament and parenting.

For example, Hetherington (1989) found that temperamentally difficult children were more likely to develop significant adjustment problems following divorce due to aversive interactions with the parent. Moreover, it was suggested by Hetherington that these children are likely to be both the elicitor and the target of aversive responses by the parent. Conversely, temperamentally easy children were found to be less subjected to criticism, displaced anger, and anxiety by the parent. And, when they were the recipient of aversive responses, temperamentally easy children were more able to cope with the aversive parental transaction.

In terms of the effects of temperamental variables on the quality of parent-child relationships, Ruschena and colleagues (2004, p. 361) stated that "children and adolescents with positive temperamental styles are more likely to have developed warm,

supportive parental relationships that would be invaluable during any period of difficulty." Moreover, these authors concluded that children who have a warm and supportive relationship with at least one parent display better adjustment in comparison with those who do not. Consequently, the researchers emphasized the importance of being able to approach others for help or to willingly enable approach of others as predictors of optimal coping for children of divorce.

#### *Effects of Temperament on Threat Appraisals and Coping*

Although research is considerably sparse in this area, some attention has been directed at understanding how temperament may influence children's coping and subsequent adjustment. Researchers in one prominent study have emphasized the significance of the relations between the effects of temperament and children's threat appraisals and coping styles (Lengua et al., 1999). In this study, the researchers utilized a sample of 223 children aged 9-12 years old who had experienced divorce within the last two years. The purpose of the study was to further understand the mechanisms by which individual differences affect response to stress. To accomplish this goal, the researchers examined the interrelations between temperament, appraisal, and coping, as important predictors of children's post-divorce adjustment.

Lengua and colleagues (1999) hypothesized that individual differences in temperament may be related to differences in perception of events as stressful. More specifically, these researchers proposed that children with higher levels of negative emotionality may experience greater negative arousal in response to stressful events, resulting in the emergence of negative cognitions to make sense of their negative arousal.

Thus, having a temperament characterized by high negative emotionality may be an important predictor of higher threat appraisals for stressful events (Lengua et al.).

Furthermore, as suggested by Lengua and colleagues (1999), children who perceive negative events as highly threatening may encounter greater distress in the presence of events, resulting in a greater need to cope. In this study, the researchers defined coping in terms of two independent dimensions, active coping and avoidant coping. Active coping referred to direct, constructive strategies, such as cognitive decision making, direct problem solving, positive cognitive restructuring, and seeking understanding. Avoidant coping referred to indirect, avoidance strategies, such as cognitive avoidance and avoidant behavior. It was expected that children high in negative emotionality would be more inclined to use avoidant strategies to achieve immediate relief from their emotional experience, rather than active coping strategies (Lengua et al.). In contrast, the researchers proposed that children high in positive emotionality would be more likely to acknowledge potential positive aspects of events, resulting in greater confidence and perceived coping efficacy. Thus, positive emotionality in children was hypothesized to be indirectly related to an increased use of direct or active coping strategies (Lengua et al., 1999).

As expected, children high in negative emotionality were more likely to evaluate events as threatening, resulting in higher levels of arousal. These children were more inclined to focus on the negative cues of an event; whereas, children high in positive emotionality were found to attend more to positive, rewarding cues in the environment. Children who were higher in negative emotionality were found to be unable to delay reactions to stressors, and thus, were more likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies.

Consequently, the researchers concluded that an inability to use effective coping strategies would likely result in greater post-divorce adjustment problems in children with higher levels of negative emotionality.

In a related study, Ruschena and colleagues (2004) discovered that children with positive, outgoing, flexible temperamental attributes were more likely to make efficacious attempts at coping, resulting in improved outcomes following a family transition. These findings are concordant with Hetherington (1989), in that, under supportive conditions, temperamentally easy children were enhanced by their abilities to delay gratification and practice problem-solving tasks during times of stress, and were more flexible and adaptive in solving stressful problems in the future.

#### *Summary of Temperament*

An objective of the present review was to investigate the literature regarding the effects of temperament in children adjusting to parental divorce. As described in previous sections, there is a growing recognition that much of the research is focused primarily on the impact of temperament in relation to other variables, including psychological symptomatology, and parent-child relations, as well as its effects on threat appraisals and coping. In terms of overall findings, researchers have consistently demonstrated that temperamentally difficult children are less adaptable to change, resulting in an increased vulnerability to stress and adversity; whereas, temperamentally easy children have been found to be able to cope more constructively with the changes and challenges that arise during adjustment to family transitions.

As described in the present review, researchers have conceptualized temperament as influencing children's adjustment in a number of ways. Specifically, researchers have



concluded that children with high levels of negative emotionality are at greatest risk for developing symptoms of depression and children high in impulsivity are more likely to develop conduct problems during post-divorce adjustment. In contrast, children with higher levels of positive emotionality were found to be more resilient, despite experiencing stressful conditions associated with divorce, and as a result, exhibited less adjustment problems.

Researchers have also emphasized the importance of the role of temperament and parenting in predicting adjustment problems in children of divorce. Researchers established that children characterized with a difficult temperament were more likely to develop significant adjustment problems in the presence of negative parenting. Conversely, children high in positive emotionality were found to be more resilient in the presence of maternal rejection. Moreover, researchers have demonstrated that children and adolescents with more positive temperamental attributes are more likely to develop supportive parental relationships, resulting in more positive outcomes during post-divorce adjustment.

Although current literature was relatively sparse with regard to the effects of temperament on children's threat appraisals and coping styles, researchers in one prominent study found significant differences between children with positive temperamental attributes in comparison with children with negative temperamental attributes. As predicted, children high in negative emotionality were more likely to evaluate events as threatening, resulting in greater distress and more importantly, a greater need to cope. These children were more likely to engage in avoidant coping strategies, which contributed to the onset of post-divorce adjustment problems.

Conversely, children exhibiting more positive, flexible temperamental qualities were more likely to attend to positive, rewarding cues in the environment, and to also consider stressful events as being a challenge that they could overcome. Consequently, these children were more likely to engage in direct or active coping strategies, resulting in improved outcomes during adjustment to divorce. Consistent with the research on gender, extant research presented in the previous section improves our understanding of the role of temperament and other interacting variables, in predicting post-divorce adjustment in children. The following sections address the limitations of the current literature with regard to the factors of gender and temperament and provide suggestions for future directions.

#### Summary, Limitations, and Future Directions

The rationale of the present review was an attempt to extend our understanding of the impact of the factors of gender and temperament in describing individual differences in children's adjustment during and after marital family transitions. As researchers have emphasized, there is great diversity among responses to parental divorce and remarriage; some children have been found to be more vulnerable to deleterious consequences of their parents' marital transitions, whereas, others appear to be more resilient during their adjustment to the new changes and challenges associated with the family transition. Stable child characteristics, such as gender and temperament, are believed to have the greatest effect on adaptive outcomes (Lengua et al., 1999). Thus, the main objective of this review was to facilitate further identification of children at greatest risk for developing adjustment problems, which would perhaps contribute to an ability to predict, prevent, or ameliorate such reactions.

As has been demonstrated throughout the current review, individual characteristics, such as gender and temperament, do greatly contribute to children's adjustment and either protect or increase their vulnerability to long-term adverse effects following their parents' marital transitions. Specifically, although boys have been found to react more intensely and show more enduring responses to divorce in the early stages of adjustment, researchers have discovered that girls show an increasing number of externalizing and internalizing problems and exhibit less prosocial behavior during subsequent periods of adjustment. Researchers also studied the effects of gender in children in relation to the custodial parent, in predicting children's adjustment following parental divorce. Unfortunately, much of the research was limited in this area. Despite the lack of empirical findings, the current literature in this area suggests that children may benefit and adapt better in the custody of a parent of the same sex. This phenomenon was especially true for boys in the custody of their fathers. Researchers have also emphasized the importance of mother-to-child relationships in influencing children's adjustment. The research presented in this review suggests that girls may be more vulnerable to the development of adjustment problems due to a higher prevalence of mother-to-child disclosures with daughters. Moreover, the interactive effects of gender and remarriage was notable, in that, boys were more likely to be enhanced and eventually accept the introduction of a stepparent; whereas, girls were more likely to feel threatened and hold resentment toward their mother for remarrying.

Further investigation revealed that temperament exclusively, as well as, in relation to other interactive variables plays an important role in predicting children's adjustment following parents' marital transitions. Children characterized with more positive

temperamental attributes (i.e. positive emotionality) were more likely to focus on the positive cues in a stressful environment, and thus, engage in more active coping strategies. Conversely, children characterized with more negative temperamental attributes (i.e. negative emotionality and impulsivity) were more likely to perceive events as threatening, and thus, were found to engage in more avoidant coping strategies. Consequently, children high in negative emotionality were found to experience greater post-divorce adjustment problems; whereas, children high in positive emotionality were more likely to experience improved outcomes following a family transition. More specifically, certain temperamental characteristics were found to greatly contribute to the development of psychological symptomatology. As previously discussed, children with high levels of negative emotionality were found to be associated with an increased risk for developing symptoms of depression and anxiety, and children high in impulsivity were more likely to develop conduct problems during their post-divorce adjustment. As expected, children higher in positive emotionality experienced less adjustment problems, and were more resilient in the face of adversity. Similar to the research on gender, current literature is limited with regard to the interactive effects of temperament and parent-child relations. However, researchers concluded that the extent of temperamental variables, including positive emotionality and impulsivity, either moderated the impact of negative parenting or facilitated disruption and contributed further to the development of significant adjustment problems.

As evidenced in the present review, there are apparent gaps within the extant literature with regard to the impact of gender and temperament in children's adjustment to parental divorce and remarriage. Although within the current literature base, there are

studies that focus on how individual risk and protective factors affect the adjustment of children, additional research of these factors is needed to fully understand the role of gender and temperament, in predicting children's adjustment following family transitions. Specifically, there is a lack of longitudinal research examining the effects of gender in children at subsequent periods of adjustment. Although a few longitudinal studies included in the review have focused on the adjustment of children over time, most researchers have conducted cross-sectional studies that examine children at one point in time. Moreover, these studies do not reflect the dynamic interaction of risk and protective factors that occur over the course of adjustment, and thus, do not further contribute to our understanding of the children at greatest risk for developing problems during later stages of adjustment.

Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical research in the area of gender in relation to the custodial parent. According to a limited number of researchers, the effects of gender in children and the sex of the custodial parent may be important predictors of children's post-divorce adjustment. Moreover, researchers have also considered mother to child relationships as an important variable in predicting children's adjustment following parental divorce. However, these findings lack subsequent empirical support, as there are few follow-up studies that exist within the current literature base. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that the role of gender in relation to the custodial parent contributes to the adjustment of children without further research.

In terms of temperament, a considerable gap exists within the area of research directed at understanding how temperament may influence children's coping and subsequent adjustment. Specifically, researchers in one study emphasized the

significance of the relations between the effects of temperament and children's threat appraisals and coping styles. However, as evidenced in the present review, there is a lack of empirical research focused on temperament in relation to these variables. Although Lengua and colleagues (1999) concluded that the interrelations between temperament, appraisal, and coping are important predictors of children's post-divorce adjustment, additional research is needed to support this conclusion.

Unfortunately, there are notable limitations that must be considered with respect to the literature presented in the current review. As previously discussed, researchers have primarily examined gender and temperament in children in relation to specific variables. Although the interactive effects of these variables proved invaluable, in predicting children's adjustment following family transitions, much of the research does not reflect overall findings of gender or temperament as a whole and may limit the generalizability of the current findings of children of divorce. Furthermore, given the high prevalence of children residing with their mothers following parental divorce, many of the studies were focused solely on the adjustment of children in the custody of their mothers or in relation to maternal remarriage. Consequently, research in this area does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the influences of relationships and interactions among other family subsystems on the adjustment of children.

Further limitations of the literature include studies mainly characterized with relatively small sample sizes, involving only maternal or child reports. In addition, a majority of the studies included in this review involved only middle-class white families. These samples of children of divorce are only a select group and do not represent all children of divorce from the general population. Thus, the generalizability of the findings

of children of divorce is limited. Additionally, the methodology utilized in many of the studies may have greatly influenced childrens' reports of adjustment. As researchers have more frequently employed quantitative methods for convenience, such as a mailed questionnaire, some responses were more superficial and lacked important information. Thus, contrary to the use of a qualitative method, such as a clinical interview, the use of a written/mailed format limited our understanding of the experiences and feelings of divorced parents and children during adjustment. Another notable limitation is that much of the research originates from two main sets of investigators, resulting in less diversity of opinion. In other words, the findings presented in the current review may potentially be misleading because they are based on research from the same groups of individuals, and thus, should be interpreted with caution.

Based on the literature in the current review, there is a growing recognition of how parental divorce, remarriage, and risk and protective factors affect the adjustment of children. However, there is much to be learned with respect to divorced families and children in future research. Some suggestions for new directions in research follow. As previously discussed, most studies focused on post-divorce adjustment in children are characterized by cross-sectional research. Thus, further research is needed that is longitudinal. Longitudinal studies that follow families over many years will be useful for determining the longer term effects as children reach adolescence, and as adolescents reach adulthood. Furthermore, researchers of future studies of divorce should consider the effects of extrafamilial factors in relation to the adjustment of children in divorced families. Factors such as neighborhoods, schools, and peers, which have been rarely studied, presumably influence the adjustment of children following family transitions.

Further suggestions for new directions in research include studies involving larger, more inclusive samples, where cultural, ethnic, and racial factors are all considered. Thus, for studies which include samples that are more representative of the general population, the generalizability will be significantly greater.

As supported by research in the present review, the majority of children who experience parental divorce also experience life in a stepfamily and thus, many are faced with multiple marital transitions and cohabiting relationships of their parents. Although literature in this area has slowly accumulated in recent years, many questions remain with regard to the effects of multiple transitions and reorganizations of the family on children's adjustment. Consequently, future research should account for the common occurrence of parental remarriage and its effects on the adjustment of children.

Furthermore, although research was considerably limited, researchers have noted some important contributions of the parent in the adjustment of children. This was apparent in the literature on gender and temperament. Thus, in order to fully understand the role of gender and temperament in describing individual differences in children's adjustment, researchers must consider the influences of the parent in future research.

Despite the lack of empirical research in some areas, the results in this review have provided important implications for understanding children's adjustment to divorce and remarriage. Specifically, the results suggest that the impact of gender and temperament can help predict children who are at risk for developing adjustment problems. With further research, such information might be useful in making decisions about which children would most likely benefit from targeted preventive interventions. Moreover, because gender and temperament are stable characteristics, researchers should



emphasize the importance of treatment in future research and examine which interventions would be most effective for those children demonstrating the greatest need for treatment.

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