

**The Impact of Parental Conflict and Father Closeness on the
Development of Children's Heterosexual Relationships**

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Stephanie Lawrence

Thesis Director

Michael R Stevenson

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1987

Expected date of graduation

Spring 1987

The Impact of Parental Conflict and Father Closeness on the
Development of Children's Heterosexual Relationships

Stephanie Lawrence

Ball State University

Runninghead: IMPACT OF PARENTAL CONFLICT AND FATHER
CLOSENESS

Abstract

The primary goal of this study was to assess the quality of participants' intimate heterosexual relationships as determined by their relationships with their fathers and the amount of conflict between parents as observed by the children. Two hundred two single, white students between the ages of 18 and 22 years participated. One hundred two were male and 100 were female. Participants answered questionnaires which consisted of a demographics section, seven items which reported conflict between parents, six measures which assessed their current heterosexual relationships, and two measures which assessed past and present relationships with fathers. Respondents who reported closeness to their fathers also reported satisfaction with their dating activities. Females were more likely to report loving and liking their partners, and also reported more intimacy with their partners. Both males and females were more likely to report more liking and loving of their partners if they also reported minimal parental conflict.

The Impact of Parental Conflict and Father Closeness on the
Development of Children's Heterosexual Relationships

In 1984, approximately half of the families in the United States had children under the age of eighteen (Norton & Glick, 1986). Married couples with children under the age of 18 accounted for 29% of the population, and single parents, 26% (Hanson & Sporakowski, 1986). In 88.9% of the one-parent homes, the mother was the single parent. Divorced or separated women made up 55.3% of this 88.9% (Hanson & Sporakowski, 1986). Between 1970 and 1984, the rate of divorced mothers as parents skyrocketed by nearly 300% (Norton & Glick, 1986).

The impact of parental divorce on children has been a valid cause of concern for many. Kulka and Weingarten (1979) have suggested that the effect on children can be detrimental to the extent of the divorce becoming a focal point against which other later crises are compared. They have also suggested, however, that children from non-intact homes are not more emotionally damaged than their peers from intact homes, but simply more able to talk about their problems after having witnessed their parents' public admission of imperfection. Kulka and Weingarten (1979) have also noted that divorce may

be harder on boys than on girls.

In addition to difference in emotional adjustment, empirical evidence suggests transmission of marital difficulties from one generation to the next. Kulka and Weingarten (1979) found that children from divorce-disrupted homes later viewed themselves as inadequate spouses, and viewed jobs or motherhood as more important than marriage than those from intact homes. Mueller and Pope (1977) have found that parents' marital instability leads to offsprings' choosing high-risk mates, which eventually results in children's disrupted marriages.

In spite of evidence demonstrating differences between offspring of divorced and intact marriages, some debate exists concerning the extent to which these differences should be attributed to divorce. Parental conflict in intact homes may be as detrimental to children as divorce. Glenwick & Nevrey (1986) support the view that stable one-parent homes create better environments for children than conflict-filled two-parent homes. Parental conflict causes confusion and distress in children (Hess & Camara, 1979). This emotional upheaval can be reduced by the children's development of close relationships to each parent, and by the children's

understanding that they are not the cause of the conflict.

Parents who do not wish to remain married sometimes do so for the children's sake. Some evidence indicates, however, that children whose parents are in constant conflict are more likely to exhibit behavior problems than those children from harmonious non-intact and intact homes (Emery, 1982).

Divorce does cause disruption; however, excessive, continuous conflict may produce more damaging effects than a divorce which ends conflict. Emery (1982) also suggests that type and amount of conflict play a role in children's subsequent problems. Open hostility and lengthy disagreements produce a more disastrous effect than does mild conflict. Children who are removed from these conflict-filled environments fare better emotionally than those who remain in turbulent homes.

Not only do parents' conflicts influence children's behavior, but the parental role-model may also influence subsequent dating patterns. One finding by Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) shows that children from intact, happy homes threaten to break up relationships less often than children of either divorced or intact unhappy homes. Parental conflict during divorce may encourage satisfying courtship activities of the children; they may see new relationships of their

parents' developing, and follow that model. Continued conflict after parental divorce, however, may cause excessive distress to the children, and subsequently, evaluations of their own relationships reveal dissatisfaction. If the children feel that their relationships with their parents decline after divorce, they are more likely to cohabit or marry (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984).

The present investigation focuses on the effects of parental conflict and divorce upon offsprings' subsequent development of heterosexual relationships. The intimate relationships reported by the participants will be examined in relation to their reports of closeness to their fathers and their perceptions of their parents' conflict patterns. Participants who report feeling close to their fathers would be expected to report more satisfaction in their own intimate relationships than those not reporting closeness to father. Similarly, the participants who came from homes in which conflict was minimal would be expected to report greater intimacy in their current relationships.

Methods

Participants

Two hundred fourteen college students completed

questionnaires as one way to fulfill a part of course requirements. Two hundred two of these were used for analysis. These 202 were all single, white, and between the ages of 18 and 22 years. One hundred two males and 100 females participated. In 57.2% of the cases, participants reported that their parents were married; 28.4% were divorced or separated, and 14.4% reported some other type of parental marital disruption. The ages of the respondents when parental divorce occurred ranged from one to twenty. At least one parent did not live in the same house as the children in 42.5% of the cases. Remarriage of either the mother, the father, or both, had occurred in 31.6% of participants' families, with participants' ages ranging from two to nineteen at the time of remarriage. No participants reported death of the mother, but 2.5% reported death of the father.

Parents' education was reported. Of the mothers, 41.1% had completed high school; 35% of the fathers had. A standard college education had been received by 17.8% of the mothers and 20.5% of the fathers; 6.9% of the mothers and 13% of the fathers had received some type of graduate degree.

Participants were also asked to report the amount of parental conflict that they observed. They rated the degree of

hostility that their parents displayed on a five point continuum. Fifteen and two tenths percent reported open hostility, 16.2% mild hostility, 40.4% some hostility, some calmness, 13.6% mild calmness, and 14.6% usually calm even though angry. One percent reported frequent physical harm between parents, 7% occasional harm, 11.9% infrequent harm, and 80.1% no harm. Participants also reported the degree to which parents got along in the past, and the degree to which they get along now. Parents were rated as getting along well now in 43.5% of the cases. At the other extreme, 5.5% didn't get along and 9.8% don't get along now. Parents' patterns of disagreements were rated according to duration, amount of communication, and amount of parents' involvement of the children in the parents' conflict. Four percent reported lack of any communication, 20.7% some lack of communication, 38.4% occasional lack of communication, 26.8% infrequent lack, and 10.1% communicated even though angry. In 25.8% of the cases, participants reported quickly settled disputes, in 33.3% quickly settled but occasionally renewed disputes, in 37.9% reported that disputes were maintained until the problem was solved, regardless of time, and in 3% reported little concern for immediate solutions. In 59.2% of the cases, participants were usually not or never

involved in parental disputes; in 26.4% of the cases, they were sometimes involved, and in 14.4% of the cases they were often or always involved.

Measures

In addition to the demographics section, the questionnaire included measures of participants' relationships to their fathers, both during childhood and currently, and measures of participants' intimate heterosexual relationships. Higher scores indicated positive assessments, and lower scores indicated negative assessments.

Father-child relationships were assessed using two scales. Respondents were asked to give their retrospective assessment of parental support during childhood by responding to items from the Parent-Child Interaction Rating Scale (Heilbrun, 1964) and the Cornell Parent Behavior Description (Devereux, Bronfenbrenner, & Rodgers, 1969) as suggested by Ellis, Thomas, and Rollins (1976). Stevenson's (1986) Closeness to Father Scale asked participants to report current relationships with fathers, including rating statements such as, "My father and I are compatible".

Reliability assessments were obtained for the scales. Ellis', Thomas', and Rollins' (1976) scale had an alpha

coefficient of .93. Closeness to Father (Stevenson, 1986) showed an alpha coefficient of .98.

Participants' intimate heterosexual relationships were assessed by responses to several measures of interaction with partners. The Dating Adjustment Scale (Herold, 1973) included questions such as "The good parts of my dating experience more than compensated for the bad" and "I often worry about my future dating life." The alpha coefficient for this scale was .86. The Heterosexual Activity Questionnaire (Vernor & Stewart, 1974) included questions on frequency of heterosexual activities ranging from holding hands to engaging in heavy petting (alpha=.93). Johnson's (1982) Commitment to Partner Scale asked participants to rate statements such as "My relationship with my partner gives me a real sense of belonging" and "I have very mixed feelings about my partner" (alpha=.95). Participants rated these three scales on a five point continuum. Miller and Lefcourt (1982) asked questions such as "How often do you show [your partner] affection?" to be rated on a nine point scale (alpha=.92). Rubin's (1970) Loving and Liking Scales were also used to assess participants' present relationships. The Loving Scale was used to determine the amount of romantic love felt for the partner (alpha =.91);

the Liking Scale was used to assess the amount of affection for and interest in the partner ($\alpha=.95$).

Results

Analyses of variance were used on the measures of parental conflict, with parental marital status as the independent variable. Parental marital status was divided into two categories: married and non-married. The non-married category included those never married, those divorced or separated, those widowed, those remarried and those whose marriage had been disrupted in some other manner. The married category consisted of those participants whose biological parents were married to each other.

Main effects for parental marital status were statistically significant for each of the seven measures of conflict. Table 1 shows these results. Reliability was also assessed for the items (shown in Table 2).

Insert Tables 1 & 2 about here

The Pearson correlation showed that scores on measures of interaction with partners were not highly interrelated. The content of the different scales did have some overlap; however,

the scales were assessing different aspects of respondent-partner relationships (shown in Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Stepwise multiple regression was used to predict scores on measures of relationships with others, using gender, parental support (Ellis, Thomas, & Rollins, 1976), parental marital status (married or single), parental conflict (an aggregate of the seven items of conflict), and Closeness to Father (Stevenson, 1986). Listwise deletion of missing data was used.

Scores on the Closeness to Father Scale were shown to predict the scores of the Dating Adjustment Scale ($p=.001$, $R^2=.05$). Participants who reported being close to their fathers also reported that they felt comfortable with their dating experiences.

On Miller and Lefcourt's (1982) scale of intimacy, gender of the participant was the only predictor ($p=.009$, $R^2=.035$). Females scored higher, indicating more feelings of intimacy with their partners.

Rubin's (1970) Loving and Liking Scales were both

predicted by gender and parental conflict. Scores on the Liking Scale were best predicted by gender ($p=.004$, $R^2=.042$), and then by scores on parental conflict ($p=.002$, $R^2=.004$). Conversely, scores on the Loving Scale were best predicted by parental conflict ($p=.009$, $R^2=.035$), and then by gender ($p=.003$, $R^2=.06$). In both cases, females reported loving and liking their partners more. Less parental conflict also predicted more liking and loving.

No significant predictors were found for either the Heterosexual Activities Questionnaire (Vernor & Stewart, 1974) or the Commitment to Partner Scale (Johnson, 1982).

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that parental conflict and relationships with fathers do have a significant impact on participants' development of satisfactory heterosexual relationships. Participants reported loving and liking their partners more if they came from homes in which parental conflict was minimal. Also, the development of close relationships with fathers increased reports of satisfaction of participants' dating activities. Females were more likely to report intimacy between their partners and themselves, and also reported loving and liking their partners more.

These findings support those by Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984), who suggest that children pattern their dating behaviors after the models that their parents provide. That is, participants were more likely to feel positively about their partners (i.e., loving and liking) if their parents seemed to love and like each other, as indicated by measures of parental conflict. Also, Hess and Camara (1979) note that development of close relationships with each parent decreased children's emotional turmoil; this may account for the findings of more satisfaction of the children's dating activities if their relationships with their fathers were good. Stevenson (1987) has found that the quality of the father-child relationship is a good indicator of the quality of the offspring-partner relationship. Good relationships with their fathers may provide females with models of heterosexual interaction; males may pattern their relationship roles after those they see between their fathers and mothers.

Parental marital status played an important role in the amount of conflict reported by the participants. The seven measures of conflict included amount of physical harm between the parents, the amount of communication between the parents during disagreements, duration of the disagreements, the

degree to which they got along in the past, the degree to which they get along now, the degree to which they involved their children in their arguments, and the amount of hostility exhibited by the parents. Significant differences for marital status were found for each of the seven items. Emery (1982) has suggested that the degree of severity of the parents' conflicts, as well as continued exposure to conflict, subsequently cause problems for the children.

The findings of the current study support much of the prior research in the area of the impact of parental conflict on the relationships of the children, although they may not be characteristic of all children who have been in these situations. The sample was, of necessity, homogeneous. Research which includes a better sample of people of different ages, cultures and races may provide data which is able to be more accurately generalized.

References

- Booth, A., Brinkerhoff, D. B., & White, L. K. (1984). The impact of parental divorce on courtship. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 46*(1), 85-94.
- Devereux, E., Bronfenbrenner, U. & Rodgers, R. R. (1969). Child rearing in England and the United States: A cross-national comparison. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 31*, 257-270.
- Ellis, G. J., Thomas, D. L., & Rollins, B.C. (1976). Measuring parental support: The interrelationships of three measures. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 38*, 713-722.
- Emery, R. E. (1982). Interparental conflict and the children of discord and divorce. *Psychological Bulletin, 92*(2), 310-330.
- Glenwick, D. S. & Nevrey, J. D. (1986). When parent becomes peer: Loss of intergenerational boundaries in single parent families. *Family Relations, 35*, 57-62.
- Hanson, S. M. H. & Sporkowski, M. J. (1986). Single parent families. *Family Relations, 35*, 3-8.
- Heilbrun, A. B. (1973). *Aversive maternal control: A theory of schizophrenia*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

- Herold, E.S. (1973). A dating adjustment scale for college students. *Adolescence, 8*, 51-60.
- Hess, R. D. & Camara, K. A. (1979). Post-divorce family relationships as mediating factors in the consequences of divorce for children. *Journal of Social Issues, 35(4)*, 79-96.
- Johnson, S. J. (1982). The meaning and measurement of commitment in adult life: An initial test. (Doctoral Dissertation, Purdue University, 1981). *Dissertation Abstracts International, 42*, 4620B.
- Kulka, R.A. & Weingarten, H. (1979). The long-term effects of parental divorce in childhood on adult adjustment. *Journal of Social Issues, 35(4)*, 50-78.
- Miller, R.S. & Lefcourt, H. M. (1982). The assessment of social intimacy. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 46*, 514-518.
- Mueller, C. W. & Pope, H. (1977). Marital instability: A study of its transmission between generations. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 39(1)*, 83-93.
- Norton, A. J. & Glick, D. C. (1986). One parent families: A social and economic profile. *Family Relations, 35*, 9-17.

- Rubin, Z. (1970). Measurement of romantic love. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 16*, 265-273.
- Stevenson, M. R. (May, 1986). Four measures of father involvement. Paper presented at the meetings of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago.
- Stevenson, M. R. (1987). Parental divorce and the quality of offspring's heterosexual relationships. Presented at the meetings of the Society for Research on Child Development, Baltimore.
- Vernor, A. & Stewart, C. (1974). Adolescent sexual behavior in middle America revisited: 1970-1973. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 36*, 728-735.

Table 1

Main Effects of Parental Marital Status on Measures of Conflict

<u>Measure</u>	<u>f values</u>	<u>significance</u>
Hostility-calm	18.72	p<.001
Physical harm	20.52	p<.001
Compatibility in past	140.92	p<.001
Communication	41.99	p<.001
Length of arguments	41.99	p<.001
Compatibility in present	141.39	p<.001
Involvement of children	14.63	p<.001

Table 2

Reliability of Parental Conflict Items

<u>Measure</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Alpha if Item Deleted</u>
Hostility-calm	3.00	1.20	.80
Physical harm	2.27	0.61	.83
Compatibility in past	2.13	1.26	.78
Communication	2.81	1.02	.83
Length of arguments	2.18	0.86	.81
Compatibility in present	2.26	1.39	.79
Involvement of children	2.25	1.16	.82

*number of cases=190

**alpha=.83

Table 3

Pearson Correlation of Partner Scales

	DAS	HAQ	CTPT	MSIS	LIKE	LOVE
DAS	1.0	.46	.40	.34	.21	.18
		p<.001	p<.001	p<.001	p=.001	p=.004
HAQ	.46	1.0	.34	.40	.13	.25
	p<.001		p<.001	p<.001	p=.037	p<.001
CTPT	.40	.34	1.0	.75	.54	.43
	p<.001	p<.001		p<.001	p<.001	p<.001
MSIS	.35	.40	.74	1.0	.43	.48
	p<.001	p<.001	p<.001		p<.001	p<.001
LIKE	.21	.13	.54	.43	1.0	.72
	p=.001	p=.037	p<.001	p<.001		p<.001
LOVE	.18	.25	.43	.48	.72	1.0
	p=.004	p<.001	p<.001	p<.001	p<.001	

DAS=Dating Adjustment Scale (Herold, 1973)

HAQ=Heterosexual Activity Questionnaire (Vernor & Stewart, 1974)

CTPT=Commitment to Partner (Johnson, 1982)

MSIS=Intimacy (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982)

LIKE=Liking Scale (Rubin, 1970)

LOVE=Love Scale (Rubin, 1970)

Pearson Correlation of Father Scales

	CLOSENESS	SUPPORT
CLOSENESS	1.0	.59
		p<.001
SUPPORT	.59	1.0
	p<.001	

CLOSENESS=Closeness to Father (Stevenson, 1986)

SUPPORT=Support (Ellis, Thomas, & Rollins, 1976)