Reframing the Effects of Divorce: External Factors and Individual Coping Strategies that Contribute to Adult Children's Feelings About Parental Divorce

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Strategies that Contribute to Adult Children's Feelings About Parental Divorce

by

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Abstract

Because divorce has become a prominent fixture in society within the last several decades, a significant amount of research has been conducted on divorce and its subsequent effects on the family system. Many of these studies have shown the negative effects of divorce on members of the family, particularly children. Previous literature on coping with divorce has outlined the strategies families use to manage these negative effects. Rather than focusing solely on the negative side of divorce, this study sought to provide a more complete picture of the effects of divorce, including the possibility of positive outcomes. Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with adult children of divorce to examine their feelings about divorce, the factors that contribute to these feelings, and their coping strategies. Changes in family structure, lack of divorce information, role reversal, parents' sadness, continued conflict, parental disclosure, remarriage, and financial difficulties contributed to participants' negative feelings of confusion, neglect, anger, sadness, and feeling caught. Having a voice, parental involvement, parents' happiness, decreased conflict, and remarriage contributed to their positive feelings of empowerment, relief, and closeness with family members. In addition to these factors, coping strategies denial, patience, mediation, role acceptance, open communication, social support, and learning from the divorce also increased participants' positive feelings and decreased their negative feelings. Overall, participants' described parental divorce as a continuous and difficult, yet worthwhile process for themselves and their families.

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Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009, 3.4 of 1000 marriages ended within one year (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011). Two out of every five marriages ended in divorce, and two-thirds of these divorces involved children (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011). Divorce is a difficult event for all family members involved, and its influence on the family system has been studied for decades. Communication is a particularly important consideration for researchers as they study how families navigate an unfamiliar and challenging situation that disturbs the family unit. Divorced parents have different success rates in renegotiating their relationships from former spouses to co-parents; the post-marital relationship can be cooperative with relatively little conflict between parents, or it can be uncooperative with high conflict and hostility between the two parents.

In previous research, divorce has been studied as a particular event with a definite beginning and end, yet more recent research is viewing divorce and the post-marital relationship between parents as a complex process over time (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). "The relationship between former spouses is a state of being rather than an end state, as reflected by the term postmarital and not postdivorce relationship," (Miller, 2009, p. 136). The parental subsystem can continue to impact the binuclear family twenty years after marital disruption by exerting a strong influence on the quality of relationships within the family system (Ahrons, 2007). Specifically, the divorced parent relationship has a continuously strong influence on the quality of the parent-child bond (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011).

Research is split on the impact of divorce on children; while most researchers describe the negative effects of divorce on children, a few have begun to explore the more positive side. "Researchers maintain that divorce may vary in the effects it produces; benefiting some, temporarily harming others, or permanently damaging even others" (Amato, 2000, as cited in Woods, 2008, p. 3). A significant portion of prior research highlights the negative psychological, academic, and behavioral effects of divorce on children. Meta-analyses by Amato & Keith in 1995 and 2001 showed that children with divorced parents consistently scored lower than children with married parents on measures of achievement, adjustment, and well being.

The most often reported and studied negative effect of parental divorce was the child feeling caught between two parents. High parental conflict, regardless of parents' marital status, results in poorer parent-child relationships (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Young adult children are dissatisfied with parents' destructive conflict even if it does not directly involve them; when they become enmeshed in the conflict, they become even more distressed and dissatisfied with their family system (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987). Within divorced families, the loyalty conflicts that result when coalitions are formed, uniting one family member with another against a third person, can lead to increased difficulty in the family unit (Emery, 1994, as cited in Afifi, 2003). Children can feel caught or torn between their parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi, Afifi, & Coho, 2007; Ahrons, 2007; Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2012; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). When one or both divorced parents attempt to unite with a child against the other parent, this triangulation has been shown to be

detrimental to the physical, mental, and emotional well being of the child (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012; Hetherington, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Children's feelings of being caught between parents has been shown to be a result of three main factors: inappropriate disclosure from one or both parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Johnston et al., 1987; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Weisel & King, 2007), parentification of the child (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Johnston et al., 1987), and the use of children as messengers by one or both parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Galvin et al., 2012; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

Although most researchers have covered the negative impact of divorce, a limited amount of research on the positive effects does exist. Within the past twenty years, researchers have begun to consider the idea that divorce may have a positive impact on children. Benefits include stronger relationships with individual family members (Arditti, 1999; Woods, 2008), improved child behavior (Amato, 2000, as in cited in Woods, 2008), a more mature sense of personal responsibility (Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Matters, 2011; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Woods, 2008), the addition of a new family and exposure to opportunities in school, location, or religion (Woods, 2008). Contributing to this shift in perspective is the basic idea that children are better off when they are not experiencing conflict in the home, and conflict tends to decrease when parents are divorced and no longer living under the same roof (Laumann-

Billings & Emery, 2000; Woods, 2008). Intertwined with these potential positive outcomes of divorce are the coping strategies children of divorce use to navigate this stressful process; these strategies will be explored so as to contribute to the minimal research on divorce coping for children.

Significance

"Throughout the life course, the quality of close personal relationships can promote or undermine our psychological and physical health, security, well being, competencies, and the way we view ourselves" (Hetherington, 2003, p. 318). Family communication has been an important focus for researchers to determine how relationships between parents and children have changed following divorce. Research has shown that children may experience positive or negative feelings about their parents' divorce – or a combination of both. The possibility of both damaging and beneficial effects warrants past and continued research on the impact of divorce.

In addition, a major implication of past research is that parents could not identify their children's negative feelings about the divorce (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Ahrons, 2007; Johnston et al., 1987). Ahrons (2007) stressed the fact that "it is the child's perceptions of the divorce, not the parents', that determine their reactions and behaviors" (p. 64). Therefore, it is important for both researchers and parents to consider children's perspectives on communication between family members following a divorce. Afifi et al. (2007a) found that "whether parents believe that they are disclosing appropriate information to their children about the divorce may not be as important as what the children believe that their parents are communicating

to them" (p. 98). Different reasons have been cited to explain why parents were not aware of or responsive to the grave effects their actions had on their sons and daughters. While both parents and children reported parents' actions were inappropriate (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a), parents were too self-involved with their own loss (Afifi et al., 2007b) or didn't consider the long-term consequences of continued parental conflict and overburdening of their children (Ahrons, 2006). "Parents may be aware that certain stressors are better managed alone and with outside social support networks, but they are unaware that they may be inadvertently communicating their stress to their children," (Afifi & McManus, 2006, p. 75).

Finally, children may avoid telling their parents that they are uncomfortable with certain responsibilities or discussions because they love and wish to get along with both parents (Afifi et al., 2007b; Ahrons, 2006; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). If parents are unaware of their actions that are causing their children's negative feelings, it follows that they are also unaware of how they are affecting their children's positive feelings. Little research has been conducted to show the positive feelings children have about their parents' divorce. While these positive feelings may result from the lack of conflict in the home after parental separation (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Woods, 2008), they may also be the results of children's successful coping strategies (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Matters, 2011).

This study aims to identify both negative and positive effects of divorce on children and their contributing factors to better understand how children cope positively with their parents' divorce. "It is beneficial to understand how individuals find strength in

times of distress and are thus able to change from evaluating diversity as an experience from which they can learn and grow" (Matters, 2011, p. 1). The high rate of divorce necessitates research on coping strategies to ameliorate the negative and increase the positive effects of divorce (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004, p. 59).

Review of Literature

Negative Feelings About Divorce and Their Contributing Factors

Emotional strain. Children of divorce often experience a variety of negative emotional responses during the process of divorce. Researchers have determined that parental divorce has been connected to depression (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Wolfinger, 2005; Woods, 2008), anger (Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008), hate (Woods, 2008), self-blame or guilt (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), anxiety (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), loneliness (Matters, 2011), and low self-esteem (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Studies identify that parental conflict before, during, and after separation is one factor that contributes to these feelings in children (Galvin et al., 2012; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Children's involvement in parental conflict is discussed later in this report, but Schrodt & Afifi (2007) found that young adult children were dissatisfied with parents' destructive conflict even if it did not involve them. Perhaps one of the most striking findings from past research was that "at the twenty-five year follow up, most children from divorced families still recalled their own feelings of loneliness, bewilderment, and anger at their parents…many expressed that their childhood period ended when their parents divorced" (Matters, 2011, p. 6). Not only have children reported negative feelings about their parents' divorce, but these feelings were so strong that they are remembered and perhaps still felt years later.

Behavioral problems. In addition to emotional strain, children of divorce often suffer from behavioral problems as they struggle to manage their feelings. Possible behavioral issues in children of divorce include aggression (Johnston et al., 1987), delinquency (Hetherington, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987; Wolfinger, 2005), conduct disorders (Johnston et al., 1987), antisocial behavior (Hetherington, 2003), unstable academic performance (Galvin et al., 2012; Schick, 2002; Wolfinger, 2005), and drug and alcohol abuse problems (Wolfinger, 2005). Parental conflict also contributes to this negative outcome, and the longer parental conflict lasts, the greater the risk will be that children will suffer from behavioral issues (Johnston et al., 1987). Hetherington (2003) found that children of divorced families were two to four times more likely to be in a range of disturbance for total behavior problems.

In a psychology study, Bernstein (2007) found that teenagers and young adult children of divorce demonstrated behavioral problems because they were embracing and fulfilling the "Child of Divorce narrative." This false narrative suggests that all children of divorce experience only negative effects and that all problems children face post parental divorce are caused by their parents' separation. If children of divorce believe this narrative, they may develop symptoms to show their parents that they are suffering (Bernstein, 2007). This may be a factor that explains some instances of behavioral problems reported in children of divorce.

Social/relationship anxiety. Anxiety or fear about personal relationships was a feeling found in children of divorce in many studies (Ahrons, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Matters, 2011; Schick, 2002; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Wallerstein &

Lewis, 2004; Woods, 2008). Children of divorce may feel that they are unable to form

lasting relationships with other people. They may experience a fear of commitment, an

absence of close friends of the opposite sex, difficulty with relationship openness, a

tendency to avoid confrontation, and trust issues (Woods, 2008). Bernstein (2007)

showed that a majority of children of divorce believed that parental divorce had a

negative impact on their relationships even when past research has shown otherwise (p.

70). Hetherington (2003) argues that the quality of parent-child relationships can either

"promote or undermine children's psychological and physical health, security, well-

being, competencies, and the way we view ourselves" (p. 318).

Past research has found that children of divorce have anxiety about their abilities

to form successful personal relationships because they lack an important pair of role

models. While some children develop positive communication skills to combat their

parents' negative examples, many children develop maladaptive responses to conflict like

withdrawal, emotional constriction, or aggression (Johnston et al., 1987). Therefore,

divorce may have an especially detrimental effect on children's abilities to form positive

relationships. This could be because children are unable to learn and practice competent

relationship and problem solving skills, as these skills were not demonstrated by their

parents (Hetherington, 2003). As Matters (2011) reasoned, "parental divorce impacts the

capacity to love and be loved within a lasting and committed relationship" (p. 6).

Feeling caught. The most prevalent negative effect of divorce, as reported by

children, was their feelings of being caught between their two parents. When a family

unit is split in half in the event of the divorce, sometimes children find themselves in the

middle of two 'teams' that they must choose between. Feeling caught has been attributed

to three clearly defined factors: parents' use of offspring as messengers, the

parentification of children, inappropriate parental disclosure. In addition, coordination

and unification of divorced parents can reduce conflict, and, therefore, their feelings of

being caught.

Use of offspring as messengers. When parents transition from spouses to

coparents, their main goal is likely the upbringing of any children they have together

(Miller, 2009). Unfortunately, because children are the enduring link between parents,

they are sometimes used as an indirect means for parents to hurt one another (Emery,

1994, as cited in Afifi, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987) or as a way to avoid direct

communication (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Johnston et al., 1987). Parents

attempt to limit conflict with each other by having their child communicate to their

former spouse on their behalf (Afifi, 2003) or by problem solving with the children rather

than with each other (Afifi & McManus, 2006). Specifically, children were "oftentimes

asked to seek information about child support payments, visitation, household rules,

personal information about the other parent…[and] information to test the accuracy of the

other parent's account," (Afifi, 2003, p. 741). Additionally, children may wish to solve

parents' disputes and thus act as a messenger if doing so seems to reduce parental conflict

(Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). When the burden of carrying information or gathering

information about a parent is placed on a child, it can be problematic (Afifi, 2003; Afifi

& McManus, 2006; Galvin et al., 2012; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). According to Afifi and

McManus (2006), children may refuse to take on the responsibility of being a messenger

between parents and respond with avoidance, aggression, or direct confrontation. Similarly, Galvin et al. (2012) agree that parent-child conflict is reduced "if neither parent uses the child as a tattle tale or as a go between" (p. 300). Acting as a messenger is one way in which children of divorced families can feel torn between two parents, as they are used as the primary channel through which parents communicate.

   Parentification of offspring. A multitude of past research has shown parentification of children in divorced families contributes to their feelings of being caught between parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 1987; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Jurkovic et al. (2001) define destructive parentification as a "transactive parent-child process where children in these [divorced] families are at risk for assuming developmentally taxing caregiving responsibilities at home that are not acknowledged, supervised, and reciprocated" (p. 246). When a marriage dissolves, the amount of parenting is lessened due to the reduction from two parents to one in the new households (Wallerstein, 1985). Following a divorce, parents reported feeling isolated and overwhelmed with stress and saw children as "the only people who could truly understand them" (Afifi & McManus, 2006, p. 74). Divorce has been shown to strengthen the custodial parent-child bond, but it can also overburden children who are forced into a new role with much more responsibility (Afifi et al., 2007a; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Wallerstein, 1985). When parents feel overstressed, they transfer responsibilities to children, and parentification occurs when children feel they manage too many responsibilities for the family (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007; Johnston et al., 1987; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

Previous research has addressed the power dynamics in families and how they change after a divorce. Studies found that parents and children in divorced families assume a parallel position to each other, as opposed to following the traditional hierarchical structure, with the child taking on a 'junior partner', 'pseudo parent', or 'cocombatant' role (Afifi, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987; Jurkovic et al., 2001). Similarly, Afifi & McManus (2006) determined that the inherent structure of a family results in children, the less powerful individuals, taking on more responsibilities following a divorce. "Parental conflict causes breakdown in the role structure of the family. In order for the family to survive, children are induced to assume inappropriate roles and functions, which, in turn, induces emotional and behavioral disturbance," (Johnston et al., 1987, p. 506).

Jurkovic et al. (2001) describe two categories of responsibilities placed on children of divorced parents that were reinforced throughout the literature: instrumental, which includes cleaning, earning income, caring for siblings, and expressive, which includes mediating conflict and acting as a confidant. Both boys and girls of conflicted divorce families underwent more emotional parentification than those from non-divorced families; while both parents parentified their children, mothers tend to emotionally parentified their children more than fathers (Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001). Daughters and only or eldest children are the most targeted by parentification (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 1987).

Researchers have raised the concern that parentification may compromise children's development (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007b; Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 1987) and contribute to children's stress and anxiety (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Johnston et al., 1987). "On one hand, these children in a pseudomature manner were taking care, control, and responsibility for the dispute and their parents, but on the other hand, were stressed and symptomatic" (Johnston et al., 1987). Parentification places children in divorced families in a new, uncomfortable role as equals to their parents, resulting in feelings of being caught between two parents' demands for help and increased responsibility.

Inappropriate disclosure. The most discussed factor contributing to children's feelings of being caught between divorced parents is inappropriate disclosure from one or both parents to their children (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Johnston et al., 1987; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007; Weisel & King, 2007). Inappropriate disclosure is defined as disclosure that is negatively valenced, sensitive in nature, or is judged to be unsuitable for children (Afifi et al., 2007a). As mentioned previously, divorce can result in a tight custodial parent-child bond (Afifi et al., 2007a; Jurkovic et al., 2001). Afifi and Steuber (2009) found that the closer one feels with another family member, the more likely one is to disclose to them, which may explain parents' disclosure to their children following a divorce. Children going through a divorce need some information to reduce uncertainty, feelings of mistrust, and dissatisfaction with their family (Afifi et al., 2007a), and parents

struggle with how much information to reveal to their children about the divorce (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007a).

There are a variety of factors that may contribute to parents' inappropriate divorce disclosures. First, the more intense and numerous a parent's stressors are, the more likely they are to disclose to their children (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Hetherington, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987; Schrodt & Afifi). Afifi et al. (2007a) found that "when the stressors are perceived to be too intense for parents' personal coping abilities, they may be more likely to confide in their children, even if inappropriately" (p. 81). Divorced parents may feel like they are burdened with many stressors that they are unable to tackle alone. Second, divorced parents may also feel as though they have lost some of their social support resources due to the divisive effect of divorce (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a). Third, parents' perception of control over stressors may be the biggest indicator for their inappropriate disclosures; they turn to their children for emotional support about what seems like an uncontrollable situation (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a).

While disclosing to children may be cathartic or otherwise beneficial for divorced parents (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011), inappropriate disclosures have been shown to negatively affect children's mental and physical well-being by being associated with depression (Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), anxiety (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b), guilt (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), low self-esteem (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), conduct disorders (Johnston et al., 1987), and minor physical ailments (Afifi &

McManus, 2006). Inappropriate disclosures have also been shown to weaken parent-child bonds (Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Ahrons, 2007; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007) and damage children's communication skills (Afifi et al., 2007b).

Weisel and King (2007) determined that relationships must both be mature and be equal in terms of disclosure reciprocity for there to be relational satisfaction; this may suggest why inappropriate disclosure has such a negative effect on children of divorce if they feel they disclose significantly less than their parents. Afifi et al. (2007b) determined ten categories of disclosure from divorced parents, all which could be perceived as negative by the child. These disclosures included relationship-based disclosures (e.g., mediator, comparative statements, observations about the relationship between parents) (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Johnston et al., 1987; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), the child's relationship with both parents (Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b), partner-based disclosures (observations about the other parent's behaviors) (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), self-based disclosures (e.g., observations about the parent's own behaviors) (Afifi et al., 2007b), the child's personality or behavior (Afifi et al., 2007b), living arrangements (Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b), finances (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Afifi & Steuber, 2009), role burden and family roles (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007b), general disclosure about marriage and divorce (Afifi et al.,

2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b); and dating behaviors (Afifi et al., 2007b; Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Miller, 2009).

The amount of disclosure desired by children varied between studies. Sometimes children preferred to be uncertain or not know about specific details of the divorce (Afifi et al., 2007a; McManus & Nussbaum, 2011), and sometimes they preferred communication from parents to be very direct (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). As McManus and Nussbaum (2011) wrote, "Disclosure is seldom a choice between reveal and not reveal; other strategies may be employed to balance between these two extremes" (p. 517). Regardless of delivery style, children viewed negative disclosures as inappropriate, unnecessary, and distressing (Afifi et al., 2007b).

Unification and coordination. When parents use their children as messengers, pseudo-parents, or confidants, it increases children's feelings of being caught. In comparison, when parents work together to present a unified, coordinated front to their children, children's feelings of being caught are decreased. While parents' cooperation improves over time after the divorce (Ahrons, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987), it is crucial to establish a united front early on. During the first two years following marriage dissolution, parents have maximum opportunity to change their communication patterns and habits (Hetherington, 2003).

First, it is important to develop cooperation between parents and, therefore, between the two new households. In Miller's (2009) case studies, parents reported that they did not coordinate with each other on rules about the household, dating, and parenting. Each parent individually developed an idea for acceptable behavior and

expected the other parent to abide by this idea; misunderstandings resulted in increased parental conflict. To help solve this problem, parents must attempt to coordinate their understandings about rules for their children. Specifically, household rules and rules about divorce disclosure should be consistent between the two parents: "When the household rules were consistently enforced as a family, alliances were slowly diminished" (Afifi, 2003, p. 744). Coordination by divorced parents reduces their children's involvement in conflict.

Second, and similar to coordination, when parents act a unified team, children have a positive perception of the family unit (Afifi, 2003; Ahrons, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012; Miller, 2009). Bernstein (2007) urges parents to "examine the inferences and attributions that create the distorted and unflattering portraits of the other parent" (p. 72) in order to understand how to avoid negative portrayals of the other parent. Strategies that have shown to help parents present a united front include: direct communication (Bernstein, 2007), avoidance of casting blame (Bernstein, 2007), and avoidance of negative communication about the other parent in front of the children (Galvin et al., 2012). Afifi and McManus (2006) determined that divorced families able to problem solve together, as opposed to individually, were more cohesive as a family unit. If both parents take a more constructive approach to conflict, rather than harboring hostilities or negative feelings, their conflict could be contained and prevented from affecting the children.

Past research has identified emotional strain, behavioral issues, anxiety over relationships, and feeling caught as negative effects of divorce; however, only have the

contributing factors for feeling caught been extensively studied. While a few contributing factors were mentioned for the other negative feelings, this is a gap in past literature that this study aims to fill.

Positive Feelings About Divorce and Their Contributing Factors

      Thankful for new opportunities. While some children of divorce reported negative feelings about the new changes, some children have reported feeling thankful for the new opportunities to which they would not have been exposed had their parents not divorced. The process of divorce can result in a variety of changes that restructures children's lives for better or worse. (Hetherington, 2003; Woods, 2008). Children in the Hetherington (2003) study described positive lifestyle changes that they experienced, and children in the Woods (2008) study were specifically thankful for the opportunities for travel, relocation, better education, and increased religious devotion. New chances for a better life are definitely noticed and appreciated by children of divorce.

      Stronger family/friend relationships. Children of divorce often reported that they enjoyed forming stronger relationships with individual family members or friends. A stronger custodial parent-child bond is one example of this feeling reported by children of divorce (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007b; Galvin et al., 2012; Woods, 2008). Because more time is spent with the custodial parent, children tend to form a stronger bond with that parent; this parent is often the mother, so children form stronger bonds with their mothers as opposed to their fathers (Arditti, 1999; Afifi et al., 2007b). This relationship can be beneficial for both sides, but it can become harmful if it results in parentification of the child (Afifi et al., 2007b). Children also developed closer relationships with other family

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members – siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles – and friends that they reported as helpful and supportive (Bernstein, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012; Woods, 2008). Finally, a few studies highlighted how children of divorce enjoyed having new stepfamily members from their parents' remarriage. Bernstein (2007) stressed the importance of developing and maintaining a cooperative family network that may span across two or more households.

Relief. A major finding in past research was the feeling of relief that children of divorce felt at the decrease in parental and familial conflict after their parents' separation. In fact, research has shown that it is this conflict that has such a negative effect on children rather than the divorce itself (Ahrons, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Johnston et al., 1987). According to Ahrons (2007), it is "wildly accepted that ongoing, serious conflict between parents has negative consequences for children, regardless of whether the parents are married or not" (p. 56). Furthermore, children with high-conflict parents that stay married or continue the conflict after separation experience poorer parent-child relations and well being than children whose parents divorce and reduce their conflict (Bernstein, 2007). When the conflict ends along with the parents' marriage, it is most beneficial for children; Kelly (2003) reported that when parents formed low conflict relationships immediately following the divorce, children's psychological well being improved later in life. Decreased conflict was shown to provide a feeling of relief for children of divorce.

Sense of personal responsibility. The last and most prevalently appearing positive feeling reported by children in past research is their understanding that they

developed a new sense of personal responsibility and independence as a result of their parents divorce. While the negative extreme of this feeling is parentification and parental mediation, children reported positive feelings of maturity (Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Woods, 2008), pride (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004), responsibility (Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Woods, 2008), power (Johnston et al., 1987), and independence (Hetherington, 1999, as cited in Jurkovic et al., 2001; Hetherington, 2003; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Woods, 2008). It is a delicate balance between this positive sense of self and feeling overwhelmed with responsibility (Jurkovic et al., 2001). For example, this new role fostered independence and maturity in older children but distressed younger children (Jurkovic et al., 2001). Parents should ensure that their children are not taking on an amount of responsibility or impendence that is inappropriate for their age; children do have a chance to grow as individuals during the divorce process.

Additional research will extend the positive feelings and their factors that past literature has studied in limited amounts. Furthermore, the positive outcomes of divorce understood from the child's perspective will add much more depth and detail to our understanding of children's feelings about divorce.

Coping Strategies

"No single factor contributed more to children's self reports of well being after divorce than the continuing relationship between their parents" (Ahrons, 2007, p. 58). The post-marital parental relationship has a significant influence on children, and it is beneficial to examine how researchers have attempted to provide direction and advice

about how to improve parent-parent and parent-child divorce communication in order to alleviate stress on both sides. As previously mentioned, it is challenging for parents to alter their roles from spouses to coparents with a uniting concern – their children (Afifi et al., 2007b; Miller, 2009; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Ideally, children wish to maintain positive relationships with both parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007b; Ahrons, 2007; Jurkovic et al., 2001); however, parents' use of children as messengers, co-parents, or confidants results in children feeling torn between two sides. Alvord (2005) defined coping as an ability that is,

> …an acquired, gradually internalized, generalized set of attributes that enable a person to adapt to life's difficult circumstances. It involves action. It means taking charge of one's life. Youth who are resilient are proactive when faced with challenges. They adapt to difficult circumstances by using internal as well as external resources" (p. 244).

This differentiation between internal and external factors will be used to further define coping during the current study. This study aims to contribute to what past research has outlined in the realm of divorce coping strategies; a more complete understanding of how children perceive their own coping may help parents adjust their own actions to accommodate their children's coping needs.

Having a voice. Parents' lack of awareness about their children's feelings combined with children's inability to discuss their feelings about divorce were previously mentioned as significant issues within previous research. Mending tense and broken relationships requires addressing sources of pain and anger; listening without judgment or

defensiveness to a child explain his/her emotions about the divorce is an important step towards mending the parent-child relationship (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Bernstein, 2007; Woods, 2008). In Jurkovic, et al., (2001), 50 percent of participants from divorced families did not experience parentification, thus the researchers were interested in factors that prevented these feelings in children. Acknowledging the sacrifice and increased responsibility that children have endured because of parental conflict "aids them in integrating their feelings about the parentification process, negotiating a fairer relationship with family members, and developing a personal identity that is not isomorphic with their caretaking role" (p. 256). Kelly (2003) identified having a voice as one of the most important aspects of resiliency among children of divorce. Having a voice allows children to give their opinions on living arrangements, transitions, and visitation schedules, issues that parents may overlook (Kelly, 2003; Matters, 2011). Additionally, being given an opportunity to talk about how they are coping with divorce allows children to develop a sense of control and confidence when managing challenging situations (Kelly, 2003; Matters, 2011). It is crucial for parents to inquire about children's feelings and encourage them to speak their minds about things they may otherwise keep to themselves.

Viewing parents as a united, coordinated front. Divorced parents exhibiting mutual cooperation and support about child-oriented needs positively contributes to children's well being (Galvin et al., 2012; Hanson et al., 1998). When children perceive their parents as united, their feelings of being caught are reduced (Afifi, 2003; Ahrons, 2007; Bernstein, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012; Miller, 2009). This lack of coordination

between parents contributes to their use of their children as messengers between sides (Afifi, 2003) and children's sense that the situation is uncontrollable (Hanson et al., 1998). Coordination helps establish children's roles and increases their understanding of the family as a whole (Afifi, 2003; Hanson et al., 1998; Hetherington, 2003). As Bernstein (2007) found, "'Good fences' that protect new relationships and new households and the 'good bridges' that allow communication and build cooperation and trust, assist with the often complex challenges of organizing life when family members span multiple households" (p. 77). In a study conducted by Ahrons (2007), children reported wanting their divorced parents to be peaceful with each other more than wanting them to be friends or back together. Most importantly, children reported learning how to manage their feelings about divorce from their parents who were both setting positive examples by working together (Hanson et al., 1998).

Together with coordination, unification of two divorced parents for the betterment of their children has shown to decrease parental conflict and improve children's perceptions of their families. It is beneficial for the entire family for parents to work at creating positive images of each other (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi, 2003; Bernstein, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012). When one parent voices negative feelings for the other, it creates a loyalty conflict for children who care for both parents (Afifi, 2003). Children prefer their parents to accept responsibility for their negative feelings about the other parent rather than involving them in the dispute (Afifi & McManus, 2006). Viewing their parents as a coordinated, unified presence reduces their feelings of being caught and improves their perception of the family as a whole; negative feelings about divorce are

diminished because they are no longer forced to choose between two conflicted parents, and they are given positive role models from whom to learn.

Taking advantage of outside support. To alleviate children's divorce-related stress, previous research examines two different options for outside support: therapy and social support. Divorced families need outside support to absorb some stress, regardless of the type of stressor (Afifi & McManus, 2006). Both types of outside support were recommended to help children learn to cope with problems associated with divorce.

"While many states require coparents to enroll in state-mandated divorce and coparenting courses (Friman, Garon, & Garon, 2000; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999), Bonach, Sales, and Koeske (2005) explained that these intervention programs do not ensure coparents will be able to cooperate with each other long term" (As cited in Miller, 2009, p. 136). Bernstein (2007) outlines three themes she covers in therapy sessions with post-marital families: reconsidering future possibilities, restructuring the new family system, and reconciling family relationships (p. 68). Therapy provides an objective, third party source of support for children. Participants Woods' (2008) study reported that they confided in therapists or counselors when they did not feel comfortable disclosing to anyone close to them. Specifically, past researchers advised therapy or classes that focus on learning communication skills; programs that focus on parent-child communication about stress, coping, and problem solving may improve children's adjustment (Afifi & McManus, 2006). Jurkovic et al. (2001) provide an explanation for the benefits of therapy for children of divorce:

In general, policies and programs that alleviate parental stress and interparental discord should decrease the extent to which parents turn to their children for support and triangulate them into their conflicts…Unfortunately, court-mandated educational programming for divorced families typically exclude the children. Providing them with developmentally appropriate information about and practical strategies for coping with divorce-related stressors, including interparental discord and parentification, may facilitate their postdivorce adjustment...Compared to a placebo control group, the children who received the [coping] training in the study reported less stress, which appeared related, in par, to their ability to thwart parents' attempts to triangulate them. (p. 255)

In addition to court-mandated therapy and classes, researchers suggest periodic therapy interventions on an as-needed basis (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Ahrons, 2007). The need for therapy interventions throughout the life course demonstrates the long-lasting effects that divorce can have on children and families. Interestingly, there are no mentions in any studies of support groups being used as options for support outside of the family; this may be because they are not used by or accessible to divorced families or are not considered as viable options by researchers.

The second form of support is from other family members and friends. Because children are often not developmentally capable enough to act as a primary source of support for their parents (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2007b; Johnston et al., 1987; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), it is necessary for parents and children to consider other, more appropriate outlets for their stress within and outside of the family (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Ahrons,

2007; Galvin et al., 2012). Children of divorce have reported in past studies that they did not feel comfortable disclosing to their parents because they felt stuck in the middle of their parents (Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008). For children, siblings may help each other prevent parents from involving them in the struggle, or they may share the responsibilities that result from parentification (Hines, 1997). In a study by Woods (2008), siblings were the most confided in members of a child's support system. If siblings are unable to support each other, at the very least they can provide each other with different perspectives on the divorce and their family interactions (Ahrons, 2007; Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008).

Relationships with extended kin and close friends should also be maintained to preserve children's grasp of their biological family (Ahrons, 2007; Matters, 2011; Greef & Human, 2004; Woods, 2008) and to provide further outlets for stress (Galvin et al., 2012; Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008). Children, in a distinguishing trait from their parents, identified their friends as important support resources during the divorce process (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004). Matters (2011) found that participants most often confided in their friends or relational partners, especially if they shared the experience of divorce (Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008).

In addition to therapy and support from family and friends, children identified support from the surrounding community as beneficial for coping with divorce. Specifically, children reported that church (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Hanson et al., 1998) and school (Rodgers & Rose, 2002) as being places they found support. "School attachment…served a main effect protective function for all adolescents,

regardless of their family type, for both of the outcome variables [low parental support and internalizing and externalizing problems]," (Rodgers & Rose, 2002, p. 1034). The bottom line is that children need to be aware of and take advantage of the variety of opportunities for support that are available to them.

Parents often worry that their support resources decrease when the marriage ends (Afifi & McManus, 2006), but it is crucial that parents and their children both take advantage of the support options that are available in order to manage their stress. Children especially require support systems that encourage and confirm their efforts to cope with divorce (Garmezy, 1983, as cited in Matters, 2011).

Using open communication. Finally, the most prominent strategy discussed in previous research is the value of open, direct parent-child communication. Petronio (2002) defined directness as "the degree to which the meaning and expected response are explicitly expressed" (As cited in McManus & Nussbaum, 2011, p. 503). Between parents, direct and open communication was shown to be more successful in coordination between households and amelioration of parental conflict (Bernstein, 2007; Miller, 2009).

There is conflicting research on whether direct or intentionally indirect communication is the best way for parents and children to communicate about divorce. In a study conducted by McManus and Nussbaum (2011), young adults' communication satisfaction and relational closeness after a staged conversation was significantly lower when they perceived parents to use ambiguity. A contradicting result from a second study, was that young adults preferred the certainty of knowing more information about their parents' problems and disputes to the uncertainty of not knowing (Schrodt & Afifi,

2007). This conflicts with children's disapproval of parents' disclosures; more research

must be done to study how children determine the appropriateness or desirability of

parental divorce disclosure. Galvin et al. (2012) advise against "unnecessary or specific

details" about the divorce and its related problems (p. 299). Afifi (2003) supports open

communication between parents and children and encourages meta-communication and

family meetings as ways to facilitate communication between family members. Studies

by Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Matters, 2011; Thomas et al., 1995; and Woods, 2008

all show that their participants preferred open communication with their parents. Many

children reported being open and eager to talk about their experiences with divorce with

family members and believed that more explanation about their parents' divorce was

beneficial (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Matters, 2011; Thomas et al., 1995; Woods,

2008). The participants in these studies understood their parents' intentions to keep them

out of the divorce, but they still felt helpless and had difficulty managing the situation

when they were not informed (Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Matters, 2011; Thomas et

al., 1995; Woods, 2008). This desire for open communication seems to be connected to

the desire for having a voice in their communication with parents.

One strategy discussed frequently as a way to manage this confusion about

openness is the construction of privacy rules or boundaries for appropriate parent-parent

and parent-child communication (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi, 2003; Galvin et al.,

2012; Miller, 2009). Researchers that discuss privacy boundaries are conducting their

studies using the Communication Privacy Management (CPM) framework. Following the

CPM framework, individuals struggle with the issue of revealment-concealment of

information and thus construct rules or boundaries to manage what and to whom they reveal (Petronio, 2002). In regards to divorce communication, parents often disagree with each other and with their children on how, when, and to whom to give information, and they must establish rules by which they can both abide (Galvin et al., 2012). If boundaries become enmeshed, this can result in feelings of being caught (Afifi, 2003). Parents and children should construct privacy rules that manage the degree of open communication about divorce so that both parties are comfortable. In this regard, appropriate parent-child communication may best be determined within individual families.

Separating from parents' problems. Children of divorce that learn to cope positively with their changing situation reported that reframing the divorce and separating themselves from their parents' problems helped them to reduce their own guilt and self blame and learn from their parents' mistakes (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Matters, 2011). These children are able to view their parents' divorce as an experience to learn from rather than as a catastrophic event (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000; Matters, 2011). Once children are able to separate themselves from the situation of their parents' divorce, they are able to reduce their guilt and learn from the experience.

Using existing and new personal traits and competencies. Researchers have found that individual characteristics are important factors when studying coping in children of divorce. For example, children with an inherent optimistic outlook on life may cope better with divorce (Greef & Human, 2004; Greef & Van Der Merwe, 2004; Jaycox, Reivich, Gillham, & Seligman, 1994). Similar to children that reframe the problem of divorce into a learning experience, children of divorce that have positive

outlooks on life may feel they have more personal control over a stressful situation; Jaycox et al. (1994) found that youth who were trained to be more optimistic in attributions reduced their rick for developing depression then students who did not receive the training. In addition, Maddi & Kobasa (1984) found that participants who displayed optimism also had three characteristics that were important for coping. They saw themselves as having the power to change negative events, viewed these events as worthwhile, and saw life changes as normal and as opportunities for growth (Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). Optimism could be an important personal characteristic to consider when studying divorce coping.

While optimism is a quality that children may possess before the dissolution of the marriage, the following skills developed as a result of parental divorce. Children of divorce described developing mediation skills as a positive coping strategy. Fifty percent of participants Matters' study (2011) identified feeling stuck in the middle of their parents as the most difficult aspect of the divorce. To cope with this feeling, these children began to see making peace as part of their responsibility; because they had their parents' poor example to learn from, they saw the value of listening to both sides of a situation and learned to ask questions in order to form a better perspective of an issue (Matters, 2011). In order to cope with their feelings of being caught, children of divorce adapt new mediation skills.

On top of learning to effectively mediate conflict, children became more independent and flexible. As divorce is a change that affects all aspects of life, it stands to reason that children could learn how to flexibly adjust to new relationships, living

arrangements, etc. The ability to smoothly adapt to a variety of new experiences helped

children manage their feelings. Children also became more independent as a way to assert

themselves over a situation they viewed as out of their control (Matters, 2011; Woods,

2008). Children found that relying on themselves for care and solutions to problems

helped them combat negative feelings and anger at their parents (Matters, 2011; Woods,

2008).

This list of strategies has been compiled from past research on divorce

communication; while it is extensive, further research can be conducted to better define

the differences between the external factors that contribute to children's positive feelings

and the coping strategies children proactively use to manage stressful situations. Clearer

conceptualization of coping would improve the advice offered to divorced families. The

current lack of depth and breadth regarding the ways children actively manage the

negative aspects of divorce and find the positive aspects may be because many past

studies have used parents as subjects. Thus these results reflect parents' perceptions of

their children's coping strategies. This study aims to provide the children's perspective.

Research Questions and Methodology

There has been extensive research on parent-child divorce communication

throughout the past decades. From the preceding literature review, it has been determined

that children of divorced families experience a variety of feelings about parental divorce

– ranging from depression and feeling caught to empowerment. Most divorce research

focuses on the negative effects children experience, but it is necessary to provide a full

picture. Adding to research on positive outcomes of divorce and coping strategies will

benefit children and their families as they attempt to gain new perspective on their family

unit. As previous research indicated, it is crucial to understand how children manage their

feelings throughout the divorce process, especially when parental conflict may continue

to exist (Afifi et al., 2007b; Matters, 2011). Therefore, special focus will be paid to the

strategies that children in divorced families use to alleviate their stress and cope with

their feelings and frustrations. This study aims to discover adult children's negative and

positive feelings about their parents' divorce and to outline the coping strategies that

helped them manage these feelings. Ultimately, the purpose of the study is to provide

knowledge about ways children can learn how to turn the negative divorce experience

into one that is positive and promotes individual growth. As such, the current study

addresses the following questions:

> RQ1: What feelings about parental divorce do adult children experience?

> RQ2: What contributes to adult children's negative and positive feelings about
> divorce?

> RQ3: What strategies, if any, do children use to attempt to cope with their feelings
> about parental divorce?

Method and Procedures

Creswell (1988) explained that qualitative studies are the best ways to understand

how something happens. The biggest takeaway from the current study will be *how*

children are able to cope with their feelings about parental divorce so that others are able

to learn as well. A qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, study was conducted with adult

children of divorce because past research has shown that "significant differences between

children of divorced and non divorced parents are not the result of separation of divorce per se, but a consequence of…the children's perception of the destructiveness of interparental conflict" (Schick, 2002, p. 12) Matters (2011) agrees that little is known about constructive outcomes of divorce because few studies have asked adult children what they believe to be the positive outcomes. Therefore, this study will highlight children's perceptions and show the effects of divorce from the perspective of the adult children themselves.

Three criteria were required of participants for recruitment in this study: age 18-24, have parents that divorced after the age of eight, and have parents that currently live in separate homes. Scholars have shown that it is beneficial to study young adults' perceptions on divorce because they are developmentally mature enough to process, scrutinize, and understand their parents' divorce (Linzer-Schwartz, 1992, as cited in Woods, 2008). They are both able to recall short-term feelings and describe attitudes that have developed or changed over time (Matters, 2011; Woods, 2008).

After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, participants for this study were recruited using convenience sampling and then snowball sampling. The undergraduate researcher emailed all participants with details about the study; they were told the criteria for participation, the goal, and procedure. Voluntary participants scheduled a date, time, and location for the interview. At the interview, each participant signed an informed consent form. Data collection consisted of both a demographic questionnaire and an open-ended interview (see Appendices A and B). All interviews were recorded for transcription purposes, and participants were again assured that the

interviews would be kept confidential and safe; counseling service's contact information was also provided to participants in the event that negative feelings were brought forth in the interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six female and three male adult children from divorced families; the average age was 21.78 years, and all were college students. Every participant identified his/her ethnicity as Caucasian, with only one female also identifying as Caribbean. The average length of parents' marriage was 18.33 years, and the average age of participants at the time of parental divorce was 13.5 years. Two thirds of participants lived with both parents directly following the divorce; the others lived with their mothers. Immediately following the divorce, three respondents changed schools as well as residences. Now, all live at school, but half of the participants live primarily with their mothers when they are home on periodic visits. In general, participants reported that the amount of contact with each parent has lessened since the period immediately following divorce; this is most likely because none of the participants live at home full time. Every participant had at least one sibling; the participants' place in the birth order was nearly split between being the youngest or the oldest child, and only one participant was the middle child. None of the participants reported having any extended family members or friends living in the same home with them. Finally, six participants reported that their father was engaged or had remarried, two reported their mother had remarried, and two reported that neither parent had remarried.

After the interviews were transcribed, which yielded twenty typed pages of data, the researcher coded data from the interviews into broad categories based on the three

research questions. "Although researchers might begin the qualitative content analysis process with preexisting coding systems, these systems are always modified in the course of analysis, or may even be wholly discarded in favor of a new system, to ensure the best fit to the data" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). While the research question categories were maintained during the coding process, they became more clearly defined as patterns in the responses emerged. The first was participants' positive or negative feelings about divorce. The second was the external factors that contributed to participants' negative and positive feelings; these were actions by parents that participants perceived as helpful or unhelpful in the coping process. The last coding category was participants' coping strategies; this category included the strategies actively used by participants to cope with their feelings about divorce. Once the categories were formed, a line-by-line analysis was done to find patterns and themes amongst the data; these findings were then grouped together into the larger categories. This difference between external contributing factors and individual coping strategies was not explicitly reinforced in the literature review but reflects the distinctions participants made between external forces acting upon the them and individual actions they took to improve their situation.

Results

The results outline in detail the negative and positive feelings of the participants, the external factors that contributed to these feelings, and the strategies individuals reported using to cope with their parents' divorce. The results to research questions one and two are discussed together because participants made direct connections in their interviews between their feelings and the factors that contributed to them. In some cases,

participants did not connect a feeling with an external factor and vice versa; thus, feelings that were not connected with a particular factor are described in the beginning of each section, and factors that were only generally described as contributing to negative or positive feelings are discussed at the end of each section. The patterns and connections that emerged between external contributing factors and children's feelings can be clearly seen when the results to research questions one and two are discussed together. The results conclude with a description of the coping strategies that participants reported using; these strategies also contributed to participants' positive feelings about divorce.

Negative Feelings and Their Contributing Factors

      Distrust. Some participants reported feeling wary and distrustful of their parents in the period following the divorce. Participant 5 described a very specific example of her feelings of distrust for her father:

> There were negative changes with my dad. I remember we were awkward and wary of each other. I remember an incident when the owners of the home he was renting were missing jewelry, and I was accused of stealing it. That was awful for me to be accused of that. The found the jewelry a few days later. That was just one time that made me feel like he didn't trust me, which made me trust him less too. It was a bad cycle that I think started from the divorce.

This participant described how, as a result of her parents' divorce, she did not trust and even felt uncomfortable around her father. While external contributing factors did not emerge in the analysis, several participants reported this feeling of parental distrust following the divorce.

Anxiety about relationships. A second negative feeling that emerged without discussion of any specific contributing factors was participants' anxiety about their own future relationships; five of eight participants reported that they worried about how their own relationships would be affected by their parents' divorce. So much so that one participant, Participant 8, did not know whether he would ever get married: "I became very weary of marriage. I had heard about the high divorce rates, but it really materialized after my parents split. I do want children though, so my feelings are still mixed." Participant 2 defined herself as a "perfectionist" in dating relationships:

> I don't want to ever find myself in that situation. So I try to choose wisely
> because I want to avoid eventual divorce at all costs. I know it is crazy to be
> concerned about that at this age [22], but it's true.

Two other participants remarked that they had learned what not to do in a relationship from their parents but were worried that they would still repeat the same mistakes. This anxiety over how their parents' divorce would affect their own intimate relationships was a feeling many of the participants still carried with them.

Confusion. One negative feeling for which participants did report external contributing factors was their feeling of confusion. Almost half of the participants said that they were confused about what was going on in their families: "The toughest part about the split was that I never even saw it coming, which made it that much harder" (Participant 9).

The factor that participants reported as increasing their confusion was a lack of information about their parents' divorce; participants recognized that their parents'

withholding of information about the divorce contributed to their confusion. Participant 8 recalled having no idea that his parents had marital problems:

> The hardest part was that their relationship problems were hidden from us entirely. When they told us they were separating, it was completely out of left field, and so it made it really hard for me to grasp at first because I didn't see it coming at all. I was so confused about when their relationship stopped being real and became a struggle.

Participant 2 also remembers how hard it was to not understand what was going on around her; in her case, she was eleven at the time of her parents' divorce:

> The most difficult aspect was not knowing. When you're little, your parents don't give you all the details because they assume you can't understand. I wish they had tried. In a lot of ways, I felt like I had to cope with the thing twice – once when my dad laughed about it and once again when my parents really explained years later.

Participants' confusion would have been minimized had their parents given them more information about the divorce.

Neglect. Unfortunately, parents can get caught up in their own emotions and the stress of the divorce proceedings; sometimes, their children are forced to fend for themselves. Participant 2 remembered feeling neglected: "That was my darkest point. I have never felt so helpless or disregarded. And I know now that that was selfish of me and that the divorce wasn't about me, but I felt like I had to scream to get people to hear me and hear what I was feeling. I just hope never to find myself with those emotions I

had when I was eleven." Several participants felt neglected by their parents during the divorce process, and they attributed this feeling to role reversal; parents tended to abandon some of their responsibilities, and children were forced to pick up the slack. Participant 1 found that she was suddenly forced to fill in for her parents and felt forgotten in the wake of her parents' divorce:

> Because the divorce pretty much became the central thing in both of their lives, I felt that me and my sisters [sic] were left on our own. Essentially, my mom bailed during the divorce process. I started signing my little sister up for tennis, making sure she had dinner. Because she wasn't being checked up on, my twin sister was always with guys, and when my parents did call, she refused to answer her phone. I felt that I had to make sure she wasn't getting into trouble too. I had to learn to be extra sensitive with my father and to check up on him to make sure he was okay. I felt like my parents had bailed from their parental roles. I felt totally alone, like I was the only one trying to keep our family afloat and that I was failing.

This participant felt like she had to step in for her parents because they were not meeting their responsibilities; participants reported wishing their parents had been more involved in the family's coping process as a whole, rather than only their own. Participants had very vivid memories of feeling neglected by their parents during the divorce process, and their perceptions of role reversal between themselves and their parents during the divorce process appeared as contributing factor for multiple negative feelings and, as such, will be discussed again in a following section.

Anger. Participants were angry with their parents for the problems in their families; they reported feeling "wronged" and "burned" by their parents and were "resentful" towards them. Participant 1 described how, even five years after her parents divorced, she still feels anger towards her mother:

> I only have anger towards my mom now. I feel like this is because my dad is a much more attentive parent than my mom is now. She is often only concerned with herself, and it makes me angry that she can be so selfish when the rest of my family has sacrificed so much for each other.

Participant 2 said she was angry at her father directly following the divorce, but this feeling has since diminished over the years:

> At least in the short term, there were some very negative changes in my relationship with my father. I was just so angry at him for leaving, and I blamed him for a really long time. And at eleven, I really wanted him to feel the pain he had inflicted on the rest of us who had to manage the family in his absence, so I would say or do things I knew were hurtful.

Participant 1 described how her mother was mentally absent in her family, and Participant 2 described how her father was physically absent. Role reversal was a contributing factor to participants' feelings of anger about the divorce; they were angry with their parents for abandoning their roles as dependent providers and authority figures in the household.

Sadness. Almost every participant reported feelings of sadness when remembering their parents' divorce. Some only recall a general feeling of sadness about

the dissolution of their family, but others can pinpoint more specific contributing factors: changing homes or schools and witnessing their parents' grief and sadness. Participants mourned the loss of their family unit: "I still get a little sad when I think about how we are no longer one cohesive unit anymore. I even stumble when I say "my family" because it doesn't feel the same anymore" (Participant 9). Divorce can uproot families, changing their routines and their way of life. While only three participants reported changing residences and schools, each connected that transition with sadness. Participant 8 explained how these changes were very difficult for him, even though he was away at school for a majority of the year:

> This sounds superficial, but another hard part was that I thought that they were selling the house, even though my dad did end up buying it. I was really crushed when I thought I was going to have to give up the home I grew up in. I did live in the two-house system for two full summers, so I definitely have been affected by that. I often found myself leaving my stuff at the wrong house and doing endless trips back and forth. Eventually, I just kept all my stuff in my car…I didn't like so much having to schedule dinners all the time, and same goes for holidays. The worst part was having to divide my time.

Participants identified navigating between households on school breaks and holidays as being very difficult to adjust to. Similarly, Participant 5 described how changing schools exacerbated the stress and sadness she felt during that time in her life:

> Divorce came at a time when my grandmother died, my friend died, and I had to change schools. It was a lot to deal with, and I was very depressed. It was the first

time I had ever been that sad, so I didn't know how to deal with it. I was very

unaware of how sad I actually was. I had to leave my school because it was so

awful, and I couldn't adjust.

The second factor that contributed to participants' reports of sadness was

witnessing their parents' sorrow after the divorce. While some participants said their

parents were happier after the divorce, others described how their parents still struggled

with their own emotions. Seeing how upset their parents were made the participants sad

as well. Participant 2 said she "took on" her mother's sadness as her own. She also

recalled how hard it was to deal with her parents' mood swings: "It was so upsetting to

deal with my parents crying all the time, being on edge, and being stressed, and

overreacting to everything. I was walking on glass around them. It really took a toll on

my emotions." To further enforce this pattern, Participant 3 remembered how sad she felt

when she thought about how her mother had dealt with her father's infidelity: "I only had

a tough period when I was twelve and learned about how my dad cheated on my mom. It

made me really sad to think of what my mom went through on her own." These

participants empathized with their parents and were drastically affected when their

parents' emotions took a turn for the worse.

Feeling caught. Over half of the participants reported feeling caught between

their parents as a negative outcome of the divorce. Participant 4 actually used the phrase

"feeling caught," and Participants 6 and 8 described having to "choose sides." Participant

6 summarized how feeling caught between parents negatively impacted her relationships,

especially with her father:

I tend to take my mother's side when it comes to fights or when I feel like I have

to defend her, which for years made things difficult. My father is so angry with

my mom that he can be quite an asshole, but since I grew up with my mother, I'll

always see things through her over my father. There were times when I was

treated poorly due to the fact that I was my mother's daughter. It made it hard to

figure out how to act and which side to be on.

It was difficult for her to figure out whether to protect her mother from her father's anger

or to protect herself from being caught in the crossfire.

The participants that reported feeling caught between parents also identified

factors that contributed to these feelings, including continued conflict, unwelcomed

parental disclosure, and role reversal. Continued conflict appeared in the form of

badmouthing and legal disputes in the interviews. Participant 4 described how her

parents' continued badmouthing contributed to her feelings of being caught:

Feeling caught between my parents is really difficult. They both talk badly about

the other almost every time I'm with them, even now. It is really something that

bothers me and puts me in a difficult place. I find it very immature. They should

realize that they are creating a negative image of each other for my and my

brother.

This participant is frustrated because she would like to maintain a positive image of each

parent, but the continuous fighting distracts from that effort. Participant 1 said "the trash

talking pisses me off and drives me crazy." Participant 6 also spoke about how her

parents continue to battle in the courtroom, even twenty-two years after their divorce:

They still battle in court. The game is played on both sides. My father will never

let go of the divorce settlements, etc. and will probably hold a grudge until he

dies. Whenever they have to be together, like for my brother's wedding, it causes

a lot of anxiety for me because I feel like I have to diffuse the situation.

Another factor that contributed to participants' feelings of being caught was

unwelcomed parental disclosure. Participants reported that disclosure made them feel

more intertwined with their parents' problems. Participant 3 said that although she asked

for more information about her parents' divorce, she wasn't expecting the amount of

details she received:

I had a really tough year when I was in seventh grade and began understanding

aspects of their divorce. Up until that point in my life, I knew nothing about what

had happened. Once I started asking about details, my parents didn't censor

anything. I opened a floodgate, and I wish I could sometimes stop it.

Participant 4 also reported wanting to be able to control the amount of disclosure she

received from her parents:

I wish I wasn't put in such a role of responsibility after the divorce; I think it

made us less close. I wish I confided in them more than they confide in me.

Maybe if they had given me more details only when I had asked or tried to

balance positive information with negative. The more they confide in me, the

more I feel like I become like a peer or a friend, and I really don't want to be

involved on that level. I just want to be their child.

Unwelcomed disclosure was connected to role reversal, another factor that participants identified as contributing to their feelings of being caught. Participant 1 described how her parents' lost sight of their roles as parents and forced her to take care of her two sisters. In addition to experiencing role reversal with her parents, Participant 4 also described how she reluctantly became like a parent to her younger brother:

> My parents put a lot of responsibility on me to try to help and connect with my brother because they couldn't communicate with each other about it. I hate feeling like the third parent when I'd rather just be a sister to him.

Continued conflict, disclosure, and role reversal contributed to these adult children feeling caught between their divorced parents.

Other contributing factors. Participants talked about two other external factors that contributed to their overall negative feelings about divorce. They did not associate them with a particular negative feeling like those outlined above, but merely described them as making their experience more difficult. These factors were financial difficulties and remarriage. Two participants said that shaky financial situations made the divorce process harder for everyone to cope with. As aforementioned, participants described how changing homes and schools was difficult, and Participant 4 had to change homes due to a decline in her mother's finances. She said, "My mom lost her job and was forced to sell the house my brother and I had grown up in. This was a few years after the divorce, and it still made everything harder to deal with. She needed my more help from me financially and emotionally." Financial stress added to this participant's already mounting feelings of responsibility for her family.

Secondly, remarriage presented an additional transition for these families to navigate. While 75% of respondents had at least one parent remarry following their divorce, only two addressed negative feelings about that event. Participant 9 said that coping with his father's pending engagement and new child is ongoing: "We have yet to fully embrace my dad because he moved on from our family. My sister really doesn't accept it. It is still a work in progress. There are definitely still some negative feelings about that situation." Remarriage and the addition of a stepfamily presented additional problems for participants to cope with. These two external factors added to participants' negative feelings about divorce, but the specific feelings to which they were connected, if any, remained unclear.

Lack of information, role reversal, changes in routine, parents' sadness, continued conflict, inappropriate disclosure, financial difficulties, and remarriage were the external factors that participants' reported as contributing to their negative feelings of confusion, neglect, anger, sadness, and feeling caught. The next section will outline the external factors that added to participants' positive feelings about divorce.

Positive Feelings and Their Contributing Factors

Empowerment. First, several participants described a sense of freedom and control that empowered them after their parents' divorce. Some participants reported feeling "confident" and others "encouraged" when navigating new situations after the divorce. Participant 1 said, "I had more freedom to do what I wanted. I think my parents tried to go easy on us in terms of discipline for a while, but more so they wanted us to see that they valued our opinions." This quote also exemplifies a factor that multiple other

participants also saw as contributing to their feeling of empowerment: having the opportunity to give their opinions, particularly on visitation. Participants 4 and 5 also said that when their parents allowed them to decide how to split their time between homes, it helped them feel more confident and in control of a typically chaotic situation. Furthermore, Participant 4 wished her parents had asked her opinion on more than just visitation time:

> Both my parents let us decide how we want to split our time between houses. My brother is on a two-week schedule, but if he doesn't feeling like moving on the second Sunday, he doesn't have to. At least they let us voice our feelings on that. I wish they had asked for our opinions on other things like moving residences or starting to date. Having no input makes me feel helpless.

This participant references two earlier factors that contributed to negative feelings – moving residences and remarriage; she thought that had she been given an opportunity to give her opinion on these matters, she would have felt more powerful over her situation. Having the opportunity to voice opinions was an important factor that contributed to participants' positive feeling of empowerment and control over a stressful situation.

Closeness to family members. Over half the participants felt closer to one or more of their family members following the divorce. When reporting closeness, participants described a new level of connection with particular family members that may not have occurred without the divorce. Participant 9 bonded with his father after the divorce: "I believe I am closer to my dad now than I was when he lived with me at our house. We sort of developed a friendship and a mutual understanding of each other after

my parents divorced." This new feeling of closeness was reported with both parents and stepparents; therefore, remarriage should be considered a factor for this positive feeling.

Remarriage also appeared in the previous section as a factor for negative feelings in participants, but it also resulted in new family members with whom to build positive relationships. Participant 2 developed a close relationship with her mother's long-term boyfriend and said, "he was a great addition to our family, and I am grateful for that." Similarly, Participant 3 has always had a close relationship with her stepfather as well as her father: "My mom is in a very happy marriage to my stepdad. I feel like I was too young [at age eight] when my parents divorced to remember my mom's relationship with my dad. My stepdad has always been there. I love all three [parents], and each plays a crucial part in my life. I'm lucky to have been able to develop a relationship with my stepdad." Remarriage was connected to both negative and positive feelings in this study.

A second factor that played a part in these new feelings of closeness was parental support and involvement; participants noticed when their parents and stepparents made efforts to be involved in their lives. Participant 3 reported that her mom made sure to give her dad an active role in her and her sister's lives; she realized that she might not have a close relationship with her father if that had not been the case. Participant 5 perceived that her father made sacrifices in his own life to stay close to her and her siblings:

> He moved into the same town so it would be easier for us to see him. I know he
> didn't like living there. He definitely made an effort to be involved in my life, and
> even when I was so overwhelmed in my own feelings, I noticed. Our relationship

would have suffered had he not done these things because I would have felt like

he abandoned me.

Noticeable parental involvement after the divorce allowed participants to maintain and

improve their parent-child relationships. This factor as well as remarriage contributed to a

new sense of closeness and intimacy with family members that was a positive feeling for

participants.

Relief. Almost every participant reported a feeling of relief after their parents' got

divorced because their families could begin to move forward and heal. Participants

described the divorce as a necessary and worthwhile step towards improvement for their

family. Many felt relief when their parents' separated because the conflict in their

families decreased significantly and their parents' emotional well being improved.

Participants perceived that the end of conflict in the home was a contributing

factor for participants' feelings of relief, as was improvement in parents' well being.

Participant 1 expressed how her parents' divorce gave her family a much-needed break

from conflict:

"My parents' divorce was not a surprise. My sister and I both thought it was a

good thing so my mother wouldn't yell at my dad anymore…it was so much

worse listening to my mom verbally abuse my dad, so the divorce was a relief at

the time."

Participant 4 agreed with this sentiment and noticed an improvement in her family

environment since the divorce:

I wasn't expecting them to tell us at that time, but it wasn't really a surprise because of how much they fought. Obviously the end of all the fighting was a positive outcome. It really was a bad situation to be in, so it has definitely improved since then. They are better when they don't live together, and I have really seen a change in my dad's behavior from when he was with my mom. I think they brought out the worst in each other. So the divorce process was tricky to navigate obviously, but I think it was ultimately necessary to get to a better place now.

Participants described how the cessation of parental conflict contributed to their feelings of relief; they also realized how connected they were to their parents' emotions. Similar to how parents' negative emotions contributed to their children's feelings of sadness and despair, parents' happiness greatly contributed to their children's. Participant 5 reported, "My parents were happier once they split up, and that was important for me to see. It was helpful that my parents were happier; it made me relieved to see them acting like divorce was a good thing." Seeing her parents' improved well being made this participant see the divorce as a happy event. Participant 8 said that seeing his parents happy doing things they couldn't have done when married made him happier:

My mom is happier than ever. We finally got to get kittens! My dad has a new girlfriend, and she is making him happy. He just bought a new convertible. None of these things would have happened if they were still together, and I realize that seeing them happier with their lives eased some of my stress about their divorce.

Nearly all the participants reported that the decrease in parental conflict and the increase in parental happiness were sources of relief for themselves and their families.

Participants in this study discussed how having a voice, remarriage, parental involvement, the end of conflict, and parents' happiness increased their own positive feelings of empowerment, relational closeness, and relief. It is significant to note that remarriage was the only factor to contribute to both participants' negative and positive feelings about divorce. The external factors discussed in the previous two sections were actions, in these cases those taken by parents, which increased or decreased specific feelings in the participants. In the next section, coping strategies actively chosen by participants helped participants come to terms with the divorce and gain perspective on their new family structure, which also contributed to their positive feelings about divorce.

Individual Coping Strategies

Denial. In the period initially following parental divorce, participants depended on denial to avoid the reality that their lives had drastically changed. Participant 1, who was eleven at the time of the divorce, recalled how she had ignored the changes that were happening around her:

> I'd nod politely when my mom or dad would talk to me about it but wait for it to be over. I just didn't want to deal with it, so I was quiet…And I pretended, to the best of my ability, that everything was fine…It was all I knew how to do. It's hard to say whether another strategy would have been more effective because I was little, and I didn't have a lot of ideas or resources for other ways to handle it.

Now, she realizes that denial was a strategy she used in the beginning of the divorce process until she was old enough and willing enough to understand the truth of the situation. Other participants also described how they were in denial until they could no longer ignore the adjustments they had to make to their normal family routine. Participant 8 said it wasn't "until they finally outright said it was over and my dad moved out" that he stopped denying his parents' divorce, and Participant 1 said that visiting her mother's new house after the divorce "made it a reality." None of the participants reported currently relying on denial as a coping strategy; it was only used in the initial adjustment period after the divorce before participants could then use more successful strategies.

      Patience. Taking advantage of the passage of time helped participants cope with divorce. While the passing of time is not something the participants could control, several participants discussed how they depended on time, perspective, and patience to help them cope with divorce. Participant 7 explained,

> I think its kinda [sic] like comparing apples to oranges because I was in a different stage in my life. The only difference is that I am older now and can see things more clearly. I do remember deciding not to react so strongly to every new change that came my way but to be patient and wait to see how things unfolded. I stopped assuming that every change was bad.

Even Participant 8 whose parents divorced the most recently – two years ago – saw the value in a calm demeanor: "Honestly, I don't feel like I overcame any difficulties, but more that I sort of took a step back and away from the fighting. I tried to be patient with my parents, and I wanted them to be more tolerant of each other." Participants realized

that perhaps anger and conflict were not helping the coping process, but that patience allowed them to see the divorce more clearly.

Mediation skills. Similar to patience, several participants reported developing mediation skills to cope with their parents' continued conflict after the divorce. Through mediation between parents, participants were able to dispel conflict; but, more importantly, they could understand the perspectives of both parents. Participant 4 discussed how she reluctantly developed mediation skills that ultimately helped her diffuse conflict and continue to do so today:

> I became a better mediator, whether that was willingly or not. That was probably a response to my parents' marriage as well, but I still have to mediate between the two of them even now and I wish that it wasn't necessary still. It helps me in situations with friends or at work because I am able to see both sides of a problem. It is good to feel like I can decrease conflict.

Mediating conflict gave this participant a sense of control over her parents' fighting and also developed her ability to objectively evaluate both sides of an issue. Similar to Participant 4, Participant 2 described herself as the "peacemaker" in the family:

> Because when you're the product of divorced parents, you have to get both sides of the story. You'll drive yourself crazy if you don't try to understand where the division [between parents] is coming from. So I think in that way I play mediator because there wasn't enough of that in the house when I was growing up.

Both of these participants seemed to wish that they did not have to be the one to mediate between parents and described having to fill a missing role in their family. Despite this

reluctance, the participants that reported mediation as a coping strategy during divorce also reported using it to their advantage later in life.

Role acceptance. In addition to some participants taking on a mediator role in their families, many reported taking on increased responsibilities. Although many did not feel they wanted more responsibilities, they gradually learned to accept the new demands placed upon them to be more responsible for themselves and for other family members. Participant 7 described his new sense of self-sufficiency:

> I learned how to become a very responsible person at a young age. I sort of just dealt with it in my own way and took care of myself. I learned to be very independent…that mindset helped me get through any tougher times and helped when I didn't feel like anyone else was there for me.

While Participant 7 discussed taking care of himself, many participants reported having to take care of themselves, their siblings, and even their parents. Participant 1 said,

> With regard to having more family responsibility and lack of parental involvement, I came to accept that it was my duty and that it was for the benefit of my sisters that I act this way. I developed a very motherly personality towards them.

She filled the role of her mother who was mentally absent from the family, and Participant 9 "learned to be the man of the house" to fill the role of his father. A particularly interesting result was that Participant 5 noticed how her middle brother struggled with his responsibilities and with being self-sufficient:

Recently I realized how hard it was on my older brother. My oldest brother and I became very independent because we had to adapt; we figured out how to solve our own problems. I don't think it was like that for my middle brother, and I think that affected him more than anyone knew at the time; he could have used more support.

In her family, those that accepted the shift in familial roles coped better with the divorce than those that did not. About three quarters of the participants said that accepting their new roles and the responsibilities that they came with was important in coping with divorce.

Open communication. Openly and honestly communicating with their parents helped participants tackle problems and better understand the divorce. Two participants reported using open communication to confront their parents about different issues that were bothering them. Participant 6 said,"[I] learned to confront and be open with how I feel about the awkwardness between my parents because I hope they will work on their relationship for my sake." Participant 4 tried to discuss with her parents why she felt caught between them:

I try to really tell my parents that I don't want to hear negative things about the other parent, but I don't think they really get how annoying it is…I try not to let their negativity influence me. I also tell them that they need to communicate with each other better rather than going through me. I don't like being used as a messenger. It has changed gradually, but a lot of pressure was put on me in the beginning to cope well and be okay, and help my brother, and help my parents in

the beginning of the divorce. That still happens, but not as much now, partially

because I have been vocal about not having to support everyone else. I need to

have time to help myself too.

For her, being vocal led her parents to change some of the behaviors that contributed to

her negative feelings. She also struggled with her new role as supporter and mediator, and

open communication relieved some of the pressure.

In addition to participants using open communication to confront issues with their

parents, they relied on it as a strategy to understand more about the divorce. Participant 8

said,

It was really hard at first, but once I started talking it out with my parents

individually, I began to understand where they were coming from and now I'm

glad I did that because I learned why its what they both wanted.

Similarly, communicating allowed Participant 1 to forgive her mother: "I was able to

understand why mom wasn't happy with her marriage by talking to her…I slowly

forgave her once I decided that I wanted to talk to her and wanted her more involved in

my life." Lastly, Participant 3 wished her father was more willing to discuss the divorce:

The one thing I would say is that I sometimes talk to my mom about what

happened with the divorce, but I haven't been able to talk to my dad about it. I

have tried many times, but he has not been able to, and now it's too hard to bring

up.

Many of the participants greatly stressed the value of using open communication as a

coping strategy in order to problem solve and to get a better perspective on the divorce.

Seeking social support. Eight of nine participants identified seeking social support as a crucial coping strategy, and they identified a variety of sources for this support: coaches, friends, siblings, and parents. This coping strategy differs from the positive feeling of closeness mentioned in the previous section, in that the participants experienced closer relationships as a direct result of the divorce and their parents' high level of involvement. Seeking social support is defined as a coping strategy because it was an active choice made by participants to seek support and reliance from different people. The two most prevalently reported sources for social support were siblings and parents. This finding is not surprising given that every participant had at least one sibling. Every participant that described sibling support said it was their siblings who understood their feelings the most, and that their sibling relationships improved after the divorce. Participant 2 reported,

> It brought my sisters and I closer. We had to take care of each other and defend each other when my mom, post-divorce, was still yelling all the time and crying and bitching at us. We valued each other more. I think we realized the divorce would have been a nightmare without each other.

Participant 2 also relayed this feeling:

> There's just no other person that understands like a sibling, because he got carted around as much as I did, caught in the middle of the secrets just like me, and he got it. I don't know how I would have gotten through that part of my life without the conversations we'd have…just me and him.

In addition to siblings, participants sought social support from their parents. Participant 3 explained how her mom was always there for her even when she was trying to cope at the same time:

I am beyond impressed with how my mom coped with such a painful experience. She worked extremely hard to be there for me. She also was a good model for coping – if she was able to deal with the situation in such a mature way by not allowing what happened to affect our relationship with our dad, than I wasn't going to let it hinder my relationship with him either.

Participant 2 received different social support from each parent when she went looking for it:

The remarkable thing about my dad, though, was that he wouldn't let me further the gap between us even when I tried. He was patient and accepting and gave me the space to be as pissed as I wanted, but he let me know he wasn't going anywhere. And true to form, he was there when I was finally ready to let him be…when I needed help, he was always waiting in the wings. As for my mom, she was a rock for me even in her own hardest moments; I clung to her in the wake of the divorce…[now] it's best friends. I tell her everything in my life, and there isn't a filter, that strain. And I guess maybe part of that grows out of us both being female and also similar personalities, but I think that more than anything it's a function of the divorce, of how I coped, and how she was there for me.

Participants were very aware of how their parents had helped them cope with the divorce. Interestingly, more participants reported seeking support from their mothers than their

fathers, but this may be because a majority of the respondents were female. Regardless, finding social support from outside and, in particular, within their families was an important coping strategy for participants.

   Learning from the experience. One final theme involves participants' perception of the divorce as a whole. The entirety of the results show that participants experienced both positive and negative feelings about their parents' divorce; adult children continue to learn how to navigate these feelings throughout the divorce process, and their feelings may be different at any given point along the way. The most prevalent finding in this study was that participants described how accepting imperfection and reframing the divorce allowed them to separate themselves from their parents' problems and learn from the experience as a whole.

   Accepting imperfection. Nearly all of the participants expressed how, years after the divorce, they were able to reframe the image of their parents as flawed, imperfect people rather than idealized, faultless beings. While it took some time to reach this perspective, accepting imperfections helped participants understand the complexities of personal relationships. Participant 4 described this change in mindset most succinctly:

   If you think all parents are supposed to be perfect, all you can think about is how

   and why this divorce is happening to your family and how and why your parents

   are such failures. If you see your parents as people who sometimes make

   mistakes, well then the divorce gains a certain degree of control, and you also

   learn how to manage your relationships with them.

Participant 2 agreed,

As I got older, I was able to understand more of the complexity of the whole

thing, and I had to reorder my thinking…you just gradually come to see your

parents as people who have love, flaws, and all the rest, instead of as these perfect

beings on pedestals. Going into adulthood, I think that was the only way for me to

have a health relationship with them.

Participant 5 accepted the imperfection of marriage and saw it as something that could be

broken but also fixed:

I was able to overcome my sadness because I decided to learn from what had

happened…It allowed me to realize that marriage and my life weren't perfect, but

that makes it interesting because I feel more human. I could make changes to

improve my own life and how I saw my parents' lives. It was all about my

perspective.

When participants no longer viewed their parents or their marriage as god-like, perfect

entities, they were able to feel like they had a certain sense of control over their own

relationships and lives.

Reframing the divorce. While none of the participants enjoyed going through the

divorce process, every participant reported that the divorce was a "good thing" or that

they were "better off" because it had happened. This connects to their feelings of relief

but also hints at a larger significance. Participant 1 explains that the difficult process was

worth it:

I don't think they should be together at all, but I wish that they had realized this

before getting married. I wish it could have been avoided somehow. But it was

definitely for the best. Everyone in my family is in a better place now that they

wouldn't have been in had my parents stayed together.

Other participants described similar sentiments. Participant 4 said that she "never thought

her parents should have stayed married," and Participant 7 felt that "it was a good

decision." This finding is perhaps the most encouraging because it was the only result to

be reported by all nine participants. Participants' ability to reframe the divorce as a

learning experience presents divorce as a challenging, yet worthwhile process for a

conflicted family to transition through.

Discussion

External Factors and Individual Coping Strategies

The nine participants

provided a detailed account of how parental and personal actions combined to contribute

to their negative and positive feelings about divorce. Even though this study focused on

the children's point of view, the participants described how both they and their parents

dealt with divorce. This distinction between external factors and individual coping

strategies seems to be based on participants' perception of control. Participants spoke of

coping strategies as internal choices they made at different times during the divorce

process; in contrast, they also clearly recalled how they suffered or benefitted from their

parents' actions. This finding is significant because a major implication of past research

is that parents could not identify their children's feelings about the divorce (Afifi, 2003;

Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007a; Afifi et al., 2007b; Ahrons, 2007; Johnston

et al., 1987). This study not only outlines children's positive and negative feelings but

also what parents need to change in order to make sure they are contributing only to their children's positive well being. Parents can now be aware of how their actions are directly affecting their children's abilities to cope with divorce.

In regards to specific negative and positive feelings, their external contributing factors, and children's coping strategies, participants' reports aligned closely with the findings of previous studies. The only negative outcome discussed in the literature that did not emerge as a pattern in the results was the occurrence of behavioral issues like aggression or drug use. Only one participant mentioned an incidence of behavioral problems; she discussed how her sister stayed out late and ignored phone calls. Perhaps participants did not suffer from any behavioral issues, but more likely, the interview questions were focused on their feelings rather than their behaviors. In addition to the anger and sadness felt by children in past studies, participants also felt confused and neglected, and the participants connected their feelings of emotional strain to continued parental conflict, as found in the literature (Galvin et al., 2012; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), but also to changes in routine and lack of information. Participants also reported feeling caught between parents. While these feelings and their factors were similar to the previous descriptions, one interesting finding that arose was that how parents perceived their children during the divorce process was similar to how children perceived their siblings. Specifically, parents reported feeling isolated and overwhelmed with stress and saw children as "the only people who could truly understand them" (Afifi & McManus, 2006, p. 74). In this study, participants saw their siblings as the only people who could truly understand their feelings about the divorce and depended upon them as sources of

social support. This reinforces the finding by Weisel and King (2007) that relationships must both be mature and be equal in terms of disclosure reciprocity for there to be relational satisfaction; this may suggest why participants had a more positive perception of the relationships with their siblings than they had of the relationships with their parents.

Participant reports of their positive feelings about divorce also closely matched previous research. The only feeling not found in this study that was apparent in the past was being thankful for new opportunities. This is likely a result of a small sample of respondents, a limit to this study to be discussed below. An increase in parents' happiness and parental involvement were described as factors for participants' positive feelings, in addition to having a voice and remarriage. Unification and coordination between parents did not emerge as its own factor, but it may have if parents had been interviewed.

Coping strategies were narrowly defined by the researcher in this study; they reflected choices made by participants to improve their understanding and management of the divorce and the changes it caused. This definition was adapted from Alvord's (2005) definition of coping:

"as an ability that is an acquired, gradually internalized, generalized set of attributes that enable a person to adapt to life's difficult circumstances. It involves action. It means taking charge of one's life. Youth who are resilient are proactive when faced with challenges. They adapt to difficult circumstances by using internal as well as external resources" (p. 244).

Participants reported using denial, patience, mediation, role acceptance, social support, and learning from the experience as coping strategies. These strategies directly affected factors that contributed to their negative and positive feelings. For example, patience and mediation were used to reduce familial conflict, and open communication reduced role shifts, lack of information about the divorce, and negative parental disclosure and increased children's ability to voice opinions and feelings. The interplay between the feelings of divorce children, their contributing factors, and coping strategies will be discussed below.

Achieving Balance

An interesting way to review the results of this study is to consider how children's feelings, their coping choices, and their parents' actions all influence each other. What the results all lead to is that coping with divorce comes down to maintaining balance in different elements of the family dynamic. Specifically, parents and children must work together to manage changes in family structure and routine, conflict, roles, and divorce information. When any of these elements leaned to one extreme or the other, it resulted in negative feelings in the participants. It may be beneficial to apply the rule formation strategy from boundary management theory (Petronio, 2002; Galvin et al., 2012) not only to the disclosure of divorce information but also to changes in structure, conflict, and role shifts.

Divorce information. Participants in the current study perceived that both too much and not enough information from parents about the divorce contributed to their negative feelings. Similar to descriptions of parent-child communication by Galvin et al.,

2012, participants' parents may not have been sure about how, when, and to whom to disclose information. Therefore, it is necessary for both parents and children to communicate about a level of disclosure that is desirable for both parties. Participant 4 gave her own advice for how to balance the tension between too much and too little divorce information: "I wish I confided in them less than they confided in me. Maybe it they had only given me more details when I had asked or tried to balance positive information with negative." Had she and her parents communicated about these wishes, they may have been able to come to an understanding about appropriate divorce disclosure. As McManus and Nussbaum (2011) wrote, "Disclosure is seldom a choice between reveal and not reveal; other strategies may be employed to balance between these two extremes" (p. 517). Likewise, changes in family routine, conflict, and role shifts should not be occurring at one extreme or the other; open communication about both parents' and children's feelings should be employed to balance between two extremes.

Changes in structure. When participants had to change residences, schools, or visitations schedules with each parent, they reported sadness and confusion and wished to be given more control over the changes that so affected them. On the other hand, had there been no changes to the family structure after the divorce, children would have not reaped the benefits of closer relationships with custodial parents and stepfamily members. In addition to these positive family relationships, another benefit that was not found in this study but was reported by children in past literature was the opportunities for travel, relocation, and better education that resulted from the change in family structure

(Hetherington, 2003; Woods, 2008). Therefore, it stands to reason that changes in family structure can contribute to both negative, and, if handled correctly, positive outcomes of divorce; there needs to be a balance between the amount of change occurring, and the best way to achieve that balance is with open communication between parents and their children. Having a voice allows children to give their opinions on living arrangements, transitions, and visitations schedules, issues that parents may overlook (Kelly, 2003; Matters, 2011). Additionally, being given an opportunity to talk about how they are coping with divorce allows children to develop a sense of control and confidence when managing challenging situations (Kelly, 2007; Matters, 2011). This finding was also reported by participants in the current study; they specified that using open communication allowed them to express their opinions about changes in family structure, which then contributed to their positive feeling of personal empowerment.

Conflict. Thirdly, high levels of family conflict contributed to participants' negative feeling of being caught between parents, which has also been extensively confirmed by past research; feelings of being caught have been shown to be detrimental to the physical, mental, and emotional well beings of children of divorce (Afifi, 2003; Afifi & McManus, 2006; Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007; Galvin et al., 2012; Hetherington, 2003; Johnston et al., 1987; Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Thus, it follows that a decrease in parental conflict that can come with divorce will at the very least result in a feeling of relief, as seen in the current participants. In contrast to the balance desired with parental disclosure and changes in structure, it would be most beneficial for both parents and children if parent-parent conflict were minimized as much as possible using

patience, mediation, and open communication, as found in this study. That being said, the coping strategy of open communication could also be used to promote healthy parent-child conflict, which may encourage children to voice their concerns about the divorce and allow parents to receive feedback. Afifi & McManus (2006) recommend to parents that mending tense and broken relationships requires addressing sources of pain and anger; listening without judgment or defensiveness to a child explain his/her emotions about the divorce is an important step towards mending the parent-child relationship (Afifi & McManus, 2006; Bernstein, 2007). While parent-parent conflict should be minimized to reduce negative feelings, open parent-child discussions should be encouraged to center around children's feelings and perceptions of the divorce.

Role shifts. "Parental conflict causes breakdown in the role structure of the family. In order for the family to survive, children are induced to assume inappropriate roles and functions, which, in turn, induces emotional and behavioral disturbance" (Johnston et al., 1987, p. 506). Extreme role reversal contributed to current participants' feelings of neglect, anger, and being caught, whereas some increase in responsibility led to their positive feelings of empowerment and development of mediation skills. Participants reported that accepting their new roles as pseudo-parents (Johnston et al., 1987) and mediators helped them cope with their new responsibilities, but open communication was also used as a way to refuse certain role shirts. It is a delicate balance between feeling confidently self-sufficient and feeling overwhelmed with responsibility (Jurkovic et al., 2001), and children and parents should continue to use open communication to better manage this balance.

A Beneficial Process

There has been a division in past research about whether parental divorce negatively or positively impacts children. Furthermore, individual studies have typically focused on one or the other outcome. This study shows that negative and positive feelings can coexist. Amato (2000) wrote, "Researchers maintain that divorce may vary in the effects it produces; benefitting some, temporarily harming others, or permanently damaging even others" (as cited in Woods, 2007, p. 3) In this current study, divorce seemed to temporarily harm but ultimately benefit the nine participants. Participants, initially in denial of the situation, gradually worked through their feelings about divorce with help from their parents and successful coping strategies. The overall result that emerged from the interviews was that divorce was an improvement from their parents' marriage, particularly with the use of coping strategies. This is a very important finding that should be explored further in future research to pinpoint both positive and negative coping strategies.

Limitations

This study was successful in collecting rich, in-depth details about adult children's perceptions of divorce. However, limitations of this study should be considered in order to improve future research in children's divorce coping. A major limitation of this study is that sample of participants was very narrow. All participants identified as Caucasian/white and either twenty-one or twenty-two years of age; two thirds of the participants were female. This may be because the researcher was also female and recruited using a convenience sample, but also because females may feel

more comfortable talking to other females. Additionally, all participants had at least one sibling; because sibling social support was an important coping strategy for these participants, it would have been valuable to see whether an only child would have liked to have a sibling with whom to go through the divorce process. Similarly, none of the participants lived with any extended family members or friends within their parents' homes or mentioned therapy; both of these support resources were mentioned in the literature but were touched on in this study. Also, all the participants were current college students; it would have been interesting to see how adult children coped with divorce while living at home or living alone after graduation. Lastly, because the results of this study are only based on the perception of one member of each family, they do not present a full understanding of how each familial unit coped with the divorce process. A more diverse sample would allow researchers to have a more comprehensive understanding of how divorce impacts children.

Second, participants were somewhat aware of the goals of the study – namely to address both negative and positive feelings about divorce. They may have been more inclined to participate knowing that they wouldn't only be discussing the negative aspects of divorce, which may have been more sensitive in nature. Also, their interview responses may concentrate only on the polarizing aspects of divorce rather than allowing those differences to emerge naturally without prompting. In future studies, the known details of the study should remain undisclosed so as not to influence participants' answers.

Finally, the format of the qualitative interview should also be considered. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed participants the opportunity to give in-depth

details about their divorce experience. It may be beneficial for future researchers interested in studying feelings and their contributing factors to use a more structured format. For example, if a participant identified a particular feeling, the researcher could then ask what the participant thought contributed to that feeling. This may restrict the free-flowing interview, but it would allow for more concrete connections to be made. Using these results, a subsequent survey could determine the strength of contributing factors' and/or coping strategies' relationships to positive and negative feelings. Finally, the subjective experience of the researcher is an inherent limitation to this type of study; the analysis of the participant responses is subject to the researcher's experience and understanding of the divorce process.

Future Considerations and Conclusion

In addition to addressing the limitations of this study, future research on coping with divorce should continue to help families navigate this stressful event. As seen in this study, certain distinctions – between feelings, factors, and coping strategies – sometimes had flexible descriptions. Future researchers should work to establish a clear set of definitions specific to divorce coping to clarify children's coping strategies and to improve families' understanding of this complex process.

Also, future researchers should continue to be open to results that address both negative *and* positive outcomes of divorce; this study showed that both could coexist within the same family and within the same individual. This study is in no way an all-encompassing report on children's feelings about divorce; future research should seek to confirm and add to the results of this study.

Another major gap in divorce research is the lack of studies that consider both parents' and children's perceptions of the divorce process. It is the nature of qualitative research to understand participant experiences, and divorce coping may be best understood if the perspectives of both parents and children could be analyzed together. The connections between parental behaviors, children's coping strategies, and family members' feelings about divorce would become much more rich and complex. It would have to be determined whether individual interviews, family interviews, or some combination of both would be the best format for a study of this nature.

The primary takeaway from this study of adult children of divorce should be that both external and internal factors are at play when determining children's feelings about the divorce process. Not only researchers but also parents should be very diligent in their quest to listen and understand children's perspectives on divorce. Divorced families must be willing to use open communication and problem solving to determine how the structure changes, familial conflict, role functions, and divorce information should be balanced in a way that is beneficial for all of its individual members. There is no doubt that divorce is a difficult process for any family to manage, but children and their families should be encouraged that it can also be a time for improvement and growth.

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? _____

2. What is your ethnicity? (Check all that apply.)
_____ African American
_____ Asian/Pacific Islander
_____ White/Caucasian
_____ Hispanic/Latino
_____ Other – Specify: _____

If you checked more than one ethnicity, which do you identify with most?
_____

3. Do you have any siblings?
____ Yes ____ No

If so, how many?
_____

Please include the birth order.
_____

4. With whom did you live following the divorce?
____ Mother
____ Father
____ Other

5. If applicable, with whom do you live with now?
____ Mother
____ Father
____ Other

6. Did/do any extended family members or friends live in the same residence as you?
____ Yes
____ No

Please list their relationship to you.
_____

7. How often did you see your non-custodial parent (the parent with whom you did not live) following the divorce?
_____

Now?

_____

8. What age were you when your parents divorced?

_____

9. How long were your parents married?
____ Years ____ Months

10. Did you move schools following your parent's divorce?
____ Yes
____ No

11. Did you move residences following your parent's divorce?
____ Yes
____ No

12. How much contact do you have now with both of your parents?
Mother:

_____

Father:

_____

13. Have either of your parents remarried?
____ Yes
____ No

If yes, when?

_____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your parents' divorce?

2. What was the process of divorce like for you?

3. What were the most difficult aspects?

4. Were you able to overcome these difficulties? How?

5. Were there any positive outcomes?

6. Did the relationship with each parent change? How?

7. In terms of your relationship with your parents, were there any negative changes?

Positive changes?

8. How did you react to changes in your family structure and routine?

9. What was helpful to you during the divorce process?

10. What were you able to learn about yourself through the divorce process?

11. Have you changed your thinking about your parents' divorce at any time?

12. How is the relationship with each parent now?

13. How would you compare your personal well being currently to your well being immediately after finding out about your parents' divorce?

    a. What do you think contributed to this difference/lack of difference?

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