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Effects of Divorce on Theories of Relationships

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Abstract

Research shows that people can have different ideas about the development of relationships. “Soulmate theorists” believe that there is only one person in the world that they can live a happy life with, whereas “work-it-out theorists” believes that a relationship can be successful through communication and problem solving. This study investigates if there is a difference in the way people approach intimate relationships depending whether their parents were divorced or married while they were growing up. Because research in this area is new, the hypothesis for this study is bi-directional. Parental divorce may be explained by children due to the fact that their parents weren’t “soulmates.” On the other hand, children may believe that the failure of their parents’ marriage was because they did not work hard enough at making the relationship work. Participants in the present study were male (32) and female (21) undergraduate students. They were asked to complete a demographics questionnaire concerning their parents’ marital status while they were growing up and the Relationship Theories Questionnaire developed by Franiuk et al. Children of intact marriages (N = 42) will be compared to children of divorce (N = 11) in regard to their relationship theories. Results indicate no relationship between parental divorce and their theories on relationships.

Effects of Divorce on Theories of Relationships

It is very common for marriages to end in divorce. In fact, approximately 50% of all marriages in the U.S. today end in divorce and approximately 60% of all divorces involve children (Sorrentino, 1990). These trends are disturbing, especially considering ample evidence that children of divorce experience a variety of negative outcomes.

Children's self-esteem may be at risk following the divorce of their parents (Bynum & Durm, 1996). The lack of self-esteem is a contributing factor of depression but not the only cause. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that children of divorce are more likely to suffer from mild depression compared to children of an intact family. These findings could be attributed to the children holding themselves accountable for the separation of their parents. Children of divorce are at a greater risk to display delinquent and anti-social behaviors (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Newcomber & Udry, 1987; Zaslow, 1988; Hetherington 1989,1993). A gender difference in response to divorce is also present in children of divorce. Females have been shown to have an increased conflict with their mothers, whereas males are more problematic and show little interest in spending time with their families.

Divorce also seems to impact how children of divorce engage in relationships as adults. Children of divorce, mainly females, make several inappropriate relationship decisions. Females are thought to be worse off in the long run compared to males when it comes to their relationship choices (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Newcomber & Udry, 1987; Zaslow, 1988.) The risk of teenage pregnancy, marrying at a young age, and marrying a mate with a lower socioeconomic status, who is psychologically unstable, and is less educated is higher in females with parents that are divorced (Hetherington,

1988.) Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991) found that young women of divorce generally have difficulty in heterosexual relationships. In these relationships, females report greater frequency and intensity of intimacy according to Sinclair and Nelson (1998). The greater incidences of intimacy are evident in a study conducted by Kinnaird & Gerrard (1986). In their findings, female children of divorce tend to have more sexual partners compared to females of intact parental marriages. The women must have had a negative experience with their parents' divorce and therefore project those feelings onto their own relationships.

When children of divorce marry, there is an increased risk that the marriage will also end in divorce (Park & Buriel, 1998.) The increase in probability of a marriage ending in divorce could possibly be due to the difficulties the child experienced with their parents' divorce. Past experiences could influence how a child of divorce approaches relationships. If children see their parents' marriage eventually ending in divorce, they could paint a mental picture and assume divorce is the way every marriage ends. Children who believe that most marriages will eventually end in divorce, may, in turn, be more likely to find something wrong with their spouse later in life, possibly causing the eventual divorce.

The degree to which children of divorced parents have success or difficulty in their own relationships may depend, in part, on their implicit theories of relationships. Theories of relationships are the way that a person idealizes a relationship (Franiuk, et. al, 2002). Some people believe that there is only one person, or a few people with whom they are meant to spend their life. Franiuk and colleagues (2002) call this belief the soulmate theory of relationships. The typical soulmate theorists believe that there is only

one, or few people to which love can be discovered. The one person that is meant for them is very close to perfect and finding the one right person is the most important aspect of a successful relationship. Contrary to the work-it-out theorists, soulmate theorists believe that passion between the couple is of the up most importance in a successful relationship (Franiuk et. al., 2002). Work-it-out theorists believe that a relationship can be made possible between many pairs of people, it only takes a little work to keep the relationship rolling (Franiuk et. al., 2002). The people that the work-it-out theorists are looking for do not have to be flawless in their traits because effort is the most important factor in a relationship. Work-it-out theorists do not believe that passion is an essential element for a relationship to be a success (Franiuk et. al., 2002).

To date, it remains unclear whether children of divorce differ from children of non-divorced parents in terms of their theories of relationships. Few studies, such as Sinclair and Nelson's 1998 study suggest that children of divorce find disagreement in relationships to be destructive to that relationship, therefore causing them to look for their soulmate to whom they will not have disagreements with. They may see their parents' and their own past romantic relationships ending due to the fact that their former mates were not their soulmate. The marriage of the couple may have only been an incorrect assessment of the spouse being their desired soulmate. It is possible, according to results compiled by Franiuk et al. (2002), that the level of holding a soulmate theory does not predict the level of holding a work-it-out theory, making the two hypotheses necessary.

Since children of divorce have watched the disagreements of their parents, one might expect them to believe that the split of the meaningful romantic relationships is the result of couples not being able to correctly work out the problems in the relationship.

Thus, children of divorce may be more likely than children of non-divorced parents to hold a work-it-out theory. Believers will go on their way looking for the next person that they believe they can work through a relationship with.

Happiness in relationships of work-it-out and soulmate theorists seems to differ as well. Talbot (1997) suggests that soulmate theorists hold romantic relationships to unrealistic standards, causing an increase in divorce. The soulmate theorists are less satisfied with their relationships due to these high standards not being met compared to work-it-out theorists.

Does the divorce of one's parents influence relationship theories? Two hypotheses are being tested in this study. Hypothesis one is that children of divorce will develop a stronger soulmate theory compared to children of intact marriages. Hypothesis two is that children of divorce will develop a stronger work-it-out theory compared to children of intact marriages.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were male and female students at a small Midwestern private college. The 53 participants (32 male, 21 female) ranged in age from 19 to 24. There were 11 children of divorce and 42 children of intact families. Some of the students received extra credit in their psychology courses for participation, where others were personal social contacts of the researcher.

Materials

Students were asked to complete a demographics questionnaire. In this questionnaire, participants were asked questions about past experiences with their

parents' relationship(s). Among the questions asked included the parent the most time spent with now and growing up, current relationship status, and current marital status of their parents (see questionnaire 1). Participants were asked to complete the Relationship Theories Questionnaire developed by Franiuk (2002). Participants responded to each question on a seven point Likert scale with higher numbers representing greater endorsement of the work-it-out and soulmate theories (see questionnaire 2). A debriefing sheet was given to the participants (see appendix). The debriefing sheet included contact information for a counselor in case the study brought up any feelings that needed to be talked about with a professional.

Procedure

To obtain participants, a sign-up sheet was placed in a common area at the college. Once the participants are in the testing room they were seated apart from one another to the best of the experimenter's ability to ensure privacy due to the sensitive subject being studied. Some participants did not answer the questionnaires in an academic setting however. Most of the male participants answered the questionnaires in the dormitory rooms due to time constraints. Special care was taken to account for a steady testing environment. After being seated the participants were given an informed consent form to sign. The informed consent ensured their privacy and that their names will never be matched with their survey responses. Participants were allowed to leave at any time if they were not comfortable with the questions being asked without any penalty.

Once the informed consent forms were signed, the Relationship Theories Questionnaire (Franiuk, 2002) was distributed. Participants were given a subject number

so their questionnaires could be correctly matched to their questionnaires. The questionnaires were part of a packet assembled containing surveys from another study. This combining of surveys was necessary to maximize participant numbers due to the small subject pool at the college. The surveys were counterbalanced to eliminate order effects for both studies. Following the completion of the packet, participants were given separate debriefing sheets for each of the studies in the packet, and were free to leave.

Results

The internal reliability for both the soulmate theory scale ($\alpha = .73$) and the work-it-out theory scale ($\alpha = .70$) were not optimal but were in the acceptable range. These numbers are low on significance but were similar to the original data collected by Franiuk and her colleagues (2002). These soulmate and work-it-out scales were not correlated to one another ($r = -.02$, $N = 53$, $p = .91$), much like in Franiuk et al. (2002).

An independent *t*-test was used to test each of the hypotheses. Hypothesis one, that children of divorce will develop a stronger soulmate theory compared to children of intact families, was not supported ($t(50) = -.595$, $p = .554$). As for the second hypothesis, children of divorce will develop a stronger work-it-out theory compared to children of intact families, was also not supported ($t(50) = -.204$, $p = .839$).

Several other analyses were completed to look for significance in demographic differences in children of divorce and the theories of relationships that they hold. It was found that age of the child at the time of the parents' divorce is possibly a predictor of the child having a soulmate theory of relationships, but the findings are only approaching significance, ($r = .56$ ($N = 10$, $p = .09$)). This means that the younger the child is at parental divorce, the less of a soulmate theory they had as college students.

A gender difference was also found when it came to the soulmate theory beliefs. College women were found to hold less of a soulmate theory compared to college men ($t = -2.21$, $p = .032$)

Discussion

The fact that the soulmate theory scale and the work-it-out theory scales did not effect each other was intriguing. It is awkward to believe that a person can hold both a soulmate theory and a work-it-out theory of relationships dually. This fact leads me to believe that the level of one's acceptance relationship theories can be two-fold. A person may accept some aspects of a soulmate theory and reject other beliefs from this theory and at the same time do the same for the work-it-out theory. Age at the time of the parental divorce, the child's gender, as well as the presence of abuse could all be potential factors in determining the way a child can develop a theory of relationships.

As reported, no significant differences were found for either the soulmate theory scale or the work-it-out theory scale when it came to children of divorce compared to children of intact families. Children of divorce vary in their theories of relationships just like children of intact parental marriages.

As mentioned earlier, there can be many variables effecting theories of relationships in children of divorce. Divorce is an incredibly complex happening which cannot be reduced to a few variables (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998). This statement sums up the results concerning my hypotheses. Divorce as a whole may not have an effect on the children of these divorce's theories of relationships, but possibly certain aspects of divorce do have an effect.

The age of the children of divorce plays a role in a child's theory of relationships. It was discovered that the younger the child is at the time of parental divorce, the less of a soulmate theory they will hold ($r = .56, p = .09$). This fact may be due to the child not understanding why the parental separation occurred. As a young child, many situations are new to them, i.e. divorce. This newness can skew the child's belief in the soulmate theory just on the basis of misunderstanding. The divorce of the child's parents may lead the child to believe that there is no single person in the world that a meaningful relationship can be formed with because the only relationship that they have witnessed up until that point in their lives, their parents', failed. If a child sees that the only relationship that they have witnessed failed, why wouldn't all relationships fail?

Parental divorce and age at the time of that divorce are not the only things that contribute to a person's belief in a theory of relationships. Gender has been found to contribute to people's beliefs in theories of relationships. College women were found to hold less of a soulmate theory of relationships compared to college men ($t = -2.208, p = .032$). Why is this occurring? I believe, as a college male, that it is much easier for a college woman to meet men than it is for college men to meet college women. College women seem to be able to lure just about any man in just through flirting and conversation. Using this tactic, women can meet many men that a potential relationship can be developed. Men may take the flirting and conversations the wrong way and believe that this girl really likes me and I like her just because of the signs that she is laying out. The man will then believe that the flirtatious female is the one for him, his soulmate. Women may see their tactics as only a way to meet someone that a relationship may work, but not a soulmate.

Further research on this subject should include many more participants of different race, cultural backgrounds, and age. The number of children of divorce studied should be much higher as well. Due to subject pool restraints, the present study was unable to collect a sufficient number of children of divorce or a wide variety of variation in race and cultural backgrounds. With a sufficient number of children of divorce, many other demographic, relationship, and family variables can be analyzed. Further family background and the participants current relationship situation could also be helpful in analyzing these children of divorce. Attachment levels to parents, parents' happiness in their relationships for the children of intact families, and abuse history are all possible variables to be explored.

A limitation that could have possibly effected the results of this study is the combination of this study with the other groups. The other group used different labels and values for their Likert scales, therefore possibly causing confusion or mistakes in circling from the participants. A small sample size, the amount of children of divorce in particular, is a problem with the study as well.

In future studies, researchers could include various other relationship questionnaires to determine the effects of parental abuse, the levels of happiness in intact parental marriages, or overall attachment to their parents. The findings from these other surveys could possibly find other relationships between variables and relationship theories. With future research, we can better understand the ways parental divorce can effect the future relationships of their children.

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Questionnaire 1

Participant # _____

Male or Female (circle one)

Age _____

Relationship status (circle one): Single Dating Engaged Married

If in a relationship, length of relationship _____

Will you marry this person? _____

Marital status of biological parents _____

If divorced, age you were at separation _____

If divorced, is mother remarried? _____

If divorced, is father remarried? _____

Parent you spend the most time with now _____

Parent you spend the most time with growing up _____

In one paragraph, describe your ideal marriage:

Appendix

Informed Consent Form to Participate in Psychological Study

This study is being conducted by Derik Orschell, Vivienne Alonso and Stephanie Hinojosa as part of our senior thesis project in psychology (under the direction of Dr. Stephen Dine Young, a faculty member at Hanover College). Our study consists of a series of several short questionnaires that ask about demographic information, personal background, and current attitudes about various issues. Please answer the questionnaires in the order they are given. For the purposes of the study, it is best if you answer all questions, but if there is a question that makes you feel uncomfortable, you may skip it. After you have completed the packet of questionnaires, give it to the researcher and take a copy of the description of the research. The entire study should take less than 30 minutes to complete.

The information you provide during the study is completely anonymous and at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give. If you have any questions about what you will be doing in the study or about the study itself, feel free to ask them now or at any other time during your participation.

If you have any questions after the study, please contact Derik Orschell (x7593 or orshcell@hanover.edu), Vivienne Alonso (x7972 or alonso@hanover.edu), Stephanie Hinojosa (x7911 or hinojosam@hanover.edu) or Dr. Dine Young (x7319 or youngst@hanover.edu or Office 156, Science Center).

I acknowledge that I am participating in this study at my own free will. I understand that I may refuse to participate or stop participation at any time (and still receive any extra credit that may be part of a course I am taking). If I wish, I will be given a copy of this consent form.

 Signature

 Date

Research Description- College Adjustment

The primary purpose of this study is to determine if there is a difference in the way people feel about relationships between people who have experienced the divorce of their parents compared to those who have not. Researchers suggest that there are two ways someone can imagine a successful relationship, “the soulmate theory” and the “work-it-out theory.” Soulmate theorists say that there is only one special person whom a relationship is meant to occur with. “Work-it-out” theorists believe that there are many people with whom a relationship can be built, as long as both sides work at making the relationship.

The first questionnaire that was filled out was to give the researcher some background information in order to separate the two conditions, child of divorce and child not of divorce.

The second questionnaire was the Relationship Theories Questionnaire developed by Franiuk et. al (2002). This questionnaire is designed to determine the levels of which the participant believes in both the soulmate and work-it-out theories of relationships.

The central research question is whether there is a difference in relationship theories depending on the marital status of parents.

If you have any questions, concerns, or would like to view the results of this study, feel free to contact the researcher. If you are interested in further information about this topic, please contact the researcher or Dr. Stephen (Skip) Dine Young in the psychology department at x7318, SCC 156, or at youngst@hanover.edu.

If at any time you feel that you need to speak to a counselor about your feelings, contact Gary Petiprin at the college counseling center at x7399 or by email at petiprin@hanover.edu.

Thank you for participating in my study!

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