

Functional Ambivalence of Parental Divorce on Young Adult Communication Processes within
Romantic Relationships
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the kinds of functional ambivalence parental divorce has on young adult communication processes within romantic relationships. In order to examine this, young adults whose parents are divorced and are currently in a romantic relationship of at least two months will be completing unstructured qualitative interviews. The specific communication processes that will be examined are conflict resolution, comfortability being emotionally vulnerable, and ability to commit. Participant's biological sex and whether or not their current partner's parents are divorced are also factors that will be examined. The expected results of this study are thought to be that the effects parental divorce has on young adult communication processes used within romantic relationships are functionally ambivalent, meaning that they vary from individual to individual.

Functional Ambivalence of Parental Divorce on Young Adult Communication Processes within Romantic Relationships

As divorce rates have increased over the past decades, effects of divorce have started to impact a wide scope of the population (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). This is important to note because as young adults start to navigate their own romantic relationships, the kind of relationship they watched between their parents growing up can affect their perceptions and practices they take on in their own relationships (Bandura, 1989). By observing divorce children learn that marriages do not always last a lifetime and can be broken (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). By watching their parents own commitment to each other break, children then are more likely to believe that marriage troubles cannot be easily fixed, and this also consequently makes children of divorce view the idea commitment more pessimistically (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Amato and DeBoer's 2001 study also recognized that couples who eventually get divorced report more trouble resolving conflict and tend to communicate less clearly with one another (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). According to Albert Bandura's cognitive theory, behaviors are learned by observing other people partake in those same behaviors (Bandura, 1989). This means that children of parental divorce would assume to have more relationship problems due to the effects their parents' divorce had on their views of relationships. These effects can vary upon person to person, but it is assumed that children who grew up with parents that remained estranged experience the most disruptive effects (Amato, 2004). Furthermore, the participant's biological sex plays a big factor in determining how influential the effects of divorce can be (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008).

The different communication processes I will examine are participant's level of emotional vulnerability with their partner, participants ability to actively commit to their partner,

and participant's efficiency in conflict resolution or problem solving within their relationship. This study will be examining the participants variety of responses and analyzing those results through the lens of different communication practices while taking in other factors like the child's biological sex and whether or not each member of the relationship parents got divorced. The purpose of this study is to examine the kinds of functional ambivalence parental divorce has on young adult communication processes within romantic relationships.

Goals and Information Acquisition

Since divorce has become such a common phenomenon, scholars and the public are both interested in the type of effects parental divorce has on children. However, there is still a lot to learn about the long-term effects of divorce (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). Children who have come out of divorces often times struggle initially with their family dynamic and structure changing, but the lasting effects it has on their communication skills within romantic relationships can vary from individual to individual (Kirk, 2002). Effects of divorce do not go away over time, but instead can be hidden in the form of fears, perceptions, and behaviors within victims of divorces own romantic relationships (Kirk, 2002). Furthermore, it is important to take into account that emotional and intimate relationships are interpersonal processes that involve two people (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). Even if one person in a relationship has parents who are divorced, that does not mean their possible trauma or parents' divorce is the only factor contributing to the level of satisfaction being found within their relationship (VanLeer, 1992). It is important to continue to examine what role both partners have in the interpersonal processes of their relationship with one another (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). Given the fact that various studies have already shown that the effects of parental divorce can have different effects on the overall satisfaction children of divorce experience in their own romantic relationships, further research needs to be conducted to

carefully analyze what kinds of repercussions parental divorce has on specific communication processes within children of divorce's own intimate relationships.

Social Cognitive Theory

According to Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, one way that people learn certain behaviors is by observing them being performed by someone else (Bandura, 1989). Since we grow up around members of our family, typically share the same living space as them, and otherwise admire and look up to them, they serve as the primary source for observational learning. (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). This can be applied to the way in which family members communicate. If a child grows up in a volatile household and is witness to many verbal arguments, then they consequently have less of a chance at learning productive conflict resolution (Bandura, 1989). This is because watching this type of behavior can lead observers to believe that people, not just themselves, are not adequate at solving relationship problems (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). This can affect the way in which children of divorce trust other people. Young adults whose parents divorced have been found to have a lot more difficulties with trusting people and have less feelings of interconnectedness in personal relationships (Kirk, 2002). However, not all couples who get divorced fight in front of their children, and there can be other reasons for couples to get divorced aside from just arguing. Other common reasons people tend to get divorced have been identified as problems regarding division of labor, violence, infidelity, and behavioral problems (Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). This means that not all children of divorce are necessarily subject to learning ineffective communication process just by watching their parents.

Amato and DeBoer (2001) also hypothesized that children who come from unsuccessful marriages learn ineffective relationship practices by observing their parents own interactions. A

similar longitudinal study done earlier by Amato titled, “Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce,” also showed that relationship problems were more likely to occur if both partners came from divorced households (Amato, 1996). Each person in these kinds of relationships may fear intimacy and consequently desire more or less of it than the other (Amato, 1996). This creates a demand-withdrawal type exchange (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). Fearing intimacy also may lead the couple to run into negative forms of communication and conflict resolution tactics that they both learned to use from their own parents (Bandura, 1989). These issues themselves can influence the couple to fight more and end their relationship (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). Ironically, the divorce of their parents can also lead partners to fear and avoid conflict (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). This is because watching the conflict one’s parents had, can lead them to want to avoid that happening within their own romantic relationships, even if individuals are aware that this is not a healthy communication practice (VanLeer, 1992). Since many ineffective communicative processes are learned through observation, it makes sense that couples who are made up of two people where both parties have experienced parental divorce only have a greater chance of having these negative implications infiltrate their own intimate relationships (Bandura, 1989). On top of that, if each person in the relationship has learned unproductive ways to deal with conflict, the couple is only at greater risk of having problems within their relationship because both of them have not seen what it looks like to correctly deal with relationship issues, and therefore cannot learn how to do so from one another either (Bandura, 1989).

Biological Sex Differences in Outcomes

Many studies have found that the types of effects parental divorce have on young adult’s romantic relationships communication practices can fluctuate when looking at biological sex.

Such studies have included, Segrin & Taylor's 2006 study, Booth & Amato's 1994 study, Mullett & Stolberg's 2008 study, Kirk's 2002 study, VanLeer's 1992 study, and Herzog & Cooney's 2002 study. A majority of empirical findings support the correlation between parental divorce and problems with communication skills but more so with women, not men (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). This may be because women are more likely lose contact with their fathers after a divorce and therefore feel increased amounts of insecurity in young adult relationships (Booth & Amato, 1994). This increased insecurity may cause them to develop anxious attachment styles in relationships and seek out relationships even though at the same time they fear being abandoned (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). A study done by Hetherington (1982) found that females of parental divorce were more at risk of to partake in early sexual activity and were more forward with males, but also had lower self-esteem than those women whose parents did not get divorced (Kirk, 2002).

On the other hand, some studies have found that men whose parents divorced are less likely to seek emotional relationships and are more likely to display distancing-like qualities (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). This may be because young adult males, have been found to rebel against the ineffective communication patterns they observed between their parents when forming their own relationships (VanLear, 1992). If the male offspring are aware of the poor communication practices their parents partook in, they may be able to compensate for this in the form of a better communication style (VanLear, 1992). Although when it comes to interpersonal conflict going unresolved in romantic relationships, males appear to be more negatively impacted (Herzog & Cooney, 2002).

Another study conducted by Sanders, Haltford, and Bahrens (1999) studied premarital couples communication practices in association to their parents' marital status. They studied

couples in their mid-to late twenties, with an average relationship duration of around two years. Their results showed that females who experienced a parental divorce had higher rates of negative nonverbal conduct, withdrawal from the relationship, invalidation, and conflict in their relationship compared to men with divorced parents (Sanders et al., 1999). One reason researchers, such as Mullett, Stolberg, and VanLeer, think that females may experience more negative effects of divorce, specifically when it comes to their own relationships is because females are more susceptible to learning from their parents different interactions in comparison to males (VanLeer, 1992). Furthermore, some researchers hypothesize that daughters are more likely than sons to be directly involved in parental disputes by taking on the role of mediator (Vuchinich, Emery & Cassidy, 1988). These two explanations provide evidence to support the claim that the effects of parental divorce are more disruptive in females than in males.

Interpersonal Conflict in Relationships

Parental divorce has been associated with negative beliefs regarding how realistic and practical marriage is for the span of one's life, and these ideas can be influenced by what one observed in their parent's own marriage (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). These negative beliefs can affect one's ability to commit to a romantic relationship prior to marriage (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). If an individual already has doubts about the practicality of marriage and how realistic getting married might be, why would they put themselves in a position to get there, and commit to a relationship, if the end goal is societally assumed to be marriage.

Past research conducted by Mullett and Stolberg, has shown that it is more common for females to identify having more relationship issues due to their parents' divorce than men (Mullett & Stolberg, 2008). This is assumed to be because women are more likely to imitate the same communication practices they saw between their parents, while men are more likely to

reject them (VanLear, 1992). In addition to that, Mullet and Stolberg's study also found that if both parties in a relationship come from a divorced household, the couple is at much greater risk at separating in comparison to couples where only one partner or neither partners parents got divorced. This is due to observing problematic communication process in each partners' own parents, and then consequently being unable to engage in effective problem solving within intimate relationships, as well as fearing the idea of commitment (Bandura, 1989).

It is clear through research that there is a link between parental divorce and overall satisfaction within romantic relationships. However, there is still a lot more research that needs to be conducted in regard to how this effects children subject to parental divorce's communication practices in their own romantic relationships. There is some evidence that shows young adults whose parents divorced may have a harder time committing to relationships and may struggle with conflict resolution or problem solving, but there is not a lot of literature that discusses what kind of role parental divorce has on communication processes such as individual's ability to open up or be emotionally vulnerable with their partner. It is important that future research takes a closer look at all three of these processes because they too can play a big role in determining the overall satisfaction and success one may get out of an intimate relationship. Furthermore, it is also important to understand what role biological sex and the status of each partners parents' marital status plays in the way that each partner communicates within a relationship, in order to form the most accurate conclusions on this subject.

This study will analyze how the divorce of a subject's parents can affect the way they communicate within their own romantic relationships. Specific communication processes will be studied, and these processes include participant's level of emotional vulnerability with their partner, participants ability to verbally commit to their partner, and participant's efficiency in

conflict resolution or problem solving within their relationship. On top of this, this study will also look at what role biological sex, and each partner's parents' marital status has in determining the level of effective communication processes used within a romantic relationship. To organize this analysis, three research questions were crafted. Each question is relevant to a specific communication process. RQ1 asks, "How, if at all, do young adults with divorced parents engage in romantic conflict resolution?" RQ2 asks, "How, if at all, do young adults with divorced parents perceive their level of comfortability being emotionally vulnerable with their romantic partner?" Lastly, RQ3 asks, "How, if at all, are young adults with divorced parents able to commit to their romantic partner?" By conducting the study through qualitative interviews and using questions that connect to these core theories, we should get more answers as to why parental divorce causes such disruptive effects in children of divorce own communication processes within their individual romantic relationships.

Method

Participants

Possible participants for this study will consist of college students attending a large, public, northeastern university in the fall of 2021. This demographic will be sampled because they are at a point in their life where, for most, developing romantic relationships is held at a high degree of importance, according to (Erikson, 1962). Students will first complete a written survey, taken via pen and paper, to gather demographic information such as their age, sex, current relationship status, and parents' marital status. One hundred to two hundred students will be selected from this survey and then asked to voluntarily participate in a series of in-depth interviews. Participants will be eligible for participation if they are (a) between the ages of 18-25, (b) identify as having parents who are divorced, and (c) identify as currently being in a heterosexual romantic relationship for a minimum of three months. Requiring participants to meet these constraints will be done in an effort to minimize confounding variables. Potential participants will be contacted via email and asked to schedule an interview at a time and place that is convenient for them. Each participant will be told that the study is about the effects parental divorce has on young adult's communication processes in their own romantic relationships.

Data Collection

A team of research assistants and the first author will conduct the interviews. Interviews will take place in a setting and at a time of each individual participants choosing. The interviews will be done face to face or over the phone, depending on the participant's preference. Once informed consent was obtained from each participant regarding participating and completing an in-depth interview, they will be reminded that their participation is voluntary. The interviews and

questions asked within them will all be related to the perceived effects the interviewee's parent's divorce had on their own romantic relationship communication practices and satisfaction levels within that romantic relationship. The interviews will be unstructured. This way the researchers will be able to get an understanding of the participants' existence through their own language (Fontana & Frey, 1995). The interviews will start off with general questions and then move to more specific ones as the interview progresses, in order for the interviewee to be in control of guiding the content of the interview (Mahl, 2001).

Interviews

The interviews will consist of three parts, refer to appendix. The first part will consist of questions that relate to the participants' parents' marriage and divorce. Specific communication concepts like conflict resolution, emotional vulnerability or openness, and commitment will be incorporated into the questions and applied to each participant's understanding of their parents' marriage and divorce. The second part of the interview will move to questions that directly relate to the participants' own current romantic relationship. Interviewers will ask the interviewees to describe their current level of satisfaction in their own relationship. This will be done through a variety of questions that relate to various communication practices. Such questions will ask participants to describe their ability to resolve conflict with their partner, describe how comfortable they are speaking to their partner about personal and emotionally triggering topics, and whether or not the participant has trouble committing to others or committing to advancing levels of relationships (i.e., exclusivity, dating, engagement, marriage, etc.) Participants will also be asked if their current romantic partner's parents are divorced as well. By asking questions related to the participant's parents' relationship first, it will allow the interview to transition into questions about how the relationship participants watched growing up

may have affected their own current relationship practices. The third part will ask participants to describe the connection if any they think their parents' divorce has on various communication processes like conflict resolution, emotional vulnerability, and commitment, within their current romantic relationship. Interviews will last anywhere between one and two and a half hours and will be digitally recorded and transcribed. Participants will be rewarded a \$50 visa gift card after completing their interview as a token of gratitude for participating.

Data Analysis

The information that will be collected from the in-depth interviews will then be transcribed and pseudonyms will be assigned to each interviewee to ensure confidentiality. Participants answers and feedback will also be separated into groups based off of their biological sex, and whether or not their partner has parents who are also divorced. Results and answers to the various questions will be analyzed through the use of thematic analysis.

RQ1 asks, "How, if at all, do young adults with divorced parents engage in romantic conflict resolution?" This question will be analyzed using thematic analysis and this will be applied to participants answers regarding their perceptions of their parents' ability to effectively resolve conflict, their perceptions of their own ability to resolve conflict in their current relationship, and their individual belief that there is or is not a strong connection between the overall level of effectiveness their parents had when communicating with each other and participants own use of effective communication processes in their own romantic relationships. RQ2 asks, "How, if at all, do young adults with divorced parents perceive their level of comfortability being emotionally vulnerable with their romantic partner?" This question will also be analyzed using thematic analysis and will be applied to participants answers to questions that relate to their perceptions of their parents' perceived comfortability being emotionally vulnerable

with one another, the participants perceptions of their own level of comfort when being emotionally vulnerable with their partner, and whether or not each participant believes there is a strong connection between the overall level of effectiveness their parents had when communicating with each other and their own use of effective communication processes in their romantic relationships. RQ3 asks, “How, if at all, are young adults with divorced parents able to commit to their romantic partner?” This question will also use the method of thematic analysis to analyze participants responses to questions that relate to their judgements about their parents’ ability to commit to one another, the participants own judgement about their ability to commit to their current romantic partner, and whether or not each participant believes that their parent’s ability or inability to commit to one another contributes to their capability of committing in their current romantic relationship. Factors like participant’s biological sex and whether or not their current partner’s parents are divorced will also be analyzed using thematic analysis and applied to each research question to see if they play a role in influencing participant’s answers. The thematic analysis will look at participant’s answers through a six-step process coined by Clarke and Braun in 2014. This process consists of familiarization, coding of data, generating themes found in participants’ answers, reviewing those themes, defining and naming the themes, and writing up the information concluded by the analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to examine the kinds of functional ambivalence parental divorce has on young adult communication processes within romantic relationships. The communication processes that will be analyzed are conflict resolution, comfortability being emotionally vulnerable, and ability to commit. In addition to just parental divorce, other variables like participant's biological sex and whether or not their partner's parents are divorced will also be analyzed in order to generate the most accurate conclusions. This will be conducted in the form of unstructured qualitative interviews. Three research questions were crafted to further organize the rest of the interview questions. The method of thematic analysis will also be used to analyze participants' answers, as well as organize and find common themes within the data. The findings of this study could implicate that the effects of parental divorce specifically on young adult communication practices can vary from individual to individual.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Hello. My name is Cassandra Byrne. I am a Communications student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. I am doing a study to learn more about the effects parental divorce has on various communication processes used within young adult's romantic relationships. This study will be done in three parts. In the first part, I will ask you some open-ended questions relating to your parents' marriage and divorce. In the second part, I will ask you some more open-ended questions regarding your own current romantic relationship. In the third and last part, I will ask you more open-ended questions regarding the effect you may or may not think your parents' divorce had on various communication practices you use in your current romantic relationship. The entire process will take approximately 1-3 hours.

Before we begin, there are a few things I would like to go over:

- First, are you at least 19 years old? Are your parents divorced? Are you currently in a romantic relationship that has lasted a minimum of two months?
- Second, in order for me to accurately acquire all of the responses you provide in the interview, I will be audio recording it. Your name and identity will not be linked to any of the information you provide in the interview in any way. The only people who will have access to your audio type will be me and my team of two research assistants. Even though this interview will be transcribed, your name will not be indicated throughout the recording of the interview. I would like you to know that you are free to ask me to turn off the audio recorder at any time during this interview. You may also refuse to answer any questions without punishment.

- You will receive a \$50 visa gift card after completing the interview as a result for your participation. However, talking about your parents' divorce and current romantic relationship may make you feel uncomfortable. All responses will be regarded with the utmost confidentiality.

I also want to take you through the informed consent form and procedures for the study so you can clearly understand your rights today. **(Give both copies of consent form to the participant, give participant time to read and sign both forms, collect one form from participant).**

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part 1: Parents' marriage and divorce

What I am interested in is your experience regarding your parents' marriage and divorce.

Everyone's experience is different and there are no right or wrong answers here. Whenever you can, please give me stories and examples to clarify your point that will be helpful. Do you have any questions about this interview?

[TURN ON AUDIO RECORDER NOW]

1. I am going to ask you some questions about significant memories you have relating to your parents' relationship. Let's start at the beginning. Was it ever apparent to you that your parents had planned on splitting?
2. If so, what was the first moment you realized they might be separating?

3. Did you ever witness tension between your parent's before they separated? (i.e verbal fights, physical distance, less amounts of affection between them)
 - a) If so, tell me a story of when and where you witnessed this?
 - b) If so, how frequently would you say you witnessed this?
 - c) If so, about how long did this change in your parents' relationship last before they decided to get divorced?
4. Do you think there was a lot of conflict in your parents' relationship?
 - a. If so, do you believe they were able to resolve it well?
 - b. If so, is there a specific instance or story you can tell me about where your parents were in conflict with each other? How were they able or not able to resolve it?
5. Do you believe your parents communicated effectively with each other when they were together?
 - a. If so, what made you believe this?
 - b. If not, what made you believe they did not?
6. Did your parents tell you they were getting divorced?
 - a. If so, can you recall how they did it? And if they did it together?
 - b. If so, how did the news make you feel?
 - c. If so, were you surprised by the news or expecting it?
7. How old were you when you found out your parents were getting divorced?
8. Do your parents still talk to each other now?
 - a. If so, how often would you say they do?
 - b. If so, do you think this contact is civil or not?
9. What else should I know about your parents' divorce?

Part 2: Current romantic relationship

Now that we have part 1 questions taken care of, we can begin the second part of our interview.

What I am interested in is your experience in your current romantic relationship. Everyone's experience is different, so there are no right or wrong answers here. Whenever you can, please give me stories and examples to clarify your point that will be helpful. Do you have any questions before we start this part of the interview?

[TURN ON AUDIO RECORDER NOW]

1. I am going to be asking you about certain aspects and feelings you have regarding your current romantic relationship. Let's start at the beginning. How long have you known your current romantic partner? How long have you guys been together?
2. Are your partners parents divorced?
3. What aspects of your relationship do you consider to be the strongest?
4. What aspects of your relationship do you think need the most work?
5. Can you think of a time where you and your partner fought?
 - a. If so, can you tell me a specific story of when this happened?
 - b. How did you two resolve or not resolve things?
 - c. Was the process of resolving things difficult for you?
6. Do you feel comfortable opening up to your partner about emotionally triggering topics?
7. [If they said they did feel comfortable opening]
 - a. Why do you think you feel comfortable doing so?
 - b. Did you feel better after opening up or did you regret it?
 - c. How did their response make you feel?

- d. Would you do it again or often?
- 8. [If they said they did not feel comfortable opening up]
 - a. Why do you think you feel uncomfortable?
- 9. Was committing to being in a relationship difficult for you?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 10. Is committing further to your partner (i.e traveling, engagement, marriage) something you want to do either now or in the future?
 - a. Why or why not?
- 11. What else should I know about your current romantic relationship?

Part 3: Effect on communication processes

Now that we have part 1 and 2 of the interview taken care of, we can begin the third and final part of the interview. What I am interested in is your perceptions on how your parents' divorce might have influenced specific communication processes within your current romantic relationship. Everyone's experience is different, so there are no right or wrong answers here. Whenever you can, please give me stories and examples to clarify your point that will be helpful. Do you have any questions before we start this part of the interview?

[TURN ON AUDIO RECORDER NOW]

- 1. I am going to be asking you about certain aspects and feelings you have towards both your parents' divorce and your current romantic relationship. Do you believe your parents' relationship serves as a model for other relationships?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why not?

2. If your parents had not gotten divorced, do you think you would behave differently in your current relationship?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why not?
3. Do you think your parents' marriage influenced the way you resolve conflict within other relationships?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why not?
4. Do you think your parents' marriage affected your willingness to be emotionally vulnerable or ability to open to your romantic partner?
 - a. If yes, why
 - b. If no, why not
5. Do you think your parents' divorce impacted your views on commitment?
 - a. If yes, do you think it negatively or positively impacted your views on commitment? Why?
6. What is the biggest impact you think your parents' divorce had on the way you communicate in your own romantic relationship? Why do you think this?
7. What else should I know about your parents' divorce and its effect on communication processes such as, conflict resolution, emotional vulnerability, and willingness to commit within your own current romantic relationship?

Thank you for participating in this study. Your time and willingness to talk about your parents' divorce and current romantic relationship is appreciated. If you have any questions, feel free to ask me at this time.

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