



Beyond Broken Families: Interparental Conflict, Divorce, and Family Formation Intentions

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Introduction

Societal standards on families often idealize the dynamic of the “intact” family, which creates a pressure for parents to “stay together for the children” at any cost. Yet the stigma of having a broken home often leads to a more damaging reality: chronic parental conflict can lead to more damaging effects than an amicable divorce. This study examines how these destructive environments shape the intentions of family formation of emerging adults, investigating triangulation as a moderating factor.

Literature Review

Bowen’s Family System Theory (FST) conceptualizes the family unit as an integrated emotional system where members influence one another across individual, systemic, and intergenerational levels (Erdem & Safi, 2018). FST posits that functioning cannot be understood just at the level of the individual level alone, but must be examined within the organization of interconnected family subsystems, particularly the marital dyad and the parent-child relationship. Furthermore, research has proved how individual development is embedded with these interdependent family processes rather than isolated traits (Cox & Paley, 1997). Consequently, changes within family dynamics, such as divorce, reflects a reorganization of familial dynamics rather than a dysfunctional family structure, often conceptualized as processes that involve escalating estrangement and interparental conflict (Härkönen et al., 2017).

Current literature has emphasized that divorce should be viewed more as an ongoing process occurring within family systems, rather than a single event. Research has shown that the pre- and post-divorce family environment, primarily during the presence of interparental conflict, is accounted more for the greater variability in a child’s development rather than the legal divorce itself (Cao et al., 2022). While divorce has been linked to negative adjustment outcomes for children (Amato, 2010), research has also highlighted how the chronicity,

intensity, and resolution of interparental conflict often affects wellbeing more than the marital dissolution itself (Davies & Cummings, 1994). Consequently, growing up in a high-conflict intact family is reported to be more detrimental to children's development and adjustment than experiencing low-conflict parental separation (Amato et al., 1995). This suggests that the "stay together for the kids" belief may be counterproductive as it subjects children to exposure to a toxic family environment.

While these findings are seen in children, the research also extends into emerging adulthood (commonly 18-25 years old). Emergent adulthood is a critical stage of self exploration, which involves separating from one's family systems to navigate their own relational goals (Conger & Little, 2010). As individual development occurs within the family system, exposure to chronic interparental conflict (CIPC) fundamentally alters an emerging adult's motivations of marriage just as they are preparing to depart from their known family systems. Retrospective reports have consistently presented a positive relationship between parental conflict and negative marital attitudes (Christensen, 2014). This shows that emerging adults who witnessed destructive marital processes (such as those living with high-conflict intact families), are often reported to have a lower likelihood of marriage, driven by the fear of repeating dysfunctional patterns.

However, individuals' responses to CIPC vary, which suggests that moderating factors are in play, such as triangulation. Triangulation occurs when parents involve their children into their marital conflicts (Buehler & Welsh, 2009). This can take place in different forms such as forcing a child to take sides, act as a messenger, or serve as an emotional confidant. These boundary violations between parent and child places youths in a confusing and stressful environment as they feel forced to take sides and manage their conflicting loyalties (Etkin et al., 2014). As they are "stuck" in their family systems, individuals who are affected by triangulation directly absorb the dyadic tension. This is theorized to create an association

between families and chronic conflict, which can lead to a protective strategy against wanting to form their own family units as a means of self-preservation (Fosco & Grych, 2008).

Despite evidence linking interparental conflict and triangulation to negative adjustments in adulthood, a gap remains in understanding whether these dynamics predict intentions in family formation within emergent adults. Most of the literature has focused on general-well being or in marriage specifically. Furthermore, triangulation in previous research has been used mainly as mediator and has rarely been tested as a moderator in family dynamics research. Therefore, the present student aims to investigate how exposure to high-conflict intact versus low-conflict divorced family scenarios influence emerging adults' future family formation intentions, and if this effect is moderated by parent-child triangulation.

It is hypothesized that:

- **(H1):** Emerging adults from high-conflict intact families will report lower family formation intentions than those from low-conflict divorced families.
- **(H2):** Those who experience triangulation are more likely to report lower family formation intentions.

Methodology

Research Design and Justification

The proposed study utilises a cross-sectional, retrospective survey design. As the independent variable, parental dynamic, makes up a concluded developmental period for emergent adults, a retrospective design allows for participants to report on their past experiences of being in their family system, while a cross sectional design is implemented to assess emergent adults in their current mindset, measuring how their family dynamics are associated with their current family intentions. Additionally, due to the ethical and practical impossibility of randomly assigning and manipulating participants to specific family

dynamics, the study will utilise a quasi-experimental approach to compare these pre-existing groups.

Participants

A target sample of 200 emerging adults (18-25) will be recruited through SMU's university research credit portal (SPS) as well as public online research participation channels in order to ensure representation of both target family scenarios. To be eligible for the study, participants must have lived with at least one biological parent until the age of 18. To isolate the confounding variable of grief, individuals who experienced parental bereavement before the age of 18 will be excluded from the study.

Procedure

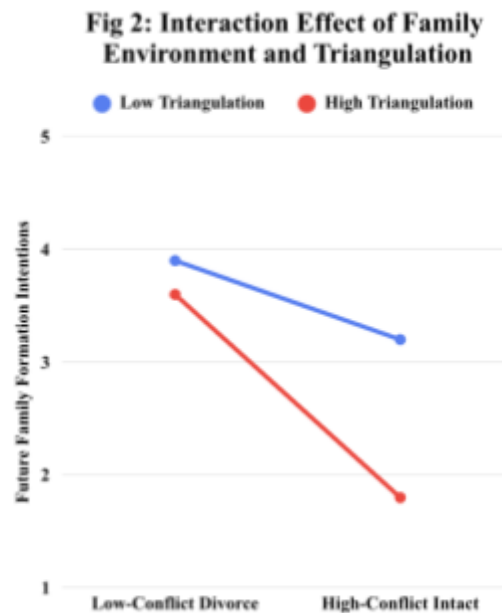
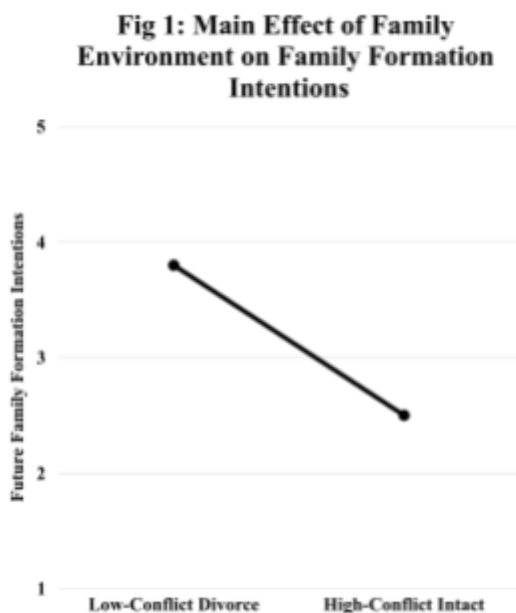
The study will be conducted through an online survey on Qualtrics, with all responses remaining anonymous. After providing informed consent, participants will complete a set of demographic questions, in order to verify their eligibility for the study as well as to categorize participants into either intact or divorced groups based on their parent's marital history. Those who meet the criteria will complete the standardized survey questionnaire, where they will answer questions about their childhood family experiences and memories of parental conflict and triangulation. Upon completion, participants will be debriefed on the nature of the study and will be provided research credit or a cash reimbursement.

Measures

This study utilises three measures to assess the observed variables. The independent variable, parental dynamic, consists of 2 levels: high-conflict intact families and low-conflict divorced families. Participants will first indicate their parents' marital status before age 18 in the demographic block of the survey. After, they will complete questions from the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) (Grych et al., 1992) to assess childhood conflict intensity. While the original CPIC scale utilises a true/false answer format, this study

will use an adapted 5-point Likert scale. This is implemented to capture more nuance in participants.. Finally the dependent variable is assessed through a set of likert-scale questions adapted from two established scales: The Marital Attitudes and Expectations Scale (MAES) (Park, 2012), and The Desire to Have Children Scale (Natividade et al., 2020). As there is not a single standardized scale to capture family formation intentions, this approach ensures a comprehensive measurement of different factors that influence family formation such as marriage and parenthood.

Expected Results



It is expected that there will be a significant main effect of the family environment on future family formation intentions. Specifically, emerging adults who are raised in high-conflict intact families are more likely to report significantly lower intentions to marry and have children, compared to individuals who were raised in low-conflict divorced families. This would support the hypothesis that exposure to a highly tense family dynamic as

a result of high interparental conflict, negatively affects an emergent adult's intention to form a family than experiencing a low-conflict divorce.

Furthermore, it is expected that there will be a significant interaction effect between the destructive family dynamic and childhood triangulation. Triangulation is expected to exacerbate the negative impact of the family environment, specifically for individuals in the high-conflict intact family group. Those who experienced high levels of triangulation, are expected to show the lowest intentions of wanting to form a family once they leave their current family systems. This would align with the literature, proving that internalizing the emotional burden of parental conflict, is a driving force for emergent adults to form protective strategies, leading to avoidance of wanting to form a family to prevent the cycle of dysfunction happening in their own lives.

Implications

The implications of this study challenges the societal belief that parents experiencing severe conflict and turmoil in their marriage should always “stay together for the kids.” In a clinical setting, these results would emphasize the importance of working with parents to reduce interparental hostility towards one another and enforce healthy parent-child boundaries. Furthermore, clinicians may also identify when separation may be the less harmful option for the family system, while also supporting young adults as they reconstruct healthier models of family systems and formations.

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