THE INFLUENCE OF DIVORCING PARENTS' POST-SEPARATION DATING RELATIONSHIPS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

By

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Bachelor of Science in Family Life

Brigham Young University

Provo, Utah

2016

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
MASTER OF SCIENCE
July, 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my wife for standing by me this entire process. At times she may have felt like we were the ones divorced and co-parenting because of the long hours spent finishing this project. She has been my strength and support through it all and deserves the credit as much as I do. I also wanted to thank my committee for their hard work and dedication to making this thesis what it is. Without them I know I couldn't have completed this project.

Name: ETHAN JONES

Date of Degree: JULY, 2019

Title of Study: THE INFLUENCE OF DIVORCING PARENTS' POST-SEPARATION DATING RELATIONSHIPS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

Major Field: HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY SCIENCE

Abstract: Divorce for many families is a common life trajectory, with divorce rates being about half of first marriages (Amato, 2010; Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin, and Weber, 2012). On average, children from divorced families have significantly lower scores in academic achievement, behavioral conduct, self-concept, and social competence than their counterparts from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991) and are at an increased risk for emotional and social problems (Amato, 2000). Using Family Development Theory the present study will examine three primary research questions examining the relationship among child behaviors (externalizing or internalizing), parenting practices (positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, poor supervision), dating status, and parental stress in order to investigate some significant variables that may be affecting children during the divorce process. Parents dating status did moderate the relationship between divorcing parents parenting practices and their child's externalizing behavior but it did not for their child's internalizing behaviors. The findings of this study both confirm previous research as well as expand knowledge into a very important stage of development within an ecosystemic framework (Bronfebrenner 1996; Laszloffy 2002; Minuchin, 1976). It demonstrates how subsystems influence communication, available resources, meaning-making and the experience of family stress.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

We know that the divorce rate has increased steadily since 1910 and leveling out in the 1990's and 2000's (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), with nearly half of first marriages ending in divorce or permanent separation (Amato, 2010; Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin, and Weber, 2012). Some observers now suggest, that one's first marriage is a trial marriage for a second marriage and that divorce matures a person (Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012) while others maintain that high divorce rates are a sign of the deinstitutionalization of marriage (Cherlin, 2004). As couples experience disagreements, a quick and easy response may be to separate, often because living in different homes can aid in avoiding conflict (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002), however it may also be very difficult for couples to dissolve a relationship (Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman, 2010). Parents in this situation may overlook the profound emotional and psychological impact on all involved: themselves, their spouses, their children, and their communities and extended family networks. Divorced adults are at increased risk for psychiatric illness, suicide, alcoholism, homicide, physical illness, and overall mortality (Cooney & Kurz, 1996; Lorenz, Wickrama, & Elder Jr, 2006).

Children from divorced families have significantly lower scores in academic achievement, behavioral conduct, self-concept, and social competence than their counterparts from intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991) and are at an increased risk for emotional and social

problems (Amoto, 2000). Roberson, Sabo, & Wickel (2011) suggests that it is not the divorce itself that negatively impacts parental and child adjustment, but the level of conflict between parents. It is well known that children with parents whose relationship is considered to be low in conflict experience lower levels of well-being in later adulthood while children from high conflict couples experience greater well-being when those parents' divorce (Jekielek, 1998; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995) In other instances children do far better when parents dissolve their relationship specifically in maturity, self-esteem, empathy, and androgyny (Gately & Schwebel, 1993).

Through the inclusion or exclusion of new and former members into the family system, relationship dynamics change (McGene & King, 2012), which often make the transitions much more difficult. However, there is little research on the process by which new adults are added to the existing family systems, or even the dating process following divorce and the subsequent impact on child outcomes. Anderson et al. (2004) found that about half of parents, who had filed for divorced within the last 60 days, had already been dating a new partner and that about a quarter were currently in a new serious relationship. The authors later found that close to 80% of parents had started dating by one year after filing for divorce. Therefore, considering the prevalence of dating and remarriage after divorce, it is particularly important to learn how new romantic relationships may impact parents' current levels of stress and their children's behavior that may arise from involvement in a new relationship. These effects of divorce could differ with modern society and show that divorce should not be part of a normal life trajectory.

Purpose of this Research

With the effects of divorce influencing so many households and furthermore children within the households, it is important to understand in what ways divorcing parents' parenting (positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, and poor supervision) affect their children. We know that parents experience stress in day to day life and that stress is increased by a divorce (Smith,

1990). In order to cope with stress, parents may turn to dating relationships. Researchers have been able to observe how children's attachment to their parents' dating partner influences childhood outcomes, (Anderson et. al, 2004), but haven't observed how the child's relation to their parents may be different because of a dating partner. This may be explained by parenting practice changes that could occur after divorce. The changes in parenting may in turn influences the child's well-being and emotion regulation. For this reason, this study aims to expand knowledge in this field and see how dating relationships influences parents parenting and children's outcomes.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study will examine three primary research questions examining the relationship among child behaviors (externalizing or internalizing), parenting practices (positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, poor supervision), dating status, and parental stress. Specific hypothesis are provided for research question 2 and 3 only.

Research Question 1*: How is participant dating status associated with control variables (sex, income, education, divorce initiation, participant age, age of child)?*

Research Question 2*: Does dating status moderate the relationship between parenting practices (positive parenting, poor supervision, inconsistent discipline) and child's externalizing behavior?*

H_1*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by decreasing positive parenting and increasing child's externalizing behavior.*

H_2*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by increasing poor supervision and increasing child's externalizing behavior.*

H_3*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by increasing inconsistent discipline and increasing child's externalizing behavior.*

Research Question 3*: Does dating status moderate the relationship between parenting practices (positive parenting, poor supervision, inconsistent discipline and child's internalizing behavior?*

H_4*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by decreasing positive parenting and increasing child's internalizing behavior.*

H_5*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by increasing poor supervision and decreasing child's internalizing behavior.*

H_6*: Dating status will moderate the relationship by increasing inconsistent discipline and decreasing child's internalizing behavior.*

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CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With the divorce rates at such high levels, many researchers have sought to explain certain aspects of divorce (e.g., co-parenting conflict, the effects of divorce on children, changing parenting styles). Family development theory and family stress theory conceptualize divorce as alternative life trajectory for families and this trajectory has unique stressors that influence overall well-being. Through this theoretical lens, stress, parent's decision to date, parenting and childhood outcomes are then discussed.

Theoretical Consideration

Evelyn Dunn and Ruben Hill (1948) identified eight developmental life stages a family could expect to encounter within their family's collective life. Laszloffy (2002) later expounded upon the work of Dunn and Hill to include aspects of Family Stress Theory and a multigenerational perspective while still using the developmental life stages previously identified. As families navigate life, there are expected life transitions such as marriage, child bearing, and launching. These stages introduce new norms and stress to the family that are considered healthy for the development of the family. However, there are also nodal events that occur that are not typically expected such as a divorce that introduces new norms and stressors at a more extreme pace and magnitude. Not only do children experience the direct

effects of divorce, they also experience the indirect effects of the stress that parents feel when transitioning from marriage to divorce, both of which may negatively influence their children. Consistent with Family Development Theory, Family Stress Theory posits that transitions not predicted by Family Development Theory increase familial stress, which led Laszloffy (2002) to expand the Family Development model to include aspects of Family Stress Theory. Divorce is ranked as a top stressful life event (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). In fact, more studies investigate the impact of divorce from a stress perspective than from any other perspective (Amato, 2000). Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman (2005) explains that according to Family Stress Theory, if many changes occur within a short period of time, the mental and physical health of both adults and children alike may be negatively affected.

Perceived Stress

Divorce is stressful as parents are faced with difficult questions such as where the kids will live, which parent ends up with what possessions and property, and ultimately what life looks like moving forward. In 90% of the cases, the child is placed with the mother distancing the father (Braver, Griffin, & Cookston, 2005). In a study conducted by Holden and Ritchie (1991) controlling for different forms of negative parenting maternal stress was shown to be a significant predictor of children's behaviors. As parents, specifically residential parents, negotiate new rules, boundaries, and interaction patterns between all members of the family changes can be difficult to predict and how they will influence family members. (Cookston, Braver, Griffin, De Luse, & Miles, 2007). As stress continues to accumulate, parents may start to experience emotional flooding (Havighurst and Kehoe, 2017) and decrease the quality of parenting for the first several years after separation (Hetherington, 1992). Emotional flooding is a phenomenon, where emotions are so overpowering that thinking logically about situations is almost not possible. In the event of emotional flooding, the individual will have a difficult time thinking about cause and effect and do things purely out of instinct. Without the proper understanding of the stress process,

emotional flooding and emotion regulation, parents may not be deliberate in their parenting practices, which may inadvertently be harmful to their children.

Dating Relationships

As parents seek support from other adults, specifically a dating partner, during times of stress and transition, they find themselves feeling more stable, but may inadvertently be changing their relationship with their own child. In reality about half of parents begin dating prior to the finalization of their divorce and about a quarter of those individuals state their relationship is serious (Anderson et al., 2004). Moreover, parents cope with the stress of the marital dissolution in various ways with many seeking support from new significant others (Amato, 2009) or turn to their children as the emotional support for their distress, which creates an inappropriate burden for the child (Hetherington, 1999). Though the dating experience may increase wellbeing for the parent, the subsequent effect on the children is underresearched with a primary question involving how the parental dating relationship could affect parenting styles, which in turn, could influence the children.

Parenting

Parent's involvement in a new romantic relationship often enhances concerns of decreased contact between parent and child. Research suggests that children, who are able to maintain a quality relationship with both of their parents after parental divorce, have better future development and adjustment to the divorce than those children who only have a relationship with a single parent (Austin, 2012; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). With the decrease in contact, parents may be inconsistent in their discipline as well as poor in their supervision. In a national sample 49% of children had not seen their custodial parent in the last year (Furstenburg & Nord, 1985; Furstenburg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). Research has also found that approximately 62% of mothers practice some form of parental gatekeeping (Austin, 2012), despite potential negative effects on their children. This practice limits parent's (mostly fathers') opportunity to

have a healthy and active relationship with their children and impedes any efforts to collaborate and cooperate. Under these circumstances, parents may engage in negative parenting practices which has been observed to influence children's outcomes (Stormshak, Bierman, McMahon, & Lengua, 2000). Research suggests that the new obligations that come along with such a relationship may distract or compete with co-parent's existing obligations to children, particularly for fathers (McGene & King, 2012). Such parents may resort to poor behaviors, due to their preoccupation with their own emotions and feeling overwhelmed with the demands and effects of divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003). When this happens, children's experiences of the divorce and feelings may not only be disregarded, but they may also be enlisted to fulfil and care for their parents' needs (Garber, 2011). Fortunately, child well-being may actually be enhanced, if children are encouraged to maintain a close relationship with both biological parents as well as their parent's new partner (King, 2009). These parents may be more equipped to engage in positive parenting. Involvement in a dating relationship may also serve as a protective factor for both parents and children, since parents may have the opportunity to take care of themselves, so that they can be more present and responsive as parents. Parents, however, may need to keep their children in mind and focus on not allowing the stress of divorce, negative parental attitudes, and self-centeredness to impede parent-child relationships (Whiteside, 1998). Given the aforementioned goals, the common occurrence of co-parental involvement in new relationships both before and after the finalization of the divorce has a potential to impact the parent-child relationship, which in turn impacts children's outcomes.

Childhood Outcomes

Though children may be considered resilient and have been observed to eventually overcome the impact of divorce, there are still a considerable number of children that go on to have long-term mental health and behavioral problems amounting to about 25% (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Even for the children that do adjust well, many go through a phase of considerable sadness, anger, and emotional pain that can last for years after the divorce (Fabricius & Hall,

2000). These emotions are related to a number of negative outcomes such as depression, suicide, antisocial behavior, school dropout, substance use and precocious sexual activity (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Linked to antisocial behavior is a child's inability to regulate their emotions properly, because of this inability children experience other social problems such as poor peer relationships and bullying (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000; Shields, Ryan, & Cicchetti, 2001).

Since the family is the primary context for socialization where children learn how to regulate their emotions and successfully cope with stress (Katz & Windecker-Nelson, 2004; Kochanska, 1997; Ramsden & Hubbard, 2002), changes in the family may greatly influence these children's skills. Researchers have indicated that stress such as that associated with divorce affects children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999) with many of the stressors involving logistics and changing relationship dynamics. Until recently, children of divorce typically spent almost all of their time with their mother's, only sleeping at their dad's four to five nights a month (Kelly, 2007). Reduced access to both parents, changes in residence, changes in school and access to friends or extended family add to the discontinuity and compounded effects of the divorce process for children. In a number of studies, children of divorce have scored lower than those with parents of intact families in psychological adjustment (Forehand, Neighbors, Devine, & Armistead, 1994; Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994). Emotional problems have also been observed in boys in divorced families specifically, depression, opposition, and impulsivity (Guidubaldi, Perry, Cleminshaw, & McLouglin, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Hodges, Buchsbaum, & Tierney, 1983). Many of these emotional problems are externalized with predispositions to acting out.

Children of divorced parents express more conduct problems than those with parents of intact families, in areas such as school and home life (Doherty & Needle, 1991; Simons & Associates, 1996). This externalizing behavior has been observed more frequently in boys, who have experienced their parents' divorce (Hetherington, 1979), in comparison to girls of divorce or

the norm. It is important to note that children's peer support has been observed to be a protective factor and shown to improve adjustment post-divorce (Sameera & Stolberg, 1993; Silitsky, 1996; Teja & Stollberg, 1993) more so than family support. However, as children remove themselves from their peer support systems it may be a sign of internalizing their behavior. While many children of divorce are resilient within one to five years following divorce, approximately 25 percent go on to experience a major mental health issue later in life (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). A possible precursor to these mental health issues may be maladaptive emotion regulation, this study will focus on internalizing (emotional problems and peer relationships) and externalizing (conduct problems and hyperactivity) behaviors.

As families experience the non-normative experience of going through a divorce, it increases the amount of stress experienced by all members of the family. For children, the uncertainty of the whole process leaves children wondering how to respond. In these instances, children are more likely to respond as previously mentioned, because their parents may be so caught up in their own stresses that the children are forgotten. In order to be recognized and cared for, children may act out or become reclusive.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Parents with children between the ages of 4 and 17 served as the participants for this study. Recruitment for this study was conducted through Oklahoma Cooperative Extension's Co-Parenting for Resilience (CPR) program which fulfills Oklahoma House bill 2249, mandating parents with children between the ages of 0 and 18 to complete a course on parenting prior to divorce. Participant data was collected before and after the completion of the class by means of questionnaire. Participants were made aware of possible research being conducted utilizing registration and post-program data prior to providing written consent. This study contained 1990 females and 1722 males for a total of 3712. 73.5% of females initiated the divorce while 46.5% of men stated they initiated the divorce. Of these individuals 5.1% hadn't completed high school, 27% had completed high school, 31.5% had taken college or technical classes, and 23.4% completed college. The monthly income ranged between $0 to over $7,000 and was divided into thousand-dollar increments. 14.3% of the sample size made less than $1,000, 24% between $1,000 and $2,000, 17.5% between $2,000 and $3,000, 8.1% between $3,000 and $4,000, 4.8% between $4,000 and $5,000, 2.2% between $5,000 and $6,000, 1.2% between $6,000 and $7,000, and 2.5% earned more than $7,000 a month. Children within the sample ranged from 4 to 17 years old a mean of 10 years and a standard deviation of 3.8 years.

Procedure

Prior to attending the Co-Parenting for Resilience course, parents were asked to complete a battery of questionnaires as part of their registration for the program. These questionnaires included the demographic questions (e.g., sex, age, race, education, income level, divorce initiation status, dating status), Perceived Stress Scale, the Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire, and Alabama Parenting Questionnaire in addition to several other domains of co-parenting. Parents were prompted to answer questions to the best of their knowledge and when answering the Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire, asked to respond based on their oldest child from their current divorce. Upon completion of the course, a post-class survey was given and parents then voluntarily consented for their responses to be used in future research as well as an opportunity to participate in follow up research.

Measures

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 2001) centers on parental reports of children's behavior, between the ages of 4 and 17, in the area of inattention, hyperactivity, internalizing and externalizing problems. The SDQ has 25 items measured on a 3-point Likert type scale, "0=not true," "1=somewhat true," "2=certainly true." In the event participants had more than one minor child with the partner from whom they were separating, they were instructed to think of the behavior of their oldest child over the past month (see Appendix A). Example items include: (Child's name) *"is considerate of people's feelings" "is often unhappy, depressed or tearful," "steals from home, school or elsewhere."* Negative items were reversed coded to indicate positive child adjustment and all items were then summed to create a composite score such that an increase in value represents increases in parental assessment of their child's positive behavior. According to Robert Goodman, the Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire also has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .73$ (2001). For this study, the SDQ subscales were combined into internalizing and externalizing behaviors in order to best answer the research questions and hypotheses. In order to create the

internalizing scale, emotion problems and peer relationships were combined to create a 10-item scale and Cronbach's alpha was calculated and produced a coefficient of (α = .71). For externalizing behaviors, conduct problems and hyperactivity were combined to create a 10-item scale and Cronbach's alpha was calculated and produced a coefficient of (α = .82).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1988), is a widely used self-report psychological instrument measuring the degree to which life situations are appraised as unpredictable, uncontrollable, and overwhelming within the previous month. In addition, the PSS includes several direct queries about current levels of experienced stress. The PSS has 10 items measured on 5-point Likert type scale from "0=never" to "4=very often" (See Appendix B). Example items are: *"In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?" "In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?"* Negative items were reversed coded and all items were summed to create a total score such that higher scores represent higher levels of stress. Funk and Rogge report, that the Perceived Stress Scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported at α = .88 (2007). For this study Cronbach's alpha was calculated and produced a coefficient of (α = .87).

In order to assess for parenting practices the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire was utilized (APQ; Frick et al., 1991; Shelton et al., 1996). Specifically, the positive parenting, poor supervision, and inconsistent discipline subscales are used to assess parenting practices among participants. Each subscale included three items with responses coded on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= never and 5= always (See Appendix C). Example of items include "*you praise your child when she does something well*," "*You let your child out of a punishment early (like lift restrictions earlier than you originally said)*," and "*You get so busy that you forget where your child is and what he/she is doing.* With the present study, the internal consistency for each subscale was: poor supervision (α = .74), inconsistent discipline (α = .70), and positive parenting (α = .88).

Parents were asked whether they were in any form of dating relationship during the time of registration for the Co-Parenting Resilience course. Responses ranged from, "*Not in a current dating relationship*" which was coded as a 0 to some form of dating relationship whether that be casual, serious or cohabitating, which was then coded as a 1.

The demographic variables (i.e., parents age, age of child, income, education level, sex, and divorce initiation status) were all single item measures and were used as control variables.

Analyses

Research question 1 assesses for the relationship among participants' dating status and the control variables (sex, income, education, divorce initiation, participant age, and age of child), predictor variables (stress, positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, and poor supervision), and the dependent variables (child's externalizing and internalizing behaviors). In order to do so, point bi-serial correlations were conducted.

Research questions 2 and 3 utilize hierarchical multiple regression (HMR) to measure if participants dating status moderates the relationship between parenting practices (positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, and poor supervision) and child outcomes (externalizing and internalizing behavior). The first block of the HMR will include the control variables (sex, income, education, divorce initiation, participant age, and age of child). The second block will include the predictor variables (stress, positive parenting, inconsistent discipline, and poor supervision). The third block will consist of the interactions between dating status and parenting practices. Only significant interactions will be retained in the final model. HMR allows to test for moderation while holding predictor and control variables constant.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Research Question 1

The correlations are reported in Table 1. In order to test the first hypothesis, correlations were ran between the control, independent, and dependent variables. A partner currently in a new dating relationship was significantly related to many of the variables including the amount of education completed ($r = -.086$, $p = \leq .000$), divorce initiation ($r = .072$, $p = \leq .000$), income level ($r = -.038$, $p = \leq .047$), perceived stress ($r = -.107$, $p = \leq .000$), inconsistent discipline ($r = .049$, $p = \leq .008$), children's externalizing behaviors ($r = .088$, $p = \leq .000$). The gender of the parent was significantly related to multiple variables as well; education completed ($r = .091$, $p = \leq .000$), divorce initiation ($r = -.280$, $p = \leq .000$), perceived stress ($r = -.085$, $p = \leq .000$), positive parenting ($r = -.150$, $p = \leq .000$), and inconsistent parenting ($r = -.085$, $p = \leq .000$). The amount of education completed was significantly related to stress ($r = .054$, $p = \leq .001$), inconsistent discipline ($r = -.076$, $p = \leq .000$), poor parental supervision ($r = -.10$, $p = \leq .000$), and children's externalizing behaviors ($r = .073$, $p = \leq .000$). The age of the child was significantly related to parents income level ($r = -.063$, $p = \leq .001$), parent's perceived stress ($r = .039$, $p = \leq .02$), positive parenting ($r = -.278$, $p = \leq .000$), inconsistent discipline ($r = -.065$, $p = \leq .000$), poor parental supervision ($r = .303$, $p = \leq .000$), and children's externalizing behavior ($r = -.162$, $p = \leq .000$). Divorce initiation was significantly related to perceived stress ($r = -.128$, $p = \leq .000$),

positive parenting (r = .093, p = ≤ .000) inconsistent discipline (r = .046, p = ≤ .013), poor parental supervision (r = .047, p = ≤ .014), children's externalizing behavior (r = .012, p = ≤ .482), and children's internalizing behavior (r = .039, p = ≤ .019). Parents income level was significantly related to positive parenting (r = .055, p = ≤ .004). Parents perceived stress levels were significantly related to their positive parenting (r = .133, p = ≤ .000), inconsistent discipline (r = .146, p = ≤ .000), poor parental supervision (r = .087, p = ≤ .000), children's externalizing behaviors (r = .273, p = ≤ .000), and children's internalizing behaviors (r = .363, p = ≤ .000). Positive parenting was significantly related to inconsistent discipline (r = .159, p = ≤ .000), children's externalizing behaviors (r = -.089, p = ≤ .000), and children's internalizing behaviors (r = -.100, p = ≤ .000). Inconsistent discipline was significantly related to poor parental supervision (r = .474, p = ≤ .000), children's externalizing behaviors (r = .241, p = ≤ .000), and children's internalizing behaviors (r = .130, p = ≤ .000). Poor parental supervision was significantly related to both children's externalizing (r = .084, p = ≤ .000) and internalizing behaviors (r = .070, p = ≤ .000). Finally, children's externalizing behavior was significantly related to their internalizing behavior (r =.510 p = ≤ .000).

Research Question 2

Results of the final externalizing HMR model were significant $F(12, 2424) = 47.279$, $p<.001$ and $R^2= .19$. Control variables that were significant in the final externalizing model include: parent level of education ($\beta = -.14$, $p < .005$) and age of child ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$). Control variables that were not significant in the final model include: participant sex, divorce initiation status, and income. Predictor variables that were significant in the final model include: parent's stress ($\beta = .137$, $p<.001$), positive parenting ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$), inconsistent discipline ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$), and poor supervision ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$).

Within the final block the interaction between dating status and positive parenting was not significant at $p<.05$. Therefore, we failed to reject the null hypothesis for H_1. However, the interaction between dating status and inconsistent discipline was significant indicating that dating status moderates the relationship between inconsistent discipline parenting practices and child's externalizing behavior holding all control and predictor variables constant. As such we reject the null hypothesis for H_2. Likewise, the interaction between dating status and poor supervision was significant and also moderated the relationship between poor supervision and child's externalizing behavior holding all control and predictor variables constant. Therefore, the null hypothesis for H_3 was rejected. (see table 2).

Research Question 3

While the results of the final internalizing HMR model were significant F (13, 2423) = 33.58, $p<.001$, participants dating status did not moderate the relationship between divorcing parents parenting practices and their child's internalizing behavior. As such we failed to reject the null hypothesis for H_4, H_5, and H_6. The final model had an $R^2 = .15$. There were no control variables that were significant in the final internalizing model. Predictor variables that were significant in the final internalizing model include: parent's stress ($\beta = .14$, $p<.001$), positive parenting ($\beta = -.01$, $p <.05$), inconsistent discipline ($\beta = .11$, $p <.01$) after holding participant sex, education, child's age, divorce initiation constant. (see table 3).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Previous research has linked divorce to negative children's outcomes (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). It has also linked various aspects of parenting to children's outcomes (Prevatt, 2003). The current study sought to better understand how stress, dating, and parental practices influence children in an effort to fill a gap in previous research. A unique aspect of this data was the time at which the data was collected, specifically after parents have filed for divorce, but before divorce was finalized. Meaning that 38.9% of men and 39.3% of women in the sample have already begun dating someone new before their previous marriage is even ended. Miller (2009) states that there are some positives for parents to begin dating after divorce and that parents, who began dating, experience less stress. However, the question then becomes, how do the parents' new dating relationships specifically influence the children? Family developmental theory posits that non-normative life events may cause adverse reactions within the family. With divorce, a non-normative event, it is assumed that the children will have some reaction to the reconfiguration of the family system and also to the addition of new members into their family system—whether directly involved or peripheral (Pearlin et. al., 2005). Some of these adverse reactions may be changes in parents parenting practices. As early as infancy parent-child interaction has been connected to children's executive functioning (Bernier, Carlson, and Whipple, 2010). Over the child developmental trajectory several parenting factors have been

related to children's outcomes like harsh parenting (Chang, Schwartz, Dodge, and McBride-Change, 2003), poor supervision in single parent households (Coley and Hoffman, 1996), and inconsistency in parenting (Gardner, 1989). The findings of this study both confirm previous research as well as expand knowledge into a very important stage of development within an ecosystemic framework (Bronfebrenner 1996; Laszloffy 2002; Minuchin, 1976). It demonstrates how subsystems influence communication, available resources, meaning-making and the experience of family stress. A common response to stress that children show is to act out or, in other words, externalize their emotions. Results from this study allow for the rejection of the null hypothesis one, which stated that parents dating moderated the relationship between parental practices (e.g. inconsistent parenting, poor supervision) and children's externalizing behaviors. As parent's stress levels, parenting practices, and dating are kept constant, parents who are dating and engage in negative parenting practices report greater amounts of externalizing behavior in their children than parents who are not dating but, report similar levels of negative parenting practices.

These results provide evidence beyond previous research, which has historically centered on the impact of divorced parent dating relationships on children from an attachment perspective and the need to protect children from adult attachment disruptions (Anderson, et. al, 2004). Further, these findings support previous literature that has investigated the impact of stress on parenting (Deater-Deckard, 2008) but, provides evidence into the specific child outcomes that accompany parenting practices for dating and non-dating divorcing parents. Though the literature has pointed to the positive benefits for dating after divorce for parental mental health (Amato and Sobolewski, 2004), this research continues an understanding into the pathway for subsequent impacts on parent-child relationships within the family unit.

Another common stress response for children is to turn inwards and internalize their emotions. This tends to be more difficult to record, because of the nature of the behavior itself.

Instead of seeing the behavior externalized, behavior is less obtrusive and often doesn't demand parental attention. The second model of internalizing behavior found no significant relation between the interaction of dating and parenting practices on internalizing behavior, causing the rejection of hypothesis five. The lack of statistical significance, however, doesn't diminish the results of this study. Specifically, these results are not surprising given that children internalizing their emotions tend to appear normal on the outside, but are unable to express their inner feelings of distress. This is particularly true for children too young to have the verbal capacity to report those feelings (Gentzler, Contreras-Grau, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005).

Implications

It is important to understand how this study may influence families, policy makers, and practitioners. There are several implications that can be made from this research that may further the field and help families who are currently experiencing a divorce. A bulk of the self-help literature points to the need for divorcing parents to limit introducing dating partners to their children, due to the need to limit attachment disruptions associated with additional divorce-like losses. However, this study points to the need to delay dating for reasons related to the changing parent-child relationship during the period of family instability and the need for parents to be more aware of their own health and functioning as it relates to their parenting processes. Thus, for families experiencing divorce, parents may inadvertently be harming their children when they begin a new dating relationship too soon after filing for a divorce despite the new relationship serving as stabilization for their own sense of self.

For public policy makers, it is important to reconsider co-parenting training programs and their efficacy in teaching about dating partners and their effects on children. The focus on dating could easily be expanded to include content related to both positive and negative effects of the dating relationship on several domains of post-separation adjustment. Further, co-parenting

education programs would do well to expand and include clear content related to the changing parenting process following separation and into divorce and the effect on children who may express behavior externally or internally. Furthermore, it may be beneficial for custody orders to continue limiting the interaction between dating partners and children for a period of time while both parents and children adjust to their new norms. Policy makers could also focus on continuing to enforce a cooldown period between the finalization of the divorce and when a parent can remarry. These parameters may increase positive parent-child interactions and minimize some of the negative effects of divorce.

There are several ways in which this research benefits helping professionals who are integral in assisting families currently going through divorce. As practitioners work with individuals, couples, and families navigating the divorce process, thinking about dating partners may not be a part of that practitioner's assessment. This study shows that practitioners may be inadvertently affecting the children by not assessing for post-separation dating relationships and warning of the effects it may have on the children. It is then imperative that practitioners take the time to inform parents of the consequences of their decisions and subsequent parenting practices may have and help them in doing what is best for them, but also what is best for their family.

Limitations

No study is without its limitations and should be acknowledged to benefit future research. As secondary data, the research is limited by the measures asked within the original questionnaire. Since the original questionnaire did not ask for the gender of the child, we are unable to see how boys and girls differ in the models regarding atypical presentation of internalizing/externalizing behaviors. Another limitation of the study is the reporting method of a questionnaire. Since parents are self-reporting on their parenting and children's behaviors before the finalization of their divorce, reports may either be under or over reported due to social

desirability. It is also difficult for parents in a stressful time to be asked to report on their children's behavior when they are focused so much on getting through the divorce process or focused on a new dating relationship. This potential report bias may have contributed to the lack of significance in the internalizing model in that parents may not be as attuned to the nuances of their children's internalized expression of emotion. Another factor related to the survey questions relates to the nature of the dating relationship question not fully encapsulating the qualities of the dating relationship. The question does ask about length and seriousness of the relationship but doesn't assess for the quality which may influence the significant findings in the study. These limitations beg the need for future research to include foci in these domains in order to better understand the nuances that may affect the changing family system.

Future Direction

Future research would do well in creating a ground up study on the effects of parents dating relationships on children's outcomes. Within this study, it would be important to think about a time when parents can answer honestly and truthfully, in order to avoid socially desirable answers. It may be advantageous to employ a mixed methods approach in which outside observers watch children's behavior as well as allow parents to answer questions to assess validity of parent reports. It will also be important to look at the gender of the child, gender of the parent, as well as the time spent with each parent before, during, and after the divorce. These variables will only help clarify how post-separation dating relationships influence children's behaviors. Additionally, it would be beneficial to assess for the qualities of the dating relationship as well as the parent's capacity for autonomous functioning. If parents are able to date without the relationship affecting their parenting capacity, it may change the relationships found in this study.

These research implications point to a critical area within the study of family and development that warrants attention. The time between filing for divorce and the finalization of

the divorce is an interesting transition period for parents to already be in a new dating relationship and is a difficult time for both adults and children due to the dynamic changes experienced.

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APPENDICES

Figure 1. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

For each item, please mark the box for Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain. Please give your answers on the basis of the child's behavior over the last six months or this school year.

	Not True	Somewhat true	Certainly true
Considerate of other people's feelings			
Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long			
Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness			
Shares readily with other children, for example toys, treats, pencils			
Often loses temper			
Rather solitary, prefers to play alone			
Generally well behaved, usually does what adults request			
Many worries or often seems worried			
Helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill			
Constantly fidgeting or squirming			
Has at least one good friend			
Often fights with other children or bullies them			
Often unhappy, depressed or tearful			
Generally liked by other children			
Easily distracted, concentration wanders			
Nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence			
Kind to younger children			
Often lies or cheats			
Picked on or bullied by other children			
Often offers to help others (parents, teachers, other children)			
Thinks things out before acting			
Steals from home, school or elsewhere			
Gets along better with adults than with other children			
Many fears, easily scared			
Good attention span, sees work through to the end			

Figure 2. Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way.

0 = Never 1 = Almost Never 2 = Sometimes 3 = Fairly Often 4 = Very Often

1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?	0	1	2	3	4
2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	0	1	2	3	4
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	0	1	2	3	4
5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	0	1	2	3	4
7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	0	1	2	3	4
8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	0	1	2	3	4
9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	0	1	2	3	4
10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	0	1	2	3	4

Figure 3. Alabama Parenting Questionnaire

The following are a number of statements about your family. Please rate each item as to how often it TYPICALLY occurs in your home. The possible answers are Never (1), Almost never (2), Sometimes (3), Often (4), Always (5). Please answer all items.

You let your child know when he/she is doing a good job with something.	1	2	3	4	5
You threaten to punish your child and then do not actually punish him/her.	1	2	3	4	5
Your child fails to leave a note or to let you know where he/she is going.	1	2	3	4	5
Your child talks you out of being punished after he/she has done something wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
You let your child out of a punishment early (like lift restrictions earlier than you originally said).	1	2	3	4	5
You get so busy that you forget where your child is and what he/she is doing.	1	2	3	4	5
You tell your child that you like it when he/she helps out around the house.	1	2	3	4	5
Your child is at home without adult supervision.	1	2	3	4	5
You reward or give something extra to your child for obeying you or behaving well.	1	2	3	4	5

Table 1. Bivariate Correlations

Table 1. *Bivariate Correlations (N=3754)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Dating relationship	–											
2. Gender of parent	-.01	–										
3. Parental educational level	-.09***	-.09***	–									
4. Age of child	-.03	.00	.01	–								
5. Divorce initiation	.07***	-.28***	.02	-.00	–							
6. Income level	-.04*	-.03	-.04	-.06**	.00	–						
7. Perceived Stress	-.11***	-.09***	.05**	.04*	-.13***	-.04	–					
8. Positive parenting	-.03	-.15***	.03	-.28***	.09***	.06**	-.13***	–				
9. Inconsistent discipline	.05**	-.09***	-.08***	-.07***	.05	.00	.15***	.16***	–			
10. Poor parental supervision	.01	-.02	-.10***	.303***	.05*	-.02	.09***	-.04	.47***	–		
11. Children's externalizing behavior	.09***	-.01	-.07***	-.16***	-.01	-.03	.27***	-.09***	.24***	.08***	–	
12. Children's internalizing behavior	.02	-.02	-.01	.02	-.04*	-.03	.363***	-.10***	.13***	.07***	.51***	–

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 2. HMR Results for Children's Externalizing Behavior Model

Table 2. *HMR Results for Children's Externalizing Behavior Model (N=3754)*

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*Beta*		*B*	*SE*	*Beta*		*B*	*SE*	*Beta*	
Gender of parent	-.27	.15	-.04		.02	.14	.03		.05	.14	.01	
Parent education level	-.20	.05	-.08	***	-.14	.05	-.06	**	-.14	.05	-.06	**
Age of child	-.15	.02	-.17	***	-.19	.02	-.20	***	-.19	.02	-.20	***
Divorce initiation	-.13	.15	-.02		.16	.14	.02		.18	.14	.03	
Income level	.00	.00	-.04	*	.00	.00	-.02		.00	.00	-.02	
Dating relationship					.58	.14	.08	***	.00	.39	.00	
Perceived stress					.14	.01	.27	***	.14	.01	.27	***
Positive parenting					-.18	.03	-.14	***	-.18	.03	-.14	***
Inconsistent discipline					.35	.04	.18	***	.24	.05	.12	***
Poor supervision					.07	.06	.03		-.27	.10	-.13	*
Dating X Inconsistent									.31	.08	.22	***
Dating X Poor Supervision									-.27	.10	-.13	**
F			17.46	***			55.02	***			47.28	***
R^2			.04				.18				.19	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Table 3. HMR Results for Children's Internalizing Behavior Model

Table 3. *HMR Results for Children's Internalizing Behavior Model (N=3754)*

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3			
Variable	*B*	*SE*	*Beta*		*B*	*SE*	*Beta*		*B*	*SE*	*Beta*	
Gender of parent	-.27	.12	-.05	*	.01	.11	.00		.01	.11	.00	
Parent education level	-.04	.04	-.02		-.04	.04	-.02		-.04	.04	-.02	
Age of child	.00	.02	.00		-.02	.02	-.03		-.02	.02	-.03	
Divorce initiation	-.30	.12	-.05	*	.02	.12	.00		.01	.12	.02	
Income level	.00	.00	-.04		.00	.00	-.02		.00	.00	-.02	
Dating relationship					.23	.11	.04	*	.52	.6	.09	
Perceived stress					.15	.01	.36	***	.14	.01	.36	***
Positive parenting					-.07	.02	-.06	**	-.06	.03	-.05	*
Inconsistent discipline					.11	.04	.07	***	.11	.04	.07	**
Poor supervision					.01	.05	.01		.01	.05	.01	
Dating X stress									.00	.02	.01	
Dating X positive									-.03	.04	-.06	
Dating X inconsistent									.01	.06	.00	
F			2.36	*			43.7	***			33.6	***
R^2			.01				..15				.15	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$

Figure 4. Slope Analysis Child's Externalizing Behavior and Inconsistent Discipline

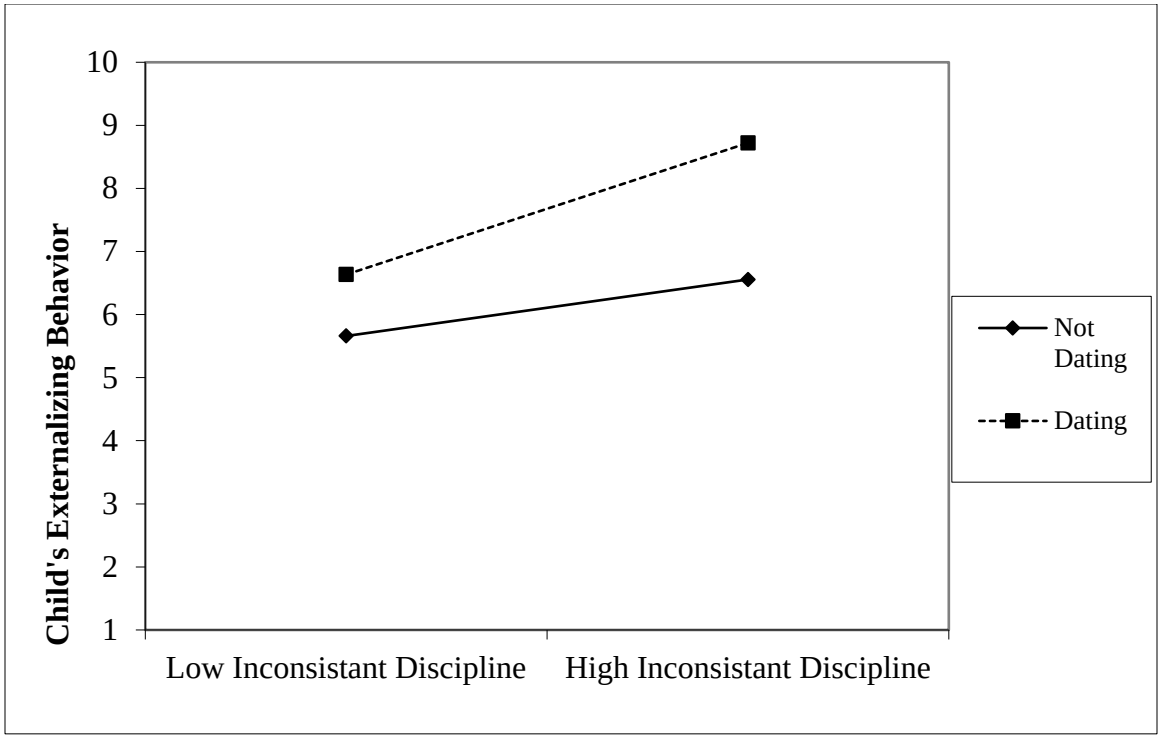
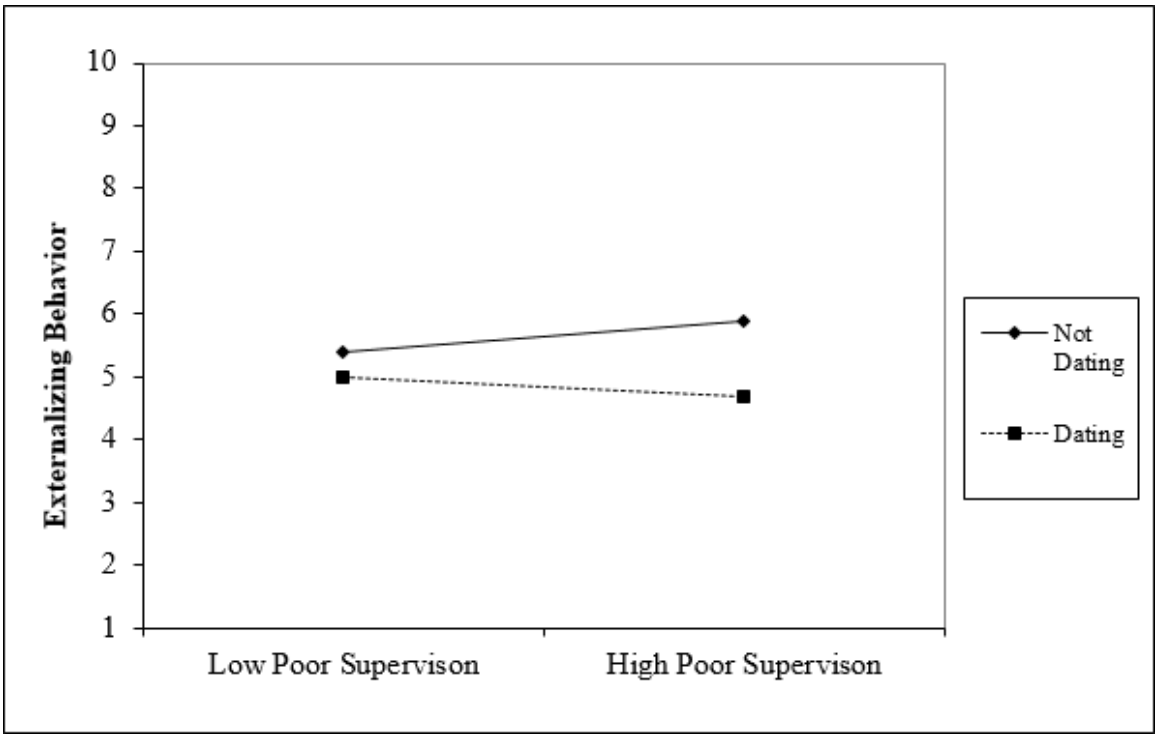


Figure 5. Slope Analysis Child's Externalizing Behavior and Poor Supervision



IRB Approval

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date:	01/28/2019
Application Number:	HS-18-4
Proposal Title:	Oklahoma Cooperative Extension: Co-Parenting for Resilience
Principal Investigator:	R COX
Co-Investigator(s):	MATT BROSI
Faculty Adviser:	
Project Coordinator:	KATEY MASRI
Research Assistant(s):	
Processed as:	Expedited Continuation

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved
Continuation Approval Date: 01/28/2019

The continuation of the IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

Requirements under the Common Rule have changed. This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which continuing review is not required. Therefore this study has been converted to the Revised Common Rule. As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a status report to the IRB when requested.
3. Promptly report to the IRB any harm experienced by a participant that is both unanticipated and related per IRB policy.
4. Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the OSU IRB and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
5. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,

Oklahoma State University IRB

VITA

Ethan Ryan Jones

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: THE INFLUENCE OF DIVORCING PARENTS' POST-SEPARATION DATING RELATIONSHIPS ON CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR

Major Field: Human Development and Family Science

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2019.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Science in Family Life at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah in 2016.

Experience:

Certified in Prepare/Enrich counseling
Trained in Oklahoma Co-Parenting for Resilience Program
Fulfilled AAMFT training requirements for clinical hours

Professional Memberships:

Student member of American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy
Student member of Nation Council of Family Relations