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THE IMPACT OF AGE AT TIME OF DIVORCE AND COPING SELF-

EFFICACY ON LOYALTY CONFLICT AMONG ADULT CHILDREN OF

DIVORCE

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THE IMPACT OF AGE AT TIME OF DIVORCE AND COPING SELF-EFFICACY ON LOYALTY CONFLICT AMONG ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Children of all ages experience divorce as a stressful life transition. Adding to that

stress is the fact that a fair number are exposed to parental alienating behaviors that, in

turn, promote conflicted loyalties as the child is pressured to choose one parent over the

other. Research in this area has shown that adaptive coping skills and coping self-

efficacy are effective tools in helping children better manage the stress experienced

during the divorce transition, resulting in an increased sense of well-being. For adult

children of divorce, these experiences are even more salient in that the pressure of

parental alienation may take on a different form, particularly that the adult child may be

expected to take on the roles of social support and mediator. As divorce rates continue

to rise among middle age adults, it is very likely that we will see more adult children

struggle with the transition of parental divorce. Hence, the primary purpose of this study

was to examine the relationship between perceived coping self-efficacy and the

experience of parental loyalty conflicts among adult children of divorce. Secondarily,

this study examined whether differences in coping and loyalty conflicts manifested

across different age ranges (i.e., child, adolescent, adult). Results indicated that age at

the time of divorce was not a significant predictor of loyalty conflict; however, coping

self-efficacy positively and significantly predicted experiences of parental loyalty

conflict. No significant gender differences were observed on the predictor or the

criterion variables. Implications for interventions and future research are proposed.

Keywords: adult children of divorce, children of divorce, loyalty conflict, coping self-
efficacy, parental alienating behavior

Chapter 1: Introduction

Divorce Statistics

Divorce has been identified as one of the most stressful and difficult transitions in contemporary American life (Kersting, 2003). It has become more common within the last half century and, as such, is slowly becoming more socially acceptable. Nevertheless, the impact divorce has on children remains a significant societal concern. The vast majority of research in this area has focused on the ramifications of parental divorce on children and young adolescents. With the increase in later-life divorce rates (after 20+ years of marriage), research has begun to delve into the unique aspects of how adult children of divorce are affected by the dissolution of their parents' marriage (Sumner, 2013).

Research on the effects of divorce for children and adolescents is substantial. Much of the research focuses on custody issues and the negative ramifications of parent-child boundary issues (Baker & Brassard, 2013). Some researchers have suggested that parent-child boundary issues are often a product of over disclosure of divorce details to the child or adolescent. These inappropriate disclosures by a parent, whether intentional or unintentional, have adverse effects on the child. In addition, these over disclosures promote more active parental alienation behaviors, which set the stage for the child to feel caught in the middle of marital disputes and pressured by one or both parents to take sides.

Divorce also creates a significant change in the parent-child relationship. Behaviors exerted by parents in an attempt to keep their offspring close may cause more harm than good, especially when parent-child boundaries become blurred and parental

alienating behaviors place children in the middle of the conflict. Parental alienation refers to attempts by a parent to denigrate the child's other parent in the presence of others or directly to the child (Baker & Chambers, 2011). Furthermore, research has found that parental alienation behaviors result in children experiencing loyalty conflicts as children begin to feel pressured to choose between parents (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). In particular, the desire to be close to both parents may result in the child's attempts to mediate marital disputes (Amato & Afifi, 2006), placing them in an untenable position. For adult children of divorce, parental loyalty conflicts may arise in the form of equitable time spent with each parent, especially around holidays and special occasions (Amato & Afifi, 2006). While holidays can be a difficult time for all children of divorce, holidays are particularly difficult for adult children, as they must decide how to allocate time without feeling as though they are preferring one parent over the other. Children and adolescents, on the other hand, are generally told how and with whom they will be spending time, which removes the pressure to choose. This added pressure of having to choose where to spend time may create a stronger sense of conflicted loyalty among adult children of divorce.

A significant amount of research has studied how coping impacts individual well-being in general as well as following parental divorce (Irion, Coon, & Blanchard-Fields, 1988). Research has shown that individuals from divorced families display more maladaptive coping than their peers from intact families (Chesney, Neilands, Chambers, Taylor & Folkman, 2006). Specifically, in cases where parents applied more pressure on their children to choose sides, the children with maladaptive coping abilities were more at risk for decreased well-being than those who exercised more adaptive coping

(Gately & Schwebel, 1991; Irion et al., 1988). Thus, it would appear that in order for children to successfully navigate the transition of parental divorce, support and encouragement for using adaptive coping abilities coupled with access to social support resources are critical to reducing the negative impact of parental divorce (Gately & Schwebel, 1991).

Another important aspect of coping ability is the belief in one's ability to manage a given situation, i.e., coping self-efficacy. Research has shown that individuals with a greater sense of coping self-efficacy adapt more positively to the transition of divorce (Kwasky & Groh, 2014). However, despite the fact that adult children of divorce are expected to have a greater repertoire of coping abilities compared to younger children, these strategies may not necessarily be more adaptive in nature. This possibility would seem to suggest yet another reason to explore the differences in coping and perceptions of coping among children, adolescents and adult children of divorce in order to better understand their unique experiences of parental divorce.

Statement of Problem

Substantial research exists surrounding the impact divorce has on children and adolescents. However, there is a dearth of research looking at the unique challenges that adult children of divorce experience as a result of the dissolution of their parents' marriage. In particular, there is no research examining the possible mitigating role of coping self-efficacy in managing the negative effects of parental alienation and loyalty conflict among adult children of divorce. In addition, this research may be important in a counseling and therapeutic capacity. Specifically, the results may help mental health professionals better understand the unique nature of the challenges adult children of

divorce face. The findings may also provide additional guidance for developing new interventions as well as modifying existing treatments to better meet the needs of this growing population.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Divorce Statistics and Late Life Divorce

In the past fifty years, divorce has become significantly more common. In 2009, the divorce rate in the United States was "3.4 per 1,000 population" (Sumner, 2013, p. 271). Of interest is the fact that divorce is now occurring for many couples later in life. This phenomenon, now referred to as "midlife" divorce, describes those divorcing after at least 20 years of marriage (Sumner, 2013). The U.S. Census has found that adults between the ages of 50 and 64 have the highest increasing rate of divorce (Sumner, 2013). Thus, it is their offspring who will be faced with a changing family dynamic as a result of their parents' decision to divorce.

Currently, one million children and adolescents each year see their parents divorce (Baker & Brassard, 2013). Previous research suggests that age is an important factor in determining how children will react to the divorce of their parents (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986). There is a significant amount of research regarding how divorce affects young children and their adjustment during and after the divorce. There is, however, little research examining how adult children of divorce fare. This may be due in part because of the belief that adult children are buffered from the effects of divorce by their age and supposed enhanced coping abilities. For example, Cooney et al. (1986) suggests that older children are more preoccupied with things outside of their family unit, which may serve to buffer them from the emotional and psychological

fallout surrounding the divorce. In contrast, Silverman (1989) asserts that divorce is often thrust upon adult children with the expectation that they are not only able to survive the experience, but to provide support to struggling parents as well. In any case, the consensus of the limited research that exists on adult children of divorce indicates that a divorce later in life is traumatic for both the parents and their adult children. Jones and Jones (2008) state that late-life divorce can often be more traumatic than a marriage that lasted less than 10 years because it drastically changes the social support structure of parents and their offspring. This change, in turn, may increase the chance that parents will begin to depend more heavily on their adult children for social support. Despite this claim, little research has been conducted to examine what adult children experience when their parents divorce.

Theoretical Framework

Literature surrounding how divorce affects children has posited many potential theories. With the increase in the divorce rate over the past fifty years, it may come as no surprise that early research used a pathogenic model as a theoretical framework. This model was used because it was assumed that children of divorce would experience more negative effects from the divorce than positive (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). However, as the divorce literature has begun to evolve, research has shown that not every child will experience long-term negative effects from divorce (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). Thus, research in this area emphasizes the use of newer models to address these additional complexities, resulting in the emergence of more comprehensive theoretical frameworks. These frameworks include feminist theory, systems theory, attribution theory, attachment theory, as well as many others (Amato, 2000). However, the core of

these theories focuses specifically on divorce as a stressful life transition, affecting children of all ages. While it is now widely recognized that not all children will experience the potential negative effects of divorce (Gately & Schwebel, 1991), researchers still assert that the divorce process is stressful under the best of circumstances (Amato, 2000). For this reason, many frameworks surrounding divorce research use the divorce-stress adjustment perspective, which views divorce as a process that begins before the legal separation of the couple and continues for many years following the legal conclusion of the divorce (Amato, 2000). In other words, this model assumes that marital disruptions occur throughout the marriage and contribute to adjustment problems for children in advance of legal proceedings.

While there are various theoretical frameworks that embody the divorce-stress adjustment perspective, for the purposes of this study, the Challenge Model was chosen because it focuses specifically on age at the time of divorce and coping resources, both of which are variables of interest in this study. This model acknowledges that not all children of divorce face problematic outcomes and, as such, encompasses the range of outcomes for children whose parents divorce.

Previous research utilizing the Challenge Model has found that the quality of adjustment for participants was based upon the following factors: (a) age and gender at the time of divorce, (b) temperament of the child, (c) locus of control, (d) level of coping resources available to them, (e) amount of interpersonal conflict present throughout the course of the divorce, (f) quality of parent-child relationships, (g) mental and physical state of the child's parents, (h) remarriage, and (i) extent and quality of social support available to the child (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). While these factors are

believed to facilitate children's optimal development, the Challenge Model "maintains that children's adjustment during each stage of parental divorce and its aftermath is shaped by the unique challenges they face during the divorce transition period, by the personal characteristics and support they have or (lack of), coping, and by their previous level of adjustment" (Gately & Schwebel, 1991, p. 63).

In regard to age, the Challenge Model purports that younger children have more negative outcomes immediately following the divorce and that these negative effects may continue for some time (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). In contrast, the model suggests that older children may fare better during their parents' divorce because they have more tools to manage the various stages in the divorce adjustment process. In particular, Gately and Schwebel (1991) suggest that adult children of divorce fare better due to (a) decreased dependence on parents, and (b) a larger repertoire of coping abilities.

Parental Divorce and Children and Adolescents

There is no question that parental divorce is stressful for all parties involved, and research consistently supports the experience of parental divorce as a significant, disruptive life event that has the potential for adverse effects on the development of children and adolescents (Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000). Amato (2000) and Lopez et al. (2000) assert that children often find divorce stressful because it involves the departure of one parent from the household, which can be confusing and cause a considerable amount of anxiety for the child as well as a fear of abandonment and rejection. Younger children are also more dependent upon parents to take care of them and may not be cognitively advanced enough to seek support from peers and other adults (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993).

Divorce can also impact many other aspects of a child's life. Adverse effects reported in the literature include, but are not limited to (a) less effective parenting; (b) reduced involvement from the noncustodial parent; (c) continuance of interparental conflict; (d) additional disruptive life events such as new schools, moves, and new marriages; (f) lessened economic resources; and (g) challenges to academic achievement and self-esteem (Amato, 2000). Children who come from divorced families have also been found to have higher rates of conduct issues, reduced social competence, and more long-term health concerns (Amato, 2000).

While literature exists stating there are differences in the effects of parental divorce on children and adolescents versus young adults, research also exists stating that the divorce process exerts variable effects on children from infancy to adolescence (Lansford, 2016). Specifically, those who are under the age of 6 at the time of their parent's divorce may be at higher risk for social and emotional development difficulties (Zill et al., 1993) and are more likely to experience conduct and behavioral problems as well as achievement problems in both academic and social settings (Zill et al., 1993).

Gender differences in children's response to parental divorce. While there is some disagreement in the literature as to gender differences in children's response to parental divorce, the majority of researchers agree that there are, indeed, differences. Discrepancies exist throughout the current research on gender differences in children of divorce. Some research has found minimal to no differences in the effects of divorce, while others have found females to be at greater risk for psychological problems stemming from divorce (Huure, Junkkari, & Aro, 2005). Both males and females appear to experience externalizing and internalizing behaviors, and these behaviors manifest

differently in males and females (Lansford, 2016). In general, research has espoused the existence of greater externalizing behaviors among males and greater internalizing behaviors among females. Internalizing behaviors are defined as problematic behaviors turned inward and directed toward the self. Externalizing behaviors are those behaviors in which an individual lashes out at others usually in the form of violence or aggression and can include things such as fighting, conduct issues, verbal altercations with others, and so forth. While gender differences in externalizing behaviors are common among following divorce, boys often have higher rates of conduct problems and engage in acting out behaviors at home and in school (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). In fact, research with males in elementary school has shown that externalizing behaviors begin fairly early, sometimes before the official legal end of their parents' marriage, and continue for up to five years (Lansford, 2016). Even greater externalizing behaviors have been shown in males if the divorce occurs while they are in middle school (Lansford, 2016). Males from divorced families have also been shown to have higher rates of impulsivity and hyperactivity compared to males from intact families (Grych & Fincham, 1992) and are more vulnerable to family discord than females (Huure et al., 2005).

Girls on the other hand, while they may engage in the similar types of externalizing behaviors as boys, they tend to do so to a lesser degree (Grych & Fincham, 1992). In addition, Grych and Fincham (1992) suggest that externalizing behaviors may also persist for longer periods of time and be more prevalent in boys than in girls.

As for negative internalizing behaviors, they have been shown to be more prevalent among children of divorce compared to their peers from intact families

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(Grych & Fincham, 1992). Among boys, internalizing behaviors are reflected in higher rates of aversive behavior and lower prosocial behavior with peers (Grych & Fincham, 1992; Lansford, 2016). Males also report higher levels of self-esteem and maturity than their female counterparts and exhibit decreased rates of separation anxiety (Gately & Schwebel, 1991; Lansford, 2016). Boys have also been shown to have higher levels of overall well-being following parental divorce compared to their female peers (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). In contrast, girls were found to overcome their negative internalizing behaviors faster than boys (Grych & Fincham, 1992). While girls suffer more from depression and "overcontrolled" behaviors (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Zill et al., 1993), they experience fewer difficulties with cognitive and emotional development than boys (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). In a study surveying teachers, girls were described as more anxious, more dependent, and withdrawn following their parents' divorce (Zaslow, 1989). Zill et al. (1993) also found that girls whose parents divorced while the child was of a young age often developed relationship difficulties with their mothers once the child reached young adulthood.

Gender differences also exist within the context of parent-child relationships. Daughters appear to experience more adverse effects related to parent-child relationships following a divorce. For example, a study by Neilsen (2011) suggests that girls need the nurturing of their fathers and this often becomes lessened upon the divorce of their parents (Nielsen, 2011). This lack of fathering in girls can often lead to disadvantages for girls such as engaging in sexual activities at an earlier age, unwanted pregnancy and sexual promiscuity, poor grades, higher rates of high school drop-out

and more legal difficulties (Nielsen, 2011). It has also been suggested that daughters are more likely to feel unloved by their father during and after the divorce (Nielsen, 2011).

While there do appear to be some gender differences among children of divorce, Zaslow (1989) found that the context of the divorce, family dynamics, and other individual factors are important to take into consideration when tailoring interventions to more effectively address the negative behavioral outcomes of parental divorce. Since no two children are exactly the same, these various individual factors should be taken into consideration when selecting and implementing interventions for use with children of divorce (Zaslow, 1989).

Parental Divorce and Adult Children

Research indicates that the developmental stage of the individual plays a significant role in the ability of children to effectively cope with stressors brought on by the dissolution of their parents' marriage (Cooney et al., 1986). To illustrate, it's been suggested that, due to their age, individuals who are 18 or older will cope better with their parents' divorce (Fintushel & Hillard, 1991). While this may be the case, research also indicates that parental midlife divorce creates unique obstacles for adult children that have yet to be fully explored (Cooney et al., 1986). Preliminary findings by Cooney et al. (1986) found that adult children of divorce struggle most with the following aspects of divorce: (a) vulnerability and stress, (b) changes in parent-child relations, (c) conflicting loyalties, (d) feelings of anger, and (e) worries about parents' future.

Another unique consideration for adult children of divorce lies in the fact that they have likely been privy to a greater extent to (a) the history of conflict within the marriage prior to the announcement of divorce, and (b) more details related to the

ensuing divorce. While this no doubt causes stress and anxiety for them prior to the divorce, some information in regard to the marital conflict may actually help buffer the shock that comes with the announcement of the divorce. In fact, Amato (2000) suggests that some adult children of divorce may actually experience a sense of relief once the decision to divorce is official, even if the marital conflict has not been overt. On the other hand, inappropriate and over-disclosures by a parent regarding intimate details about the marital conflict have been shown to increase anxiety and exacerbate stress levels in children of divorce (Afifi & McManus, 2010).

Further, Fintushel and Hillard (1991) point out that adult children have created an idea of themselves surrounding their family and their identity within that family and upon the divorce of their parents, this status is questioned. They also state that, for adult children, the changing view of self in relation to the family takes them back to feeling like a child again. In other words, their parents' divorce leaves them feeling like a child; however, as an adult, they are expected to manage their emotional distress in adult fashion. It is this phenomenon, among others, that makes the adult child's experience of parental divorce different (Fintushel & Hillard, 1991).

Relatedly, due to the natural changes in the parent-child relationship as children mature, Sumner (2013) states that the communication between parent and adult child begins to shift as the child enters adulthood. These changes include increased communication, a mutual respect between parent and child, as well as the lessening of parent-child role expectations, which often leads to a more friendship-based relationship (Cooney et al., 1986). It may be that this morphing of the original parent-child

relationship into a more egalitarian adult relationship makes it difficult for adult children of divorce to navigate the new family relationship dynamics.

For example, parents who lack other social support outlets may confide intimate details about the divorce to their children (Afifi & McManus, 2010). This can be true for children of all ages, but is more apt to occur with adult children. This emotional parentification results in the adult child being pressured to provide social support, comfort, and even caretaking to their parent (Afifi & McManus, 2010). Generally, providing social support to parents is not a task young children have to deal with. In addition, it is not surprising that older children have a tendency to become protective toward the more fragile parent in a divorce situation. However, this may lead to role-reversals and a tendency to take on the responsibility to mediate disputes between their parents (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994). Research has shown that this type of parent-child boundary violation results in higher levels of reported psychological distress (Afifi & McManus, 2010).

As previously discussed, interventions have been shown to be effective for reducing stress associated with the divorce transition as well as minimizing parental alienation behaviors. Much of this work has been done within the population of younger children. However, within the limited research examining useful interventions for adult children of divorce, individual and family-systems therapy have been shown to be effective (Toren et al., 2013). Specifically, relational therapy, psychodynamic therapy, and experiential techniques can help to alleviate the distress of parental divorce (Jones & Jablonski, 1998). Furthermore, it is important for adult children of divorce to seek some sort of support whether it be counseling or support through peer relationships in

order to combat the stress and negative emotions associated with the divorce of their parents.

As divorce rates, specifically late-life divorce rates, continue to grow in the coming years, many adult children will likely find themselves seeking guidance on how to navigate the choppy waters of their parents' divorce. This unfortunate reality speaks again to the need for more research to be conducted to determine the unique effects of divorce on adult children.

Gender differences in adult children's response to parental divorce. As to research findings related to gender differences in response to parental divorce among adult children of divorce, Cooney et al. (1986) found that emotional distress was higher for women than men within the young adult age group. This may be the case because females often feel the need to stay close to family and be involved in family life. Therefore, they may find themselves more involved in the marital issues surrounding the divorce. Women also reported higher levels of anger than men, and 67% of those in Cooney et al.'s (1986) study stated they felt some degree of anger surrounding their parents' divorce. Furthermore, many adult children may question why parents could not simply stay together after having been together for so long. They may also be angry about the loss of the family they remember and simply wish for it to remain the same.

Additionally, Lopez, Campbell, and Watkins (1988) found that males were less dependent on their fathers for support and assistance than their female counterparts. They also found that individuals from divorced families tended to harbor more anger toward their fathers than their peers from intact families (Lopez et al., 2000). In some

cases, this may be related to issues of infidelity in which the father initiates the divorce in order to pursue another relationship.

In regard to the changes in family relational dynamics, substantial research has found that the relationship between children and fathers takes the greatest hit (Cooney et al., 1986). This is true for both sons and daughters, but appears more profound in the relationship between fathers and daughters (Cooney et al., 1986). The strongest bond is often found between mothers and daughters, and this bond is often strengthened throughout the process of divorce (Cooney et al., 1986). In some cases, this may be related to females being more inclined to want to support their mother, especially if it is their father who initiates the divorce.

Protective factors and therapeutic interventions for children of divorce. Some studies point to mechanisms that help reduce the distress of divorce. These include intrapersonal characteristics such as self-efficacy and current coping and social skills. Interpersonal relationships that provide significant amounts of social support have been shown to reduce distress (Amato, 2000).

Access to evidence-based therapeutic interventions is also an important resource for moderating the effects of divorce on children of all ages. Most of the interventions used to assist with the transition of divorce are grouped into three classes based upon the primary target of the intervention: (a) the child, (b) the parents, (c) and the legal system (Grych & Fincham, 1992).

When determining proper interventions to use for a child, many things should be considered in order to determine the current level of adjustment of the child. These include gender, age, temperament, and social cognition. The determination of each of

these factors can guide a therapist to the best potential intervention (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Interventions can include either individual counseling or family therapy where the child and parent are able to engage together (Toren et al., 2013). Child-centered therapies often focus on social skills and alleviating negative emotions the child may be experiencing. This can be accomplished both through individual therapy or group therapy with peers (Grych & Fincham, 1992). School-based interventions have also proven to be helpful for children experiencing the negative adjustment effects of parental divorce (Grych & Fincham, 1992), as they have been shown to decrease problem behaviors and anxiety levels, as well as increase adjustment levels (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985).

When addressing parental divorce issues through intervention, group therapy has been found to be the most beneficial. The use of groups was found to decrease children's anxiety and depression levels (Toren et al., 2013). Groups that are designed for children and parents often consist of psychoeducation and support for social and coping abilities for children and their parents (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Parenting techniques may also be incorporated particularly when loyalty conflicts or parental alienation is determined to be an adjustment problem for the child. Behavioral family therapy and Multi Modal Family Intervention (MMFI) have been found to be effective particularly when parental alienation behaviors have been identified. In addition, these therapies may also be helpful in addressing conduct problems. In particular, group therapy, when used with both parents and children, has proven to be extremely successful in ameliorating the effects of parental alienation (Toren et al., 2013). Toren et al. (2013) also found that group family therapy allowed parents to gain a better

understanding of the perspective of the alienated parent by interacting with other parents who report similar experiences.

Within the legal system, the use of mediation has been found beneficial as opposed to litigation because it promotes a more relaxed and less hostile environment (Grych & Fincham, 1992). In conjunction with mediation, the court system often recommends MMFI or parenting coordinators to help resolve the negative effects of parental alienation on children (Schwartz, 2015).

Obviously, relevant therapeutic and legal interventions are important for children of all ages dealing with their parents' divorce. It is a common myth that very young children and toddlers are not impacted by parental alienation. Even young children may begin to alienate a parent without intention. If this occurs, therapeutic interventions can be extremely important in reducing the effects of parental alienation (Warshak, 2015). Intervention is essential because it provides the child with the means to overcome cognitive, relational, and behavioral deficits resulting from parental alienating behaviors during and after the divorce (Warshak, 2015). As mentioned previously, interventions can vary but usually include some combination of individual therapy for both parent and child in conjunction with family therapy.

Interparental Conflict, Parental Alienation and Loyalty Conflicts

Baker and Brassard (2013) indicate that for elementary aged children, witnessing interparental conflict was the third highest stressor they faced in their lives. Parental conflict, in general, has proven to be a significant factor in predicting post-divorce adjustment, both immediately following the divorce as well as many years after (Baker & Brassard, 2013). Additionally, high levels of interparental conflict have been

associated with higher rates of parent-child relationship problems (Baker & Brassard, 2013). These relationship problems have been found to lead to both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, interpersonal relationship problems, and lower levels of adjustment for children of all ages (Baker & Brassard, 2013). Moreover, these problems can also spill over into other relationships the child has, including those with other family members, peers, and authority figures (Warshak, 2015).

Some research postulates that parents share information with their children in an attempt to help them better understand the changes and transitions that go along with a divorce and to reduce their uncertainty about the divorce (Afifi & McManus, 2010). As mentioned previously, pertinent disclosures surrounding details of the divorce can provide some benefits to the child. Afifi and McManus (2010) state that adolescents benefit from being given some information surrounding the divorce in order to assist in allaying some of the uncertainty related to the future. In fact, these pertinent disclosures have been found to enhance a child's well-being, reduce their level of anxiety surrounding the divorce and build trust within the parent-child relationship (Afifi & McManus, 2010). This is, however, only true of pertinent disclosures. On the other hand, inappropriate or over-disclosure can lead to blurred parent-child boundaries and result in physical and mental health problems for children of all ages as it places them in the middle of the parental conflict (Afifi & McManus, 2010).

The phenomenon of parental alienation is the intense rejection of a parent by the child following a divorce (Dunne & Hedrick, 1994). According to Toren et al. (2013), approximately one percent of the child and adolescent population experiences some form of parental alienation (Toren et al., 2013). Baker and Verrocchio (2015) defines

parental alienation as "parental behaviors that signal to the child that it is not acceptable to have a loving relationship with the other parent (p. 3048)." With minor children, its origin is often associated with custodial issues. When parents divorce, a decision must be made as to how much time children should spend with each parent. This may lead parents seeking full custody to attempt to alienate their children from the other parent. Baker and Verrocchio (2015) equate parental alienation to psychological maltreatment in that alienating behaviors place additional pressure on children to choose sides.

In fact, parental alienation has become so common and has such negative consequences that it has become recognized within the mental health community as its own phenomena. Parental alienation has been defined as an occurrence arising "primarily in the context of child custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from a combination of programming (brainwashing) a parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent" (Baker & Damall, 2007, p. 56). According to Richard Gardner (1998), the following are illustrative of parental alienating behaviors:

1. Child is preoccupied with depreciation and criticism of the parent that is unjustified and/or exaggerated.

2. Conscious, subconscious, and unconscious factors within the alienating parent contribute to the child's alienation from the other.

3. Denigration of the parent has the quality of a litany, a rehearsed quality. There is phraseology not usually used by the child.

4. Child justifies the alienation with memories of minor altercations experienced in the relationship with the parent which are trivial and which most children would have forgotten. When asked, the children are unable to give more compelling reasons.

5. The alienating parent will concur with the children and support their belief that these reasons justify alienation.

6. Hatred of the parent is most intense when the alienating parent and the child are in the presence of the alienated parent. However, when the child is alone with the alienated parent, the child may exhibit hatred, neutrality, or expressions of affection.

7. If the child begins to enjoy him/herself with the alienated parent, there may be episodes of 'stiffening up' and resuming withdrawal and animosity, as though they have done something wrong. Alternatively, the child may ask the alienated parent not to reveal his/her affection the other parent.

8. The degree of animosity in the child's behavior and verbalizations may vary with the degree of proximity to the alienating parent.

9. Hatred of the parent often extends to include the alienated parent's extended family with even less justification by the child.

10. The alienating parent is generally unconcerned with the psychological effects on the child of the rejection of parent and extended family.

11. The child's hatred of the alienated parent is often impervious to evidence, which contradicts his/her position.

12. The child's position seemingly lacks ambivalence. The alienated parent is 'all bad,' the alienating parent is 'all good'.

13. The child is apt to exhibit a guiltless disregard for the feelings of the alienated parent. 14. The child fears the loss of the love of the alienating parent." (Dunne et al., 1994, p. 24-25).

Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) echo concerns related to parental alienation behaviors, stating that "to turn a child against the other parent is to turn a child against himself" (p. 485). Moreover, a study on parental alienation by Baker and Verrocchio (2015) found that by attempting to alienate a child from one parent, the alienating parent is actually communicating to the child that they are unworthy of the love of the other parent. This can have extreme ramifications on the well-being of the child, as children often internalize negative alienating feedback they receive from a parent. In other words, children who experience parental alienation behaviors think that they are not worthy of love at all because they are told by one parent that the other does not love them (Baker & Chambers, 2011). Baker and Chambers' (2011) study also found that children who experience parental alienation behaviors have higher rates of depression and more insecure attachments.

Existing research clearly indicates that parental alienation behaviors place pressure on a child to choose between parents, leading the child to feel caught in the middle (Amato & Afifi, 2006). As a result, children who feel caught in between two parents have a more difficult time adjusting than those who do not (Baker & Brassard, 2013), and this outcome may extend well into adulthood (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Feeling caught in the middle has also been shown to be related to lower rates of well-

being and poor relational quality with both mothers and fathers (Amato & Afifi, 2006). In addition, research by Amato and Afifi (2006) found three typical ways in which children attempt to cope when they feel caught in the middle: (1) maintain a positive relationship with the both parents, (2) form an alliance with one parent over the other that occasionally creates a psychological imbalance within the child, or (3) reject of both parents. Unfortunately, all of these options have consequences in that they all create increased stress for children as they struggle to navigate the uncharted waters of their parents' divorce.

It is this feeling of having to choose sides that results in loyalty conflicts for the child. When a child feels as though they have to take sides with one parent, they often feel as though they must also turn against the other parent. This idea of having to "choose sides" is at the heart of the loyalty conflict experience and has been referred to as triangulation (Minuchin, 1974). It has been shown to predict greater internalizing behaviors as well as increased rates of depression and substance abuse issues, a decrease in self-esteem, an inability to become self-sufficient, and a decreased trust in others (Baker & Brassard, 2013). Baker and Brassard's (2013) research also found that children who experience higher parental loyalty conflicts showed increased rates of depression, but not an increase in disruptive behaviors. This increased rate of depression may be due to parental alienation behaviors that lead the child to view themselves as "worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value when meeting another's needs" (Baker & Brassard, 2013, p. 407). By feeling as though they are turning away from one parent, children can begin to have feelings of guilt or shame for rejecting or betraying the other parent. This conflictual experience is relevant to adult

children as well. To illustrate, Cooney et al. (1986) found that 64% of adult children who completed their study were worried about the potential for conflicting parental loyalties. Afifi and McManus (2010) suggest that conflict loyalties and the feeling of having to choose sides results in children becoming enmeshed in their parents' disputes as they begin to align themselves with one parent over the other in order to attempt to minimize the pressure to choose sides.

Baker and Chambers (2011) identified 17 loyalty conflict-inducing behaviors that have been found to be more frequent within divorced families as opposed to intact families. These 17 behaviors are as follows:

limiting the child's contact with the other parent; interfering with communication between the child and the other parent; limiting mementos and photographs of the other parent; withdrawal of love or expressions of anger if the child indicates positive feelings for the other parent; telling the child that the other parent does not love him or her; forcing the child to choose between his or her parents; creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous; forcing the child to reject the other parent; asking the child to spy on the other parent; asking the child to keep secrets from the other parent; referring to the other parent by his or her first name; referring to a stepparent as "Mom" or "Dad" and encouraging the child to do the same; withholding medical, social, or academic information from the other parent; keeping the other parent's name off of such records; changing the child's name to remove association with the other parent; cultivating dependency; and denigration of the other parent. (Baker & Chambers, 2011)

When these behaviors occur together, they can create psychological distance between the child and the non-custodial parent, which, in turn, can lead to their relationship being riddled with conflict or even eventually becoming nonexistent (Baker & Chambers, 2011). While the bulk of the research examining loyalty conflicts has been focused on children of divorce, Amato and Afifi (2006) have looked at conflict loyalties within the older adolescent population. They suggest that loyalty conflicts decrease in late adolescence when children begin to distance themselves from their parents to create their own independence (Amato & Afifi, 2006). However, other research has shown that older children may be more likely than younger children to feel caught between parents (Amato & Afifi, 2006).

In summary, parental alienation and conflict loyalties are related in that parental alienating behaviors serve as the precursors of conflict loyalty experiences. Currently, very little research has been conducted examining loyalty conflicts among adult children. The limited existing research surrounding adult children has found that loyalty conflicts center around holidays and the need to "split time" fairly between both parents. Cooney et al. (1986) found that 85% of participants in their study stated they were concerned about how to discuss holiday plans with each parent. Thus, additional research is needed to determine the impact of parental alienating behaviors and provide additional insight into the impact of loyalty conflicts on adult children of divorce.

Coping Self-Efficacy, Loyalty Conflicts, and Adult Children of Divorce

Gately and Schwebel (1991) suggest that throughout the transition of divorce, a child may experience the adjustment process in the following increments: "(a) acknowledge the marital disruption, (b) regain a sense of direction and freedom to

pursue customary activities, (c) deal with loss and feelings of rejection, (d) forgive the parents, (e) accept the permanence of divorce and relinquish longings for the restoration of the predivorce family and (f) come to feel comfortable and confident in relationships" (p. 62). In order for children to effectively work through their parents' divorce, they must rely upon existing coping abilities.

Coping has certainly been examined in research with children of divorce. Coping is defined as "efforts to master conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available" (Mullis, Mullis, Schwartz, Pease, & Shriner, 2007, p. 138). Research conducted by Jones and Jablonski (1998) emphasizes the importance of reducing parental conflict and maintaining healthy parent-child bonds in order to strengthen a child's ability to cope with the divorce. Moreover, the stress-based theories and models that make up the divorce literature focus on the pre-existing and developing coping abilities and resources children possess and use throughout the course of the divorce transition (Gately & Schwebel, 1991). In fact, this research has revealed that even at-risk children of divorce have been found to be somewhat resilient if they possess the following qualities: positive personality traits, coping abilities that are supported by their family, and a social environment that supports and encourages positive role models and a reinforcement of coping efforts (Gately & Schwebel, 1991).

As expected, within the research conducted with adult children of divorce, it is clear that young adults coping abilities differ from those of children and adolescents. For adult children of divorce, the transition associated with divorce occurs at a crucial stage in their relational development with their parents, which places an additional

burden on their existing coping abilities. Generally, the literature categorizes coping abilities as either adaptive or maladaptive. Adaptive coping is defined as a fit between an individual's ability to control stress coupled with the coping strategy they choose to use (Chesney et al., 2006). Maladaptive coping on the other hand is defined as coping abilities that do not regulate distress or manage the cause of the stress (Chesney et al., 2006). This categorization of coping abilities as adaptive and maladaptive determines the degree of distress the adult child may experience following divorce.

Just as coping abilities can be considered adaptive or maladaptive, Monat and Lazarus (1997) categorized coping strategies as either problem focused or emotion focused (Mullins et al., 2007). When utilizing a problem-focused coping strategy, an individual may use confrontation, inquire about information regarding the situation, or practice self-constraint. Problem-focused coping has been deemed more effective (adaptive) for dealing with stressors within the individual's control and less effective (maladaptive) for stressors perceived to be out of his/her control (Chesney et al., 2006). Emotion-focused strategies are an attempt to console oneself by allowing for emotional relief from the stressor (Mullins et al., 2007). Emotion-focused coping tends to be more effective (adaptive) when stressors are less controllable and more problematic (maladaptive) when stressors are within the individual's control (Chesney et al., 2006). It should be noted, however, that both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping abilities, when applied in the right context, can be adaptive.

Irion et al. (1988) believe coping is a mediator of outcome in how young adults might cope with the divorce of their parents. Those who make use of active coping abilities have been predicted to have lower levels of emotional distress (Irion et al.,

1988). This finding supports the notion that adult children of divorce who report more adaptive coping strategies will have higher levels of psychological well-being after the divorce of their parents. The ability of adult children of divorce to use existing adaptive coping abilities can allow them to grow psychosocially and continue to foster the development of additional coping abilities necessary to manage a parental divorce. However, when adult children of divorce use maladaptive coping to work through the stress and pain they experience, their distress is heightened (Mullins et al., 2007). Adults who have poor coping abilities may experience a decreased sense of psychological well-being because they are unable to find appropriate and adaptive ways to deal effectively with the divorce of their parents. Research indicates that individuals from divorced families, regardless of their age at the time of the divorce, use more maladaptive coping strategies than their counterparts from intact families (Irion et al., 1988).

Within the broader domain of coping ability lies coping self-efficacy. This is the belief about one's own ability to complete certain behaviors (Chesney et al., 2006). In other words, coping self-efficacy is based more upon the individual's confidence in their own abilities to manage certain events. Higher levels of self-efficacy have been found to reduce depression levels while lower levels of self-efficacy put the individual at increased risk for depression (Kwasky & Groh, 2014). Kwasy and Groh (2014) also found that coping self-efficacy may mediate some of the negative effects of challenging life transitions. Given that divorce is a challenging life transition, examining coping self-efficacy among adult children of divorce may shed new light on how best to manage loyalty conflicts. So, in addition to the stress of parental divorce, dealing with

loyalty conflicts adds an additional burden on adult children as they work to adjust to the dissolution of their parents' marriage.

As previously discussed, much research has been conducted surrounding how conflict loyalties and parental alienating behaviors affect younger children and adolescents. However, minimal research has looked at how these same conflict loyalties affect the adult population. While some parallels may be drawn between the age groups, little is known about how these experiences impact adult children of divorce. A study by Buchanan et al. (1991) found that children whose parents have already emotionally disengaged from one another following the divorce felt less caught in the middle than children whose parents went on fighting for years (Amato & Afifi, 2006). This finding may relate to a possible difference between children and adult children when it comes to parental divorce. In other words, parents who are involved in custody disputes tend to have continued contact with one another beyond the finalization of the divorce. They are still attempting to co-parent and may have different views about parenting that lead to continued disputes. Adult children on the other hand no longer have to deal with custody issues, thereby reducing their exposure to post-divorce conflict. However, there is also the reality that adult children of divorce may still be receiving support from their parents in the form of advice, financial assistance, housing, and babysitting (Amato & Afifi, 2006). The continued need for parental supports would certainly increase the contact adult children would have with their parents and would likely result in the need for former spouses to communicate about these issues (Amato & Afifi, 2006). In turn, this need for increased contact with ex-spouses may contribute to adult children feeling caught in the middle again.

To summarize, the bulk of the literature on the impact of divorce has been focused on children and adolescents. While the limited research examining young adults' experiences of parental divorce suggests that adult children of divorce may share some similar experiences with younger children, there are also indications that young adults' experiences of parental divorce are dissimilar due to their advanced developmental status (Cooney et al., 1986). Thus, the lack of a substantial research base examining the experiences of adult children of divorce points to the need for further investigation with this population. To that end, this study is designed to investigate the relationships between age at time of divorce, coping self-efficacy, and parental loyalty conflicts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Participants

The target population included individuals whose parents were divorced. While the primary focus of the study concerns adult children of divorce, data from participants whose parents divorced when they were children or adolescents was also examined. All participants were recruited from a large South Central university using a list serve to reach the entire university population. To ensure that only participants with divorced parents complete the various study measures, any participant who responded that their parents were still married were taken to the end of the survey. The social media site Facebook was also be used to recruit participants in the hopes of obtaining a wider, more diverse sample. Participation in this study was voluntary and all participants completed an informed consent to take part in the study.

A total of 281 participants completed the survey. For the purposes of this study, however, only individuals who identified their parents as divorced were used. A total of 155 participants indicated their parents were divorced and included males ($n = 30$) and females ($n = 124$). One participant identified as "Other" for gender identity ($n = 1$). The mean age of participants was 28 years old ($M = 28.44$, $SD = 25.00$). The breakdown of participants for ethnic identity was as follows: Caucasian ($n = 120$; 77.9%), Hispanic/Latino/Latina ($n = 7$; 4.5%), Multiracial ($n = 7$; 4.5%), Native American or American Indian ($n = 7$; 4.5%), African American ($n = 5$; 3.2%), Other ($n = 4$; 2.6%), Biracial ($n = 3$; 1.9%), Asian American ($n = 1$; .06%) and one missing data point ($n = 1$; 0.6%). The current relationship status of participants included single ($n = 89$: 57.8%), married ($n = 56$; 36.4%), and divorced ($n = 9$; 5.8%). There was also a response choice for "separated". However, only four individuals identified their parents as being separated, therefore it was excluded from the data. The participants were divided into two groups for age at time of parental divorce: 17 and under ($n = 127$; 84.7%) and 18 and over ($n = 23$; 15.3%). Table 1 contains frequencies and percentages for all demographic variables.

Instrumentation

Demographics. All participants in this study were asked to answer various demographic questions such as their age, gender, highest level of education, their current marital status, the marital status of their parents, religion, current place of residence, age at the time of their parents' divorce, level of parental marital conflict before and after the divorce, whether or not they currently live with their parents, whether they lived with their parents at the time of the divorce, and number of siblings.

Coping self-efficacy. Perceived coping self-efficacy was measured using the

Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (CSES; Chesney et al., 2006). The scale measures

participant's perceived self-efficacy for coping with stressful situations and includes

three subscales: (a) problem-focused coping, (e.g., "Break an upsetting problem down

into smaller parts"), (b) emotion-focused coping, (e.g., "Make unpleasant thoughts go

away") and (c) social support (e.g., "make new friends") (Chesney et al., 2006).

Participants were asked to determine the extent to which they thought they could

perform certain behaviors that are important to adaptive coping. This 26-item measure

utilizes an 11-point scale (0 = *cannot do at all*; 5 = *moderately certain can do it*; 10 =

certain can do). An overall coping self-efficacy score is computed by summing all item

rankings. The Cronbach's alpha for the CSES has been reported as .95, with a mean of

137.4 and a standard deviation of 45.6 (Chesney et al., 2006). Concurrent and

convergent validity have been found to be strong within this measure (Chesney et al.,

2006). Cronbach's alpha for the CSES in this study was .96.

Loyalty conflict. The Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ; Baker &

Chambers, 2011) was used to measure the level of loyalty conflict toward each parent.

The BSQ is a 20-item measure detailing exposure to parental alienation behaviors. The

BSQ contains 19 items that identify specific behaviors and one question about general

behaviors parents have engaged in in order to turn a child against the other parent.

Responses are scored on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *never*, 1= *rarely*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 =

often, 4 = *always*). Sample questions of the BSQ include the following: "Made

comments to me about or exaggerated the other parent's negative qualities while rarely

saying anything positive about that parent", "Limited or interfered with my contact with

the other parent such that I spent less time with him or her than I was supposed to or could have" (Baker & Chambers, 2011, p. 60). The BSQ was used in order to assess the level of loyalty conflict toward each parent. The BSQ has demonstrated strong internal consistency reliability with a demonstrated Cronbach's alpha of .93 (Baker & Chambers, 2011), a mean of 6.1 and a standard deviation of 5.9 (Bernet et al., 2015). The inter-item reliability for this study was .96.

Self-deception. The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) was developed to assess self-deception and impression management by participants (Paulhus, 1984, 1988). The BIDR is broken down into two subscales: Self-Deception and Impression Management. For purposes of this study, only the Self-Deception subscale was used. The BIDR Self Deception subscale is a 20-item measure determining exaggeration of positive cognitive attributes. Responses are scored on a 7-point Likert scale (*1= Not True, 4= Somewhat True, 7= Very True*). Sample questions of the BIDR include "My first impressions of people turn out to be right" and "I am fully in control of my own fate" (Paulhus, 1984, p. 40). The BIDR has good internal consistency reliability with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .68 to .80 (Paulhus, 1984), and a mean of 7.5 and a standard deviation of 3.2 for males and a mean of 6.8 and a standard deviation of 3.1 for females (Paulhus, 1984). The Cronbach's alpha for this study was .73.

Procedure

After Institutional Review Board approval, participants were recruited via an email disseminated to all students on a South Central university campus. In addition, the social media website, Facebook, was utilized to recruit additional participants and

increase the diversity of the response pool. Participants were provided an email link directing them to the online survey. The survey was anonymous and responses were stored on a secure, encrypted server housed within the Center for Educational Development and Research (CEDaR) in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Oklahoma. An online survey containing all items from the measures listed above was created via Qualtrics software. The survey link directed potential participants to the Informed Consent document containing information about the purpose of the study. The online survey contained the following measures presented in random order: demographic questionnaire, the Coping Self-Efficacy Scale (CSES; Chesney et al., 2006), the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding-Self Deception (BIDR-SD; Paulhus, 1980), and the Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ; Baker & Chambers, 2011). Upon completion of the survey, participants were taken to the exit page and thanked for their time.

Research Questions

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Are age at the time of divorce and coping self-efficacy significant individual predictors of loyalty conflict?

2. Does coping self-efficacy significantly predict additional variance in loyalty conflict above and beyond age at time of divorce?

3. Are there significant gender differences in reported coping self-efficacy and loyalty conflict?

4. Are there significant differences in coping self-efficacy and loyalty conflict among selected age groups?

Data Analyses

Regression analyses were appropriate for this study because the researcher was interested in determining the combined and individual contributions of two predictor variables (Age at Time of Parents' Divorce, Coping Self-Efficacy) to variance in the criterion variable (BSQ, i.e., Loyalty Conflict).

In order to control for the effects of relevant demographic variables, predictor variables were entered in the following sequence: Block 1—relevant demographic variables; Block 2—Self-Deception; Block 3—Age at Time of Parents' Divorce; Block 4—Coping Self-Efficacy. Additionally, four independent sample t-tests were run to examine potential differences across selected age groups and gender differences on the variables of interest (i.e., Coping Self-Efficacy, Loyalty Conflict).

Chapter 4: Results

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were performed to determine the reliability of measures used in further analyses. Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the relationships among the predictor and criterion variables as well as among various demographic variables. Results showed a significant, negative correlation between Coping Self-Efficacy (as measured by the CSES) and Loyalty Conflict (as measured by the BSQ), $r = -.47$, $n = 240$, $p < .01$, with higher CSES scores related to decreased feelings of conflict loyalty. Pearson correlations between various demographic variables and the predictor and criterion variables showed significant positive

correlations between Level of Education and CSES, $r = .34$, $n = 256$, $p < .01$, indicating that more education was related to greater reported Coping Self-Efficacy. Additionally, results revealed a significant negative correlation between Level of Education and Loyalty Conflict, $r = -.28$, $n = 247$, $p < .01$, with those endorsing more education reporting lower loyalty conflict scores. Current Relationship Status of Parents was significantly negatively correlated with CSES scores, $r = -.29$, $n = 256$, $p < .01$, with participants whose parents were currently divorced endorsing less Coping Self-Efficacy. Current Relationship Status of Parents was significantly positively correlated with scores on the BSQ (Loyalty Conflict), $r = .46$, $n = 247$, $p < .01$, with participants who endorsed that their parents were currently divorced reporting increased levels of conflicted parental loyalty.

In order to test for gender differences in Coping Self-Efficacy (CSES) and Loyalty Conflict (BSQ), an independent-sample t-test was conducted. There was no significant difference in scores for males ($n = 30$) ($M = 208.40$, $SD = 46.15$) and females ($n = 124$) ($M = 206.89$, $SD = 48.51$); $t(254) = .19$, $p > .05$). When comparing BSQ (Loyalty Conflict) scores for males ($n = 30$) and females ($n = 124$), there was no statistically significant difference in scores for males ($M = 34.13$, $SD = 15.51$) compared to females ($M = 37.59$, $SD = 19.48$); $t(80.94) = -1.29$, $p > .05$).

A second independent samples t-test was conducted to examine potential differences in Coping Self-Efficacy (CSES) and Loyalty Conflict (BSQ) based on Age at Time of Divorce. In order to conduct this analysis, participants were divided into two groups (Group 1 = 17 and Under; $n = 127$ and Group 2 = 18 and Over; $n = 23$). Again, results revealed no significant differences in CSES scores (under 18: $M =$

193.75, *SD* = 46.83; 18 and over: *M* = 205.52, *SD* = 51.3); *t* (151) = -1.09, *p* = .28) or

BSQ scores (under 18: *M* = 44.63, *SD* = 18.66; 18 and over: *M* = 39.35, *SD* = 16.88); *t*

(146) = 1.19, *p* = .24) between the two age groups. Due to unequal sample sizes for

gender and age groups, the Welch-Satterthwaite statistic was reported.

Primary Analyses

Preliminary analyses were performed on the data to ensure there were no

violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to examine whether Coping Self-Efficacy

(CSES) predicted Loyalty Conflict (BSQ), above and beyond Age at the Time of

Divorce. The full model was not statistically significant, R^2 = .15, $F(1, 125)$ = 3.16, *p*

= .08 (See Table 3). Level of Education was entered into Step 1 to control for its

influence on the criterion variable and explained 2% of the variance in Loyalty

Conflict (BSQ scores). The Self-Deception subscale of the BIDR was entered at Step

2, explaining an additional 11% of the variance, *R* square change = .11, *F* change

$(1,127)$ = 16.29, *p* < .001. Age at Time of Divorce was entered at Step 3 explaining no

additional variance, *R* square change = .000, *F* change $(1,126)$ = .007, *p* = .93. In the

final step, the entry of CSES scores predicted an additional 2% of the variance in BSQ

scores, *R* square change = .02, *F* change $(1,125)$ = 3.17, *p* = .08

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research attempted to add to the existing literature base in the area of

parental divorce by focusing on the experiences of adult children of divorce. As

previously stated, much of the existing literature is older and centered around the

experiences and outcomes for younger children of divorce. Very little research currently

exists looking specifically at the experiences of adult children of divorce. Thus, the current research attempted to (a) focus on the unique experience of adult children of divorce compared to their child-adolescent counterparts, (b) determine the role coping self-efficacy plays in experiences with loyalty conflict among adults whose parents are divorced, and (c) provide potential guidance for therapy in working with adult children of divorce.

As to whether age at time of divorce and coping self-efficacy would significantly predict loyalty conflict, contrary to expectations, the results indicated that age at the time of divorce and coping self-efficacy were not significant predictors of loyalty conflict. This suggests that, for this sample, the extent of experiences of loyalty conflict were similar across the child-adolescent and young adult groups. In other words, experiences of conflicted parental loyalties may not be more salient for adult children as previously suggested (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006). In addition, this finding does not support previous research (e.g., Irion et al., 1988) suggesting that adult children of divorce may experience less distress related to parental loyalty conflict due to increased coping abilities. Rather, the results simply suggest that the level of distress resulting from reported experiences of conflict loyalty are comparable for both younger and older children of divorce. It is possible that this could be due to the differences in experiences and specific conflicts that are unique to each of the developmental groups: children of divorce and adult children of divorce. Also, the loyalty conflict instrument was not developed to measure the different nuances of conflict loyalty experiences, rather to identify if they exist and to what degree.

Also, contrary to expectations, coping self-efficacy did not add significant additional variance to the model. This finding does not support previous research (e.g., Kwasy & Groh, 2014) suggesting that coping self-efficacy may mediate distress related to experiences with parental loyalty related to parental divorce. While all children of divorce experience conflict loyalty, children versus adult children of divorce experience different types of conflict loyalty, as previously stated. Adult children are more likely to experience difficulties choosing which parent to spend time with and feeling bad about this time allocation while children are told who to spend time with and it is less of a choice for them. Also, children are expected to adapt to the transition between homes, whereas adult children do not experience this aspect of loyalty conflict. Given that this research examined the level of loyalty conflict, it makes some sense that the groups did not differ on reported level of loyalty conflict.

While level of education was entered into the regression to control for possible effects based on the fact that it was significantly correlated with the loyalty conflict measure, it was not found to be a significant predictor of loyalty conflict. This outcome may be due to the homogeneity of the study sample (i.e., primarily college-age students). Similarly, the self-deception scale was included in the regression in order to control for possible response bias among the participants.

As for potential gender differences in experiences of parental loyalty conflict, results revealed no significant differences between males and females. It should be noted, however, that significantly fewer men ($n = 30$) completed this survey than did women ($n = 124$). It is certainly possible that the inequity in gender groups may have compromised the ability to detect a difference between males and females in this study.

Counseling Implications

The finding that coping self-efficacy did not appear to minimize the distress of parental loyalty conflict with this research sample does not mean it cannot still serve as a basis for developing more individually tailored treatment interventions for adult children of divorce who present for therapy. Furthermore, treatment plans that include a component on coping skill and relational skill building could benefit clients of all ages in navigating the transition process inherent in parental divorce. Similar interventions could also be adapted to group and family counseling formats in order to provide cost and time efficient options for clients.

The use of psychoeducational technique may also be beneficial to help normalize the experience for clients and create awareness that they are not alone in their experience. Psychoeducation can also center on providing coping skills relevant to children of divorce. These coping skills could include ways to alleviate stress such as mindfulness and relaxation, cognitive reframing, and emotion regulation. Helping the client process their emotions and thoughts surrounding the divorce of their parents may help them to negate some of their emotions surrounding the divorce, particularly feelings of anger or resentment towards their parents.

Individual counseling or group therapy would be beneficial for adult children of divorce to allow them a safe space in which to explore the feelings and emotions they have surrounding the divorce. Specifically work that is specific to the experience of adults rather than divorce support groups for children that are focused on children alone and don't take their adult counterparts into consideration. The ability to learn and develop more individualized coping skills could be utilized in individual counseling as

well as group therapy. The ability to recognize that there are others who experience the same difficulties surrounding the divorce of their parents can allow for normalization as well as providing support and help from others in terms of how best to cope. Counseling may also be important to address any interpersonal difficulties that may have arisen between child and parents throughout the course of the divorce.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

Obviously, limitations to this study exist. While online surveys and data collection have become the norm in research, this venue does present potential concerns related to the level of control over data collection. Also, as with many studies, demographic diversity was lacking. For example, the majority of participants identified as Caucasian (77.9%) with far less representation in the following categories: Multiracial (4.9%), Hispanic/Latino/Latina (4.5%), Native American (4.5%), African American (3.2%), Other (2.6%), Biracial (1.5%), and Asian American (0.6%). Additionally, more females (80.5%) completed the survey compared to males (19.5%).

Another limitation to the study was the limited sample size, including unequal gender and age group subsamples. With a significantly female and primarily younger representative sample, it may have been difficult to detect possible group differences. As such, it would be beneficial for researchers to prioritize gathering more male and adult children of divorce (18 and older) participants for comparison in order to reexamine whether possible differences may exist between males and females and children-adolescent versus adult children's parental divorce experiences.

This study's recruitment of college students created a limitation as well. While the survey was sent to other groups of older individuals, the majority of the participants

were college students, making it impossible to generalize findings to other age groups. Therefore, future research should make a concerted effort to recruit individuals from a wider age range.

As previously stated in the literature review, there are many different aspects of parental divorce that make the transition difficult for adult children, e.g., vulnerability, changes in parent-child relationships, anger, providing social support to parents, conflict loyalty, etc. (Afifi & McManus, 2010; Cooney et al., 1986). Due to the limited scope of this study, certain aspects of the divorce experience for adult children were not examined. For example, anger experienced toward one or both parents as a result of the decision to divorce and subsequent changes in parent-child relationships is certainly an area worth exploring. Future research should attempt to take this and other aspects into consideration in order to better understand the experience of adult children of divorce. This could be accomplished using qualitative designs that would allow for greater breadth and depth of detail related to the unique experiences of adult children of divorce including, but not limited to, specifics on perceived coping self-efficacy and its relationship to experiences of parental loyalty conflicts. Moreover, qualitative research designs would provide more comprehensive mechanisms for examining the nuanced experiences of children-adolescent versus adult children of divorce and, perhaps, provide additional insight into how develop and utilize therapeutic interventions better tailored to clients' specific needs.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Demographics

		Frequency	Percent
Race/Ethnicity			
	White	120	77.9
	Latino(a)/Hispanic	7	4.5
	African American	5	3.2
	Asian American	1	0.6
	Biracial	3	1.9
	Multiracial	7	4.5
	Other	4	2.6
	Native American	7	4.5
	"No Response"	1	0.6
Total		155	100
Gender			
	Male	30	19.4
	Female	124	80.0
	Other	1	0.6
Total		155	100
Education			
	Some High School	1	0.6
	High School Graduate or Equivalent (GED)	7	4.5
	Some College	47	30.5
	Associate's Degree	14	9.1
	Bachelor's Degree	49	31.8
	Master's Degree	32	20.8
	Professional or Doctoral Degree	4	2.6
Total		154	100
Current Marital Status			
	Single	89	57.8
	Married	56	36.4
	Divorced	9	5.8
Total		154	100
Age At Time of Divorce			
	17 and Under	127	84.7
	18 and Over	23	15.3
Total		150	100
Parents' Marital Status			
	Married	113	41.5
	Divorced	155**	57.0

	Separated	1	.4
	Never Married	3	1.1
Total		272	100

Note.* One individual identified as "Other" and was not included in further analyses.
** Only those participants who endorsed that their parents were divorced were included in the analyses.

Table 2

Intercorrelations Among Variables of Interest

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Education	--	-.30**	.34**	-.28**	.06	.18**
ParentMS		--	-.29**	.48**	-.02	-.09
CSES			--	-.47**	.09	.52**
BSQ				--	-.09	-.34**
ATD					--	.06
BIDR-SD						--

**p < .01 (2-tailed).
* p < .05 (2-tailed).

Note: Education = participant reported highest level of education; ParentMS = Participant reported marital status of parents; CSES = Coping Self-Efficacy Scale; BSQ = Baker Strategies Questionnaire; ATD (Age at Time of Divorce) = participant reported age at the time of parents' divorce; BIDR-SD = Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding-Self-Deception subscale.

Table 3

Summery of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting BSQ Scores

IV	Step	R^2	ΔR^2	F Change	df	B	SE B	ß
Model 1		.02	.02	2.34	(1, 128)			
Education	1					-1.85	1.21	-.13
Model 2		.13	.11	16.29**	(1,127)			
Education	1					-1.15	1.16	-.08
BDIR-SD	2					-.48	.12	-4.04**
Model 3		.13	.000	0.007	(1,126)			
Education	1					-1.15	1.16	-.99
BDIR-SD	2					-.48	.12	-4.02**
ATD	3					-.02	.25	.08
Model 4		.15	.02	3.16	(1, 125)			
Education	1					-.65	1.18	-.55
BDIR-SD	2					-.37	.14	-2.77**
ATD	3					.05	.25	.19
CSES	4					-.07	.04	-1.78

Note: Education = participant reported highest level of education; BIDR-SD = Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding-Self-Deception subscale. CSES = Coping Self-Efficacy Scale; ATD (Age at Time of Divorce) = participant reported age at the time of parents' divorce.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1) What is your gender?

   ___Male

   ___Female

   ___Other

2) What is your age? _____
3) What ethnicity do you consider yourself?
   ____ African American
   ____ Hispanic or Latino/Latina
   ____ Asian American
   ____ Native American or American Indian
   ____ Caucasian
   ____ Biracial
   ____ Multiracial
   ____ Other
4) What is the highest level of education you have completed?

   ___Some High School

   ___High School Graduate or equivalent (i.e. GED)

   ___ Some College

   ___Associate's Degree

   ___ Bachelor's Degree

   ___ Master's Degree

   ___ Professional or Doctoral Degree

5) What is your current marital status?
   ___ Single
   ___ Married
   ___ Separated
   ___ Divorced
   ___ Widowed
6) What is the current relationship status of your parents?

   ___Married

   ___Divorced

___Separated

___Never Married

7) Do you currently live with your parents?

___ Yes

___ No

8) How would you rate the degree of marital conflict between your parents before their divorce (IF APPLICABLE)? If you parents are still married, please choose "Not Applicable".

___0

___1

___2

___3

___4

___5

___ Not Applicable

9) How would you rate the degree of marital conflict between your parents before their divorce (IF APPLICABLE)? If you parents are still married, please choose "Not Applicable".
___0
___1
___2
___3
___4
___5
___Not Applicable
10) How many siblings do you have? _____
11) What is your birth order amongst your siblings?
___ Oldest
___ Middle Child
___ Youngest
12) How old were you when your parents divorced? _____
13) How long have your parents been divorced? _____
14) Were you living with your parents at the time of divorce?

___ Yes

___ No

Appendix C: Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ)

(Baker & Chambers, 2011)

Instructions: Please rate your exposure to the following behaviors that were/are things that one or more of your parents or stepparents might have done while you were growing up based upon the following scale:

0 = Never   1 = Rarely   2 = Sometimes   3 = Often   4 = Always

1) Made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other parent's negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent.

   0   1   2   3   4

2) Limited or interfered with my contact with the other parent such that I spent less time with him or her than I was supposed to or could have.

   0   1   2   3   4

3) Withheld or blocked phone messages, letters, cards, or gifts from the other parent meant for me.

   0   1   2   3   4

4) Made it difficult for me and the other parent to reach and communicate with each other.

   0   1   2   3   4

5) Indicated discomfort or displeasure when I spoke or asked about or had pictures of the other parent.

   0   1   2   3   4

6) Became upset, cold, or detached when I showed affection for or spoke positively about the other parent.

   0   1   2   3   4

7) Said or implied that the other parent did not really love me.

   0   1   2   3   4

8) Created situations in which it was likely or expected that I chose him or her and reject the other parent.

0   1   2   3   4

9) Said things that indicated that the other parents was dangerous or unsafe.

0   1   2   3   4

10) Confided in me about "adult matters" that I probably should not have been told about (such as marital concerns or legal issues) that led me to feel protective of him or her or angry at the other parent.

0   1   2   3   4

11) Created situations in which I felt obligated to show favoritism toward him or her and reject of rebuff/ignore the other parent.

0   1   2   3   4

12) Asked me to spy on or secretly obtain information from or about the other parent and report back to him or her.

0   1   2   3   4

13) Asked me to keep secrets from the other parents about things the other parent should have been informed about.

0   1   2   3   4

14) Referred to other parent by his or her first name and appeared to want me to do the same.

0   1   2   3   4

15) Referred to his or her new spouse as Mom or Dad and appeared to want me to do the same.

0   1   2   3   4

16) Encouraged me to rely on his or her opinion and approval above all else.

0   1   2   3   4

17) Encouraged me to disregard or think less of the other parent's rules, values and authority.

0   1   2   3   4

18) Made it hard for me or made me feel bad about spending time with the other parent's extended family.

0   1   2   3   4

19) Created situations in which it was likely that I would be angry with or hurt by the other parent.

0   1   2   3   4

20) Tried to turn me against the other parent.

0   1   2   3   4

Instructions: For each of the following items, write a number from 0-10, using the above scale.

When things aren't going well for you, how confident are you that you can:

Cannot Do				**Moderately Certain**				**Certain**		
At all				**Can Do**				**Can do**		
0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**

21) Keep from getting down in the dumps.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2) Talk positively to yourself.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3.) Sort out what can be changed, and what cannot be changed.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4.) Get emotional support from friends and family.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5.) Find solutions to your most difficult problems.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6.) Break an upsetting problem down into smaller parts.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7.) Leave options open when things get stressful.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

8.) Make a plan of action and follow it when confronted with a problem.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

9.) Develop new hobbies or recreations.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

10.) Take your mind off unpleasant thoughts.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

11)   Look for something good in a negative situation.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

12)   Keep from feeling sad.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

13.) See things from the other person's point of view during a heated argument.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

14.) Try other solutions to your problems if your first solutions don't work.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

15.) Stop yourself from being upset by unpleasant thoughts.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

16.) Make new friends.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

17.) Get friends to help you with the things you need.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

18.) Do something positive for yourself when you are feeling discouraged.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

19.) Make unpleasant thoughts go away.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

20.) Think about one part of a problem at a time.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

21.) Visualize a pleasant activity or place.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

22.) Keep yourself from feeling lonely.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

23.) Pray or meditate.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

24.) Get emotional support from community organizations or resources.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

25.) Stand your ground and fight for what you want.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

26.) Resist the impulse to act hastily when under pressure.

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

(Paulhaus, 1984, 1988)

Instructions: Please answer the following questions on a scale of 1 (Not True) to 7 (Very True).

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

1) My first impressions of people usually turn out to be right.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2) It would be hard for me to break any of my bad habits.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3) I don't care to know what other people really think of me.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4) I have not always been honest with myself.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5) I always know why I like things.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

6) When my emotions are aroused, it biases my thinking.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

7) Once I've made up my mind other people can seldom change my opinion.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

8) I am not a safe driver when I exceed the speed limit.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

9) I am fully in control of my own fate.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

10) It's hard for me to shut off a disturbing thought.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

11) I never regret my decisions.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

12) I sometimes lose out on things because I can't make up my mind soon enough.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

13) The reason I vote is because my vote can make a difference.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

14) My parents were not always fair when they punished me.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

15) I am a completely rational person.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

16) I rarely appreciate criticism.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

17) I am very confident of my judgments.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

18) I have sometimes doubted my ability as a lover.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

19) It's all right with me if some people happen to dislike me.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

20) I don't always know the reasons why I do the things I do.

                1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Appendix F: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

OU The UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: May 18, 2016   **IRB#:** 6837

Principal   **Approval Date:** 05/17/2016
Investigator: Lauren Elizabeth Balkenbush, Doctoral

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: The Impact of Age at the Time of Divorce and Coping Self-Efficacy on Conflict Loyalty Among Adult Children of Divorce

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:
·× Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
·× Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
·× Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
·× Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board