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The Presentation of Childhood Parental Divorce in Adulthood: A Retrospective Phenomenological Study

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THE PRESENTATION OF CHILDHOOD PARENTAL DIVORCE IN ADULTHOOD:

A RETROSPECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

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Bachelor of Arts in Psychology
University of Arizona
2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

THE PRESENTATION OF CHILDHOOD PARENTAL DIVORCE IN ADULTHOOD:

A RETROSPECTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

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Dr. Stephen Fife, Examination Committee Chair
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

There has been a wealth of research aimed at developing an understanding of the way in which the experience of divorce impacts children. However, adult children of divorce have been widely underrepresented in this literature, much of which is outdated being at least ten years old. With shifting societal attitudes and the transformation of the family system since the 1990's it is crucial that the research is updated in order to stay up on the way children and families are impacted in today's society. The purpose of this study was to hear directly from adults who experienced their parents' divorce in childhood in order to gain a deeper understanding of their experience and what the resulting impacts have been on their adult lives. Participants identified communication and support as the biggest factors contributing both positively and negatively to their adjustment. Their views of their parents, divorce, and relationships were directly tied to their perceptions of their experience with divorce and how well their parents were able to navigate it.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Although some adults and children may benefit from divorce, the ending of a marriage has the potential to be a traumatic event for every member of the family (Brown, 1982). For example, researchers have concluded that children of divorce tend to have increased instances of psychological disorders, impairments in social and relational functioning, and negative self-concepts (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal study from 1970-1995 provided groundbreaking insight into the experience of children of divorce long after the divorce process was finalized. With her longitudinal approach, Wallerstein was able to look at the impact of divorce on children when they were younger as well as when they transitioned into adulthood.

Divorce in our society has changed since the 1970's. In previous years, divorced individuals have been scrutinized, divorced families have been seen as broken, and children of divorce have been viewed as troubled. Societal attitudes have shifted leaving divorce as a more acceptable option than in in the past with less need to consider the stigma applied to divorce (Hiller & Recoules, 2013). Overall, the experience of divorce has shifted greatly, and with this shift has come a new experience for children of divorce, especially as they progress into adulthood.

Divorce became a focal point for many researchers in the 1990's, which resulted in implications for treatment and support. As the rate of divorce peaked, so did interest into how individuals, couples, and children would be impacted by the decision to divorce. After Wallerstein's study, many believed that they had gained a full understanding of the experience of divorce and the impact it can have on children. In the time that has passed

since her study, researchers have continued inquiry seeking either to confirm or challenge Wallerstein's grim findings. Throughout all of this research, the lasting impact of divorce on children as they progress into adulthood has been largely underrepresented. Adulthood presents new and different challenges for individuals to navigate than childhood. Understanding the experiences of adult children of divorce is equally as important as it is to understand their experiences as children. Insight into the experience of adult children of divorce is necessary to increase our understanding of the overall consequences of divorce as well as to better understand what helps and what hinders in terms of adjusting to parental divorce.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the experience of adult children of divorce in today's society and to better understand how the experience of parental divorce presents in adults as they seek to navigate adulthood and all of its unique challenges. Questions in this study focused particularly on areas of self-concept, social development, and adult relationships. Past inquiry has led researchers to assert that parental divorce continues to affect some children into adulthood (Amato 1996; Campbell 1995; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hoffman & Ledford, 1996; Wallerstein 1991, Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2001). For example, many adult children of divorce express reservation or fear about getting married because they do not want to risk a painful divorce (Cartwright, 2008), and adult children of divorce experience a higher likelihood of getting divorced themselves (Amato, 1996). It seems that the importance of understanding adult children of divorce has been undervalued and underrepresented in the research. It is possible that as these individuals grow and navigate adult challenges,

they present in the therapeutic setting to address individual and relational functioning without ever considering the role that their parents' divorce may play in their lives. Conversely, it is possible that as children of divorce grow into adults the resiliency inherent in childhood helps them to adjust to parental divorce with little to no consequences.

Significance of the Problem

Existing research provides relatively little insight into these and other issues related to the experience of adult children of divorce. Therefore, this study used a qualitative approach in order to develop a deeper and richer understanding as to what is the experience of adult children of divorce. By using qualitative inquiry, researchers in this study sought to allow adult children of divorce to have their voice heard and to define their experience in their own words. This study was focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of adult children of divorce in order to better understand that experience. Does the impact of parental divorce continue into adulthood, and if so what challenges does this present for adults as they seek to navigate the adult world? What helps children of divorce adjust to their experience? What hinders adjustment and development following parental divorce? In the past, researchers have relied on parents and teachers to describe the experience of children using observational surveys to quantify symptoms and experiences. This study provides first-hand accounts of how adult children of divorce experience their stories. By gaining a better understanding of how the impact of parental divorce lasts into adulthood, therapists may be able to provide insight and understanding and to assist in the process of healing and adjustment.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Prevalence of Divorce

For many years researchers have been collecting data on the trends that exist in marriage and divorce across the United States, including rates of marriages that end in divorce, the number of children and families that have been impacted by divorce, and trends in cohabitation. Many researchers have concluded that divorce rates peaked in 1979 and have been on a slow decline since then. They note, however, that despite this decline the divorce rate remains very high. (Harvey & Fine, 2004). According to the Center for Disease Control's *National Health Statistics Report* of 2012, the crude rate of marriage was 6.8 per every 1,000 and the crude rate of divorce was 3.8 per every 1,000 persons (CDC, 2012). However, this number includes children who are not eligible for marriage and adults who are not married. After adjusting for these factors it is estimated that nearly half of first marriages end in divorce (CDC, 2012). From 1989-1999 approximately one million children every year experienced parental divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). The addition of no fault divorces in almost all states has lessened the amount of steps necessary in obtaining a divorce. The process of divorce has changed significantly allowing couples to divorce with greater ease than in the past (Kot & Shoemaker, 1999).   National health statistics report that by 2010 men and women were marrying at older ages than in the past and that the number of women cohabitating prior to marriage has risen from 3% in 1982 to 11% in 2006 (CDC, 2012). As a generation of children of divorce are reaching adulthood, it seems that adults are thinking longer about the decision to marry.

As previously noted, statistics measuring divorce rates in the United States have been largely accepted to show that a slow decline in divorce has occurred following a peak in the late 1970's. This perceived decline of divorce has caused some to believe that further inquiry into the impacts of divorce are not as pressing as they were when Judith Wallerstein completed her work. Kennedy and Ruggles (2014), recently re-examined the current statistics surrounding divorce trends in the United States found trends that challenge the widely accepted idea of declining divorce rates. In their report, Kennedy and Ruggles noted that decreased funding for inquiry into divorce statistics may have caused a decline in the reliability of the Vital Statistics Report and the Census Bureau Statistics, which are primary sources for many of the statistics used to report divorce rates. They also criticize both reports for not taking into account shifts in the composition of married populations to further investigate marriage and divorce trends across age groups. Focusing their attention on assessing trends across age groups, they report that in some cohorts divorce rates have sharply *increased* from 1990-2008. They highlighted specifically that the divorce rate has doubled since 2008 for the over 35 population. Also worth noting, Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) found that in 2008, over 40% of the under 30 population had never married; four times the amount calculated in 1980. These findings indicate that divorce continues to be a common experience in the United States and furthermore that younger generations are waiting longer to marry, possibly because they are further considering the potential for divorce and its lasting impact. These trends indicate a need for continued inquiry into the phenomena of marriage and divorce to account for shifts in societal trends that have occurred since Judith Wallerstein concluded her work.

Effects of Divorce on Children

Researchers have been studying the impact of divorce on children widely since the 1970's, relying heavily on reports from parents and teachers to assess the functioning and adjustment of children (Menard, 1998). Researchers indicate that divorce presents a multitude of psychological challenges for children throughout the various stages of development (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Many studies have been conducted that have found children of divorce are more likely to suffer psychological consequences and have impacted relationships following parental divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997; Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Aquilino, 1997; Cartwright, 2008; Kot & Shoemaker, 1999; Wallerstein, 1991; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2001). In an updated meta-analysis of research into children of divorce, Amato (2001) found that children of divorced parents continually score lower than children of intact families on measures of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social relationships, and parental relationships. Researchers have found that children from divorced families have more anxious, sad, angry, and lonely feelings than the children in the comparison group, and that some children were very concerned with their parents' grief and sorrow (Storkensen, Arstad-Thorsen, Overland, & Brown, 2012). Studies found that parental divorce has long lasting impact on children's attitudes and behavior about sex supporting the notion that the impacts of divorce may be longer lasting than the 2-3 year adjustment period that has been hypothesized in the past (Jeynes, 2001).

Children of divorce have been found to have impaired relationships with their parents both immediately following the divorce and long into the future (Hoffman & Ledford, 1996). Children of divorce routinely experience a disruption in their

relationships as a result of the divorce and, at times, experience a devastating loss of the relationship with one parent entirely (Harvey & Fine, 2004). Disruption in relationship with primary caregivers has been found to negatively impact behavioral adjustment and development of social relationships throughout adolescence (Hoffman & Ledford, 1996). Children of divorce have been found to report more worries about family, and more distressed or angry feelings than did the children with no divorce experience (Storkensen, Arstad-Thorsen, Overland, & Brown, 2012).

Parents going through a divorce also experience consequences that play out in the lives of their children. Experiencing a divorce has been found to cause significant psychological distress that has the potential to negatively impact the ability to parent children (Wang & Amato, 2000). Hindered parenting to children of divorce can impact the parent child relationship, it can also decrease effectiveness of parenting. Researchers have also found that parental divorce impacts the attachment styles and ability of children (Wallerstein, 1991). Divorce can trigger loss of one parent, and limited availability of the other parent. Researchers in Germany studied the attachment styles of six year old children from both one and two parent families. They found that children in one parent families exhibited more insecure and avoidant attachment styles (Gloger-Tippelt & Konig, 2007). Divorce challenges the notion of secure attachment and supports insecure attachments as children experience a significant loss of their relationship with one or both parents.

For many years, studies have been conducted that indicate marked differences in psychosocial adjustment between children of divorce and children of intact families (Twaite, Silitsky, & Luchow, 1999). Researchers have found that high familial conflict in

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early experiences negatively impacts the quality and quantity of friendship networks later in life (Jones, 2012).

In investigating attitudes towards divorce, Mulder and Gunnoe (1999) found that children of divorced parents report a higher likelihood of getting divorced themselves than children of intact families due to more accepting attitudes of divorce. Children of divorce have been found to be twice as likely as those from intact marriages to experience divorce of their own in adulthood (Amato & Deboer, 2001). Adolescent children of divorce have reported that their experience with parental divorce has caused them to have more hesitancy about entering into romantic relationships, less confidence in their ability to maintain a long term relationship, lack of trust in intimate partners, and emotional and behavioral consequences that have damaged intimate relationships (Cartwright, 2008). In this same qualitative study, some participants blamed their parents for not providing a positive model for navigating romantic relationships, and many reported feeling that any romantic relationships they engaged in would ultimately end at some point (Cartwright, 2008). Cartwright reported that many participants seemed to exhibit fear of experiencing divorce themselves, this fear was often a deterrent to entering into a committed relationship. Children of divorce often report negative attitudes about marriage as a result of their experience with parental divorce including beliefs that families do not stay together and that all marriages will eventually end in divorce (South, 2013).

Public perceptions impact individuals as well; researchers have found that people tend to perceive married individuals as more successful, more stable, and more favorable than non-married or divorced individuals (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981). One study found

that trainees in a master's level therapy program more frequently recall negative characteristics about divorced mothers compared to married mothers (Schultz & Leslie, 2004). Amato (1991) found that the public tends to hold negative stereotypes about children from divorced families. Children of divorce often report negative attitudes about divorce, particularly, that they do not want their children to go through the same experience as they endured with their parent's divorce (Smith, 2013). Conversely, some children of divorce report accepting attitudes towards divorce (Smith, 2013). Researchers have attributed these views of divorce as a viable option to the increased likelihood for children of divorce to experience their own divorce later in life (Amato & Deboer, 2001). Amato and Deboer (2001) hypothesize that children of divorce hold weaker commitments to the idea of marriage being a lifelong arrangement than those from intact families as contributing factors to attitudes about divorce being acceptable.

Wallerstein's Findings

In the early 1970's, when divorce rates were increasing significantly, Judith Wallerstein began an inquiry into the experience of 131 children whose parents had recently divorced. Over the next 25 years, she continually revisited with these children and their families in order to gain a better understanding of the social and psychological impacts of parental divorce on children (Wallerstein, 1991; Wallerstein, Lewis, Blakeslee, 2001; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). In reflecting on her findings, she noted that one of the things that surprised her most was that the impacts of parental divorce were not short lived but instead presented unique challenges for children that lasted over the course of their lives. Initially, Wallerstein and her colleagues noticed that children exhibited fear and confusion about their parents' divorce. Many children had experienced

the divorce as an abrupt and unexpected change that they had difficulty understanding. From this experience, Wallerstein found that children developed an understanding that personal and intimate relationships, including family relationships, are unreliable and cannot be trusted to withstand the test of time. Additionally, Wallerstein found that less than 10% of the children in the study had parents who established long lasting second marriages following the initial divorce. Many children struggled with feelings of insecurity and being unwelcome in their parents' relationships post-divorce. Themes presented in interviews with participants included feelings of loneliness, anger, and fear of abandonment by their parents in the early years following divorce.

As adolescents, Wallerstein found that children of divorce acted out behaviorally more often than those from intact families. It was also noted in this study that adolescents from divorced parents often engaged in sexual activity at a younger age and with more partners on average than those from non-divorced parents. Some adolescents reported increased use of drugs and alcohol during their teenage years, and at times they attributed their sexual activity to their substance use. As it came time for children in the study to graduate high school, it was found that none of the children of divorce participating in the study were invited by both parents to discuss college plans and only 30% of the participants from divorced parents received full or consistent partial support from their parents throughout college. Wallerstein noted that this fact contributed to the finding that only 57% of the children of divorce in her study achieved their bachelor's degree, compared to 90% of the comparison group from intact families.

Wallerstein and her colleagues met with study participants regularly over the course of the 25 years that the study spanned. She found that parental divorce continued

to be a theme in the lives of children as they progressed from early childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood. Many children of divorce related to her later in life feelings of loss surrounding their childhood and lost opportunities to be a kid; with some even making statements like, "The day my parents divorced was the day my childhood ended." She found that memories of their parent's divorce often came up for children as they attempted to navigate social and romantic relationships later in life; reporting things like hopes that they would never have to experience the same things with their partners that they witnessed from their parents. Wallerstein found that close to 60% of the participants in her study reported no interest in having children. Many participants reported that their parent's divorce played a role in their decision making processes about whether or not to have children and how to parent them due to the consideration that they would never want a child of theirs to have the same experience that they did. While interviewing children of divorce in their adulthood, she noticed that they continued to identify their parent's divorce as a key theme in their adult lives. They calculated that 60% of the women in the study and 40% of the men had been able to establish what they believed to be stable and satisfying relationships. Even still, many reported continuing feelings of loneliness and fear of commitment. Many of the participants noted that they continued to feel negative attitudes towards marriage for fear of eventual divorce. At the completion of their 25 year landmark study, Wallerstein and her colleagues summed up what she identified as the central finding of their work by saying, "Parental divorce impacts detrimentally the capacity to love and be loved within a lasting, committed relationship" (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004).

Though there has been some research into the experience of adult children of divorce, the majority of studies, like Wallerstein's, are at least ten years old or have been criticized for fundamental methodological flaws (Cartwright, 2008). Families were referred to participate in the study by California divorce court judges. In 90% of the cases it was the first divorce for the parents and families consisted of a relatively homogeneous, white middle-class sample (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). In an attempt to ensure that she was studying the impact of divorce and not other phenomena, Wallerstein's study screened children to ensure that no participants had been referred to a mental health professional for emotional or behavioral problems (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Wallerstein herself explained that the reasoning for studying this limited group was in order to study divorce under the best circumstances (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). However, researchers have since pointed out that 50% of the fathers in her study were described as "moderately troubled" and had previously sought mental health services (Cherlin, 1999). Some have claimed that because of her methodology, Wallerstein's findings lack generalizability to the public, and that because the study offered counseling as compensation for participation, those experiencing distress or difficulties may be overrepresented in the sample (Amato, 2003). In his review of the divergent perspectives of social scientists investigating divorce, Cherlin (1999) encourages researchers to use caution and to view the impact on children of divorce from a less extreme standpoint than Wallerstein's grim findings indicate, citing the implications that such findings have on a societal level include changes in mediation and custody evaluation processes.

Rationale for Further Research

Despite receiving criticisms, Wallerstein's study paved the way for researchers to dive deeper into understanding the experience of children of divorce (Cherlin, 1999). As societal practices and attitudes grow and change, many of the previous findings in divorce research have become outdated. Changes in divorce law, including but not limited to the introduction of no fault divorces and more accepting societal attitudes towards divorce have presented new challenges for couples, families, and children to navigate following the decision to divorce. Therefore, it is crucial that researchers continue to investigate family members' experiences of divorce. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the impact of divorce in contemporary society will help therapists be better prepared to provide relief and to assist in the healing process as they work with individuals, couples, and families who have been touched by divorce.

Researchers have dedicated much time and effort to studying the effects of parental divorce on children, however, there are many areas that remain underexplored. If children of divorce experience disruptions or difficulties in relational functioning, it is possible that these difficulties continue into adulthood. With the addition of cohabitation, marriage, and children, relationships seem to get more complicated as individuals navigate adulthood; it seems there is more to learn about how these children of divorce are faring in managing these new challenges. Berman (1991) suggests that children of divorce experience a shattering of "the myth of happily ever after" (p. 19) in that they are presented with a bleak outlook for relationships in the future. Does the model that children of divorce are presented with impact their ability to participate in relationships in the future?

Though children of divorce have been largely studied in the past, inquiry into the experiences of these children as they navigate the new and different challenges of adulthood is lacking. Judith Wallerstein's 25 year longitudinal study was revolutionary in that it followed up with these children into adulthood. However, as previously discussed, this research has been criticized for a number of reasons. Whether or not these criticisms hold weight is not nearly as compelling as the fact that Wallerstein's study began with children whose parents divorced in the 1970's (nearly 40 years ago), and the research was completed and published over a decade ago. Given societal shifts in the prevalence and attitudes about divorce (Hiller & Recoules, 2013), the experience of individuals whose parents divorced in the past two decades may be different than those studied by researchers in previous decades. In order to continue to increase our knowledge about children of divorce and the experience they live as they progress into and through adulthood, it is necessary to continue updating our inquiries so that conceptualizations and theories regarding the impact of divorce may evolve with the changing experiences and meanings of the individuals whose parents divorced before their children reached adulthood.

Purpose of the Study

Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2001) present a compelling argument for the lasting impacts of parental divorce. Some feel that Wallerstein catastrophized her findings in order for her results to be heard (Cherlin, 1999). Some have challenged Wallerstein's findings and cite the inherent resiliency of children in order to assert that children of divorce tend to have a much brighter outlook than previously described (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Researchers have found that adults are presented with

many different challenges than children including developing their identity and self-concept and changes in the structure and expectations of romantic relationships. The purpose of this study was to understand how children of divorce navigate these challenges and the role that parental divorce plays in adulthood. This study also seeks to give adult children of divorce a voice and to counteract the silence that has been imposed on them by previous research that relied heavily on the reports of parents and teachers to define children's adjustment and overall experience. This study seeks to illuminate the experience of adult children of divorce by using the words of those who live it.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The motivation for this study comes from a desire for better understanding into the experience of those who have lived through parental divorce. It can be seen from the research that there exists diversity in the experience of children of divorce. The richness of diverse experience can be tapped through the use of qualitative methods. Qualitative methods are used to study phenomena in terms of the meaning that people make of them (Jones, 1995). Wallerstein's research demonstrates the appropriateness of qualitative methods when studying the experience of divorce. In particular, Wallerstein (2001) highlighted the benefits of face to face interviews, "Where the interviewer is free to follow unanticipated topics that arise in natural conversation, lead us to the human experience behind the statistic." (p. xxxvii)

As the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of adult children of divorce, qualitative inquiry using a phenomenological approach was used. Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experience of research participants in order to delve deeper into the understanding of the subject of the study (Moustakas, 1994; Heidegger, 1994). The phenomenological approach involves a way of being grounded in a few core assumptions. First, an individual's perception of an event is most important, and second, the only way to truly understand another's experience is to study it as closely to the source as possible (Knaack, 1984). This study utilized semi-structured interviewing with open ended questions in order to facilitate open and honest discussion of the participants' experiences. This study was being approached with an attitude of not knowing; as such, researchers intended to set aside any preconceived notions of adult children of divorce and their experience.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is considered the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). As such, it is important to include information about the experience, training, perspective, and biases that I bring to the study. I am a third year master's student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. I am completing this study as a portion of the requirements for completion of my degree. I have a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Arizona. I have been working with children, couples, and families for the past five years; first as a volunteer support group leader, then a behavioral health case manager, and now a student therapist intern.

I have personal attachments to the subject of divorce and the impact of divorce on children. My parents are divorced; their divorce was one of the single most influential experiences of my twenty five years of living, and their story remains to this day the worst story of divorce that I have ever encountered. Their divorce consumed my world from the time that they filed when I was two years old until the time their last court case ended when I turned eighteen. Though I have almost no memory of my parents being together, I have been starkly aware of the conflict that exists between them for my entire life. I only have one memory of the two of them together in the same place when that place wasn't a court room, a conference room, a lawyer's office, or in the presence of the police. My siblings and I all found ourselves exactly in the middle of their divorce. As of today, I have been estranged from my biological mother for the past eight years, something I attribute to be one of the many negative outcomes of the bitterness with which my parents divorced.

I recognize the potential for my experience to influence my analysis and interpretation of the data in this study; however, because of my experience, I feel a sincere dedication to be true and honest to the participants' words and the subsequent findings that arise from this study. In order to avoid any potential impacts that my experiences may have on this study, it has been important for me to review research from all perspectives including those discussing the resiliency of children following parental divorce. It has also been crucial that I develop a better understanding of phenomenological research and that I have continually monitored myself to ensure that I continue to view this study from a place of not knowing. Additionally, the study has been designed in collaboration with a research team consisting of Dr. Stephen Fife (faculty advisor), Katie Matthews, and Morgan Underwood (with additional input from my thesis committee members). Furthermore, the analysis has been conducted collaboratively by the research team. The utilization of a research team has helped to provide some checks and balances to the research and analysis process, thus reducing the likelihood of narrow interpretation of the data.

Participants

A target of 8-12 participants was set for this study. A total of 14 potential participants reached out to express interest in the study, however, after four months only 10 participants completed the interview and demographic questionnaire and only 9 of those 10 completed the semi-structured interview. The participants consisted of 8 individuals who identified as female and 1 participant who identified as male with an average age of 28.1. The average age at the time they started dating was 15.22 with an average of 3.5 committed relationships in their lifetime. All of the participants indicated

that they typically have been the one to initiate the ending of their relationships. At the time of the divorce the average age of the participants was 11. Six participants reported that they lived with their mother following the divorce, with varying arrangements visiting father. Two reported a relatively even split of time with mother and father. One reported there was no custody arrangement and that visitation with each parent was flexible. 56% reported that they did receive therapy to address the divorce while 44% did not receive therapy to address divorce. Researchers did not identify common themes in what was reported to have been helpful or not helpful about the therapy received (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Demographic Information

Number	Gender	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Age at divorce	Therapy for divorce
1002	Female	33	White/ Hispanic	2	No
1003	Female	31	White	12	Yes
1004	Female	34	White/Non Hispanic	12	Yes
1005	Female	25	Caucasian/ Middle Eastern	14	Yes
1006	Female	29	White	6	Yes
1007	Female	25	White	15	No
1008	Female	27	Caucasian	19	Yes
1009	Female	25	Caucasian	15	No
1010	Male	24	Asian/Korean	4	No

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling. All participants in the study were recruited through advertisements on social media using a standardized script (see Appendix B) and flyers (see Appendix D) posted in the Center for Individual, Couple, and Family Counseling at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

In order to be eligible to complete the study, all participants were over the age of 18 at the time of the interview and had experienced parental divorce at least two years prior to the start of the study. There were no limitations on age, gender, race, ethnicity, or age at time of divorce.

Procedures

After contacting the researcher to express interest, all participants were provided with electronic copies of the Participant Recruitment Letter (see Appendix C), Approved Informed Consent, and a link to the online demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A). All participants were informed that the interview would take approximately 45-90 minutes either via telephone or at the location of the participants' choosing. At the time of scheduling, participants were assigned a participant number and their email addresses were collected by the researcher. Participants were then emailed the demographic survey questionnaire through Qualtrics which they were asked to complete prior to the time of their scheduled interview.

This study was developed with the assumption that the participants are the experts in defining their lived experience. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gather information about the beliefs and practices of the individual, while tapping into their expert knowledge of the topic (Haller & Bradley, 2009). Questions were descriptive in order to allow the participants to give thorough narratives of their experience.

At the time of the interview, the researcher reviewed the Approved Informed Consent and obtained verbal consent from all participants. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher, removing all names and identifying information and replacing them with their assigned participant number. The interview followed the Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (see Appendix A), and probing questions were asked as deemed appropriate by the researcher to further explore themes that were presented during the course of the interview. At the conclusion of the interview, each participant was offered community counseling referrals to address any distress or discomfort associated with participation in the study; all participants declined. Participants were informed that they would be able to request a copy of the finished written results if desired by contacting the researcher.

Analysis

The research team for this study consisted of the faculty member and committee chair, the author, and two graduate research assistants. Team members were educated on qualitative methods and trained in coding and analysis of qualitative methods by the faculty member. Interviews were audio recorded; following the completion of the interview, the recordings were transcribed by the author.

Analysis of the data for this study followed the phenomenological approach developed by Colaizzi and described by Knaack (1984). The goal of phenomenological research is to interpret the data with faithfulness to the phenomenon being studied (Knaack, 1984). Phenomenological research involves taking a stance of not knowing. In order to achieve this, researchers were required to set aside any assumptions they had about the themes or findings that would arise from the study (Allen, 2012). Epoche is a

Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment and to abstain from or stay away from the everyday way of perceiving things (Moustakas, 1994). In order to analyze the data, researchers will abandon any preconceived perceptions of the phenomenon in order to approach the data from a place of not knowing, to be able to fully focus on the experience described by the participants.

Coding of the interview transcripts was done by the research team consisting of myself, my committee chair Dr. Stephen Fife, and two graduate student research assistants, Katie Matthews and Morgan Underwood. Each team member read through the entire interview transcript independently in order to gain an understanding of the interview as a whole. Next, the transcripts were reread and coded using a process of open coding and comparative analysis to identify significant statements that pertain directly to the experience of children of divorce (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These methods allowed the team to constantly compare themes that emerged with the data in order to identify the most prominent themes present. Following the initial reading and coding of the transcripts, team members met and consulted with each other regarding the coding in order to agree upon the prominent themes identified in the interviews. The research team met multiple times to first discuss these themes in order to conceptualize and identify repeating themes. The previous steps were repeated by each coder in order to formulate clusters from the significant statements that arose from the data. The research team met throughout the coding process with a goal of coming to a consensus regarding the primary themes developed from the data. From these themes the researchers were able to identify structural descriptions that utilized the participants' own words to describe the phenomenon being studied. Axial coding was used to identify relationships between the

prominent themes identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, each member of the research team was asked to formulate a narrative discussing their own interpretation of the data. The team met and discussed each member's interpretation in order to gain a consensus about the results. The team discussed the ways in which the themes related to one another, eventually arriving at a coherent organization of the results that demonstrated prominent key themes and the way in which they are related to one another.

In order to enhance rigor in this study, the team made specific adjustments to the research process in order to establish trustworthiness through transferability, credibility, and dependability (Koch, 199). The criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) for enhancing credibility, transferability, and dependability within qualitative methods in order to establish trustworthiness were considered in the analysis process of this study.

Methods aimed at increasing transferability focused on the way in which participants were recruited for this study as well as the way the data has been presented. Purposive sampling was used in an attempt to recruit participants from varying contexts so as to increase the likelihood that findings would be able to be generalized. In the presentation of the data, thick descriptions of the results were used. Presentation of the data was heavily inclusive of direct quotes from participants to allow readers to be able to read and make their own inferences about the findings. Discussion of the prominent themes identified by the research team were presented using the participant's words exactly to further support the conclusions that were drawn. Questions in the interview were developed using past literature in order to identify areas of exploration, which also helps to increase the likelihood of transferability.

Efforts to increase credibility included openness of the researcher both in the interview setting and in this paper about the experience within this field, personal experiences, and potential biases. The researcher kept a journal of reflections throughout the process in order to increase self-awareness throughout the interviewing and analysis. In the future, if this paper should move towards publication, the researchers have discussed engaging in member checks if possible in order to allow participants to give their responses to the data collected and to communicate whether they felt their experiences were accurately represented.

In order to establish dependability, the research team engaged in independent coding and interpretation of the data and then met frequently to discuss the findings. All themes and the relationships between them that were identified were decided through mutual efforts of the researchers present. The primary researcher conducted six interviews and then paused the recruitment process in order to allow the team to begin analysis and to discuss whether the interview was achieving the desired focus. The final three interviews were informed by the analysis and preliminary findings of the research team, further increasing dependability of the data.

In spite of these efforts in the data collection and analysis processes, there were limitations to the study that may have impacted the ability to establish rigor. The homogeneity of the sample, the age at time of divorce, and the convenience of the sample may have negatively impacted the ability to generalize the findings. Further research should be conducted aimed at gathering a more diverse sample so as to increase transferability. Credibility in future studies could be increased by completing member

checks in order to gain support for the findings from the participants themselves and to correct any errors present in the interpretation of the data.

Researcher's Reflections

Part of my interest in studying the experience of adult children of divorce relates to my own experiences growing up. My early childhood was very confusing. I do not remember ever getting an accurate understanding of what was going on in my family. I do remember feeling that there was a distinction between my family and the other families in the neighborhood and feeling that everyone was aware of the difference, a difference I did not understand. I remember this having an impact on what children in the neighborhood were allowed to be my friends, and that the ones who did rarely wanted to spend time at my house. I am not sure how, but I remember being aware that others summarized me as being a child from a broken home, even though I was not entirely sure what that meant, I knew it was not good. And I remember feeling that the adults in my life, particularly in my community and at school, were aware of the atomic level of conflict that existed between my parents; this became clear the first time I heard that the principal of my elementary school had participated in one of the court hearings.

It was not until transcribing the interviews that it hit me that I was studying a phenomenon that I had experienced. I had somehow found a way to remove myself entirely from identifying that my parents' divorce may have had an impact on my life now. I have worked with children of divorce and changing families for the past five years. In that work I have focused on trying to help others, recognizing that I had experienced divorce but not recognizing that it had any impact on me in a similar way. When we started the analysis process I had a strange feeling of déjà vu reading through

the transcripts. I started to wonder why so much of what I was reading sounded so familiar. That is when it hit me. I had lived these very same things.

As I have gotten older and particularly since becoming a therapist, I have realized that the models that I got from my parents have impacted my career choices, my understanding of myself, my expectations of relationships, my approach to interpersonal interactions, my ability to navigate through and communicate about conflict, and the role I play within my family. Reading through the experiences of the nine participants in this study reminded me of how little room there was for my experience in my parents' divorce. Everything in my early experiences revolved around the fight between my parents. Navigating holidays, birthdays, pets, hobbies, haircuts, dental visits, school supplies, healthcare, basic needs, school plays, extracurricular activities, visitation, child support, you name it; these are all of the things that had the potential to revolve around the fact that my parents could not stand each other, could not carry out a productive conversation with one another to save their lives, and absolutely could not work together collaboratively to come to any sort of mutual decision about anything. There was no continuity in the expectations, rules of the house, or family roles between my mother's home and my father's home. My mother spoke freely and fiercely about her hatred for my dad, and often made it clear that she resented my siblings and me, simply for being his children.

While transcribing I found myself relating to the experiences of the adult children of divorce that I interviewed. It became clear that there exists a commonality in the experience of children of divorce and though my experience is extreme it is not unique. The themes of confusion stemming from the blurred lines between my parents experience

as the adults embroiled in relational conflict and my experience as the child made it difficult for me to grasp what and why was happening almost at all times during my childhood. My parents, like many, found themselves unavailable to adequately assist their children in navigating post-divorce life in a healthy, positive, and productive way. They were unable to model how to successfully end a relationship, their experience did not provide me with an example of how to handle conflict in a respectful or productive manner. One thing that they did succeed in, as did many of the parents of the nine participants in this study, was to give me a front row seat to an experience that I would do anything and everything in my power to avoid repeating. What I believe I can take from my experiences, including the experience of completing this study, is that it is not divorce that is detrimental to children as we have learned in the past, but rather, the way in which we as a society divorce one another and the tendency to divorce ourselves from the responsibility to assist the children involved in navigating and first and foremost understanding the change process that is inherent in divorce.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Participants in this study were asked to paint a picture of their experience of their parents' divorce at the time and to discuss the impacts that those experiences have had on their lives as adults. From the interviews there emerged commonalities in the experiences of adult children of divorce. Three common themes of participants' *experience* were identified which the research team labeled communication, support, and perception. Participants recalled their unique stories, each of which described varying degrees on a continuum of experience. They were then asked to identify the way that those experiences impacted them in adulthood; three areas of *impact* emerged, with each type impact having varying degrees depending upon the experience. The results can be summed up as follows:

Experience

- Communication
    - Open communication is helpful
    - Closed communication is hurtful
- Support
    - Parents who communicate openly help children to feel more supported
    - Consistency in support from family is needed
    - Children find support in those who have had similar experiences
        - Siblings
        - Friends whose parents are divorced or divorcing
- Perception

- o Children's experiences in the previous categories help them develop

   perceptions of:

     - ▪ Their parents

     - ▪ Divorce

Impact

- • Self-Concept

- • Views

- • Relationships

<div align="center">**Experience**</div>

Throughout all of the interviews, communication emerged as a significant theme with experiences ranging from very open communication which was identified as helpful and more closed or avoidant communication which was hurtful. Participants who experienced open communication about the topic of divorce with their parents identified this as being helpful in their ability to develop an understanding of what was taking place, to develop an idea of what to expect, and most reported that this was helpful in achieving some level of acceptance of the divorce and the resulting changes. Participant 1007 explained:

> "My mom was really helpful with it because she was really open about it, she didn't hide anything, it wasn't supposed to be a secret. She's always been very open with everything about it and anything really in general. That openness really helps like do you have any questions, do you, you know, do you want to know maybe how I would handle it that might help you, so, I would say close friends and my mom especially."

Participant 1002 expressed similar sentiments:

"I would say, my mother was very helpful. And my dad was very helpful. They both were, they've always been very open about the divorce. It was never something to feel ashamed about, um, the reason for their divorce was never something I was supposed to be ashamed about. So, I would say that just the two of them."

Those who discussed experiencing communication that was more closed or avoidant first identified this when recalling their experiences of being told about the divorce. Multiple participants remembered that their parents did not tell them they were divorcing but instead used the language of separation or explaining that mom and dad simply were not going to be living together anymore. Participant 1003 explained:

"I remember the day moving out. We were sitting in the living room and my parents had us together, and um, they said, just we're separating and, um I believe at first it was they were telling us that they were separating but I'm pretty sure they knew that they were going to get a divorce but I mean didn't know how to tell us. But they were separating and things weren't going well. "[It was] confusing. I didn't really, know what that meant, like if my name was going to change, or like, I never thought my dad would disappear or anything like that. I was pretty sure that my parents were going to be around, but I just didn't really understand the details or why. I actually didn't wonder about why until I was in my twenties, um, I just, I remember being confused."

Participant 1005 recalled that she was never told about the divorce by her parents but instead was informed by her brother:

"My older brother told me. He said mom and dad have been fighting a lot you know that and they're going to get separated. And a month after the separation which I did not know the terms of, they officially filed for divorce."

Over the course of their lives participants seemed to have a desire to better understand the divorce, multiple participants recalled seeking out more information from their parents as they progressed through adolescence into adulthood. As participant 1003 remembered:

"So I adjusted I think in the healthiest way I knew how to do at the time by just not dealing with it, and then as I got into my twenties and I started to ask my parents about why they got divorced and tried to seek out more answers and understanding what happened, then I started to adjust to it better. As my parents have gotten better about adjusting to it themselves, I've gotten better because I feel less anxious about it because they are, they're handling it better."

Participant 1010 concluded that his mother was hiding the information about the divorce from him, in what her mind was an effort to protect him, however to him he felt that not having the details about the divorce has hindered him and he described his wishing that his parents would someday provide him with a better understanding:

"Unfortunately to this day my mom still hasn't given me the full breakdown just because she's just very scared that when she shares everything that I might possibly resent my father or hate him, I just hope that one of these days I can finally get the full story from both people."

It became apparent from the interviews that children of divorce struggle to make sense of the changes they are experiencing, those who are able to gain a better

understanding seem to be more accepting of the divorce and in turn less afraid of repeating their parents experience later in life. Those participants who did not experience open communication that would allow them to gain an understanding of divorce and the changes that they were experiencing reported feeling confused, trying to make sense of what was going on. Echoing the thoughts of participant 1003, participant 1010 explained:

"I don't know I guess it was just kind of weird because I didn't get all of the information when I was that age but then as I grew older, you know, high school, college then I started kind of connecting the pieces, you know, kind of why they divorced and then as I grew older I think my parents kind of gave me more information."

Those who were able to talk openly with their parents about the divorce and the changes that the family was going through in a healthy and productive manner seemed to feel more supported throughout the divorce process, something which was critical to adjustment.

All of the participants identified that there were things that were helpful in their experience with the divorce. Participants discussed benefit from having someone to talk to throughout their experience, someone who they could open up to in order to process what they were going through. Particularly helpful was having someone to talk to who had been through something similar, whether it was the siblings who were experiencing the divorce along with them, or friends whose parents were also currently divorcing or had divorced in the past. According to participant 1003:

"I don't know what I would have done if it had been just me, because there have been times where my sister and I could just lean on each other and be like this

sucks, or make a huge joke out of it, or be like oh yeah, that's mom, and kind of

commiserate with each other. Just having the support of a sibling was just, super

helpful."

Additionally, having family members as a constant was helpful to multiple participants, as 1003 discussed:

"My grandparents becoming more involved, helped, because it kept us, it kept

being constant in our lives and kept us on track with like going to college and not

letting us fall in to too much of the divorce."

More than one participant described getting support from friends whose parents were divorcing or had been divorced in the past. They discussed being able to commiserate with one another about what they were going through, to make sense of what was happening in their family, and to get an idea of what to expect throughout the process. Participant 1009 described how talking with friends helped her to normalize divorce:

"You know there's the jokes like oh now you get two Christmases and all that.

And just kind of, you know, people telling me that their parents have done this or

that or that they're happier now."

They described how helpful it was to be able to check in with their friends about their experiences, to trade stories, and to just have someone else who understood what it was like to go through divorce and that this shared experience of divorce sometimes strengthened the relationship, as participant 1008 stated:

"My best friend actually her parents were divorced and, you know, sometimes

when things are getting a little rough between like my parents we're actually a lot

closer because like we're able to sit there and, you know, discuss it with each other. It kind of just brought us closer as friends."

Each participant was able to identify a need for support throughout the process, some discussed not having that support in certain areas and how that made them feel alone, different, and confused. Participant 1004 discussed how she felt she could not get support from friends who had not experienced divorce:

"I didn't talk to friends about it or anything like that. It [counseling] felt like a safe space, I didn't have to hide anything or defend myself or worry about being judged or vulnerable or different. I think if I shared about my experience with friends there would always be this, or I would have this story that nobody else could relate to."

She discussed going to her school counselor to find a safe space where she could open up about what was going on at home without fear of judgment. Research participants indicated that they were either able to find support at home through the consistency of their family members or by a strengthened relationship with their siblings that allowed them to commiserate and bond over their shared experience. They also continue to seek out support through friends who have experienced something similar, thereby finding a way to make sense of and normalize their experience and prepare for what is to come throughout the process. Children of divorce who do not experience a sense of support at home are more likely to reach out and develop a support system outside of the nuclear family.

Participants of divorce described varying degrees of communication that existed within the divorcing family system. They were then able to identify people who provided

a sense of support to them throughout their experience with divorce. The culmination of their experience with support and communication led them to develop a perception of both their parents and the way that they handled the divorce, and a perception of divorce itself. Those children who were able to communicate about divorce, and feel supported throughout the process seemed to have less negative perceptions about divorce and more positive reflections of their parents. Those children of divorce who saw their parents successfully navigate divorce and not engage in conflict in front of the children led the participants to feel less anxious about the possibility of their own divorce. As participant 1009 explained:

> "I think it's kind of the whole just like divorce happens but you can be civil about it. You hear nasty divorce stories and custody battles but my parents have actually been pretty cool with it. So, it makes me less scared of it happening to me one day, I guess."

Those with more neutral perceptions of divorce felt more confident that if they were to end up experiencing divorce in their own relationships that they might be able to handle it with a positive outcome as 1009 expressed, "I think, you know, divorce happens and, I'd like to think that I could deal with it in a reasonable manner in a way similar to what my parents did."

Conversely, those who saw their parents engage in overt conflict or those that saw the negative impacts of divorce on their parents developed stronger negative attitudes about divorce. Several participants expressed strong desires to avoid repeating their parents experience as 1010 discussed:

"I just learned so much from their choices and their experience that, alright (name removed) this is *definitely* not what you want to do. Because, I saw the outcome of the decisions that they made, so that's why hopefully I can just avoid all that stuff in my life."

1006 echoed feeling that her parents went about divorce in entirely the wrong way. After discussing feelings of being in the middle of their conflict and that she and her sibling were used in the battle of the divorce it taught her that she would do anything she could to do things differently. When discussing how the role her parents' divorce plays in her life as an adult she said:

"It just, it always serves as a backbone for my relationships to let me know what I don't want for my family. And to make me work twice as hard to never make that happen, and if, you know, God forbid it does happen that I would handle it 100% differently and not fight the way my parents did around my daughter."

Participant 1004 discussed how much of a relief her parents' divorce was because it would mean an end to the conflict she would have to witness. When she thought back about the unavailability of her parents she also described how she had to look elsewhere for comfort. She described feelings of disappointment in her parents in the way that they handled not only the divorce but also their marriage. Several other participants described perceptions of divorce as the best option considering what they knew of the state of their parent's relationship, however, while they were accepting of divorce they viewed their parents negatively for the way in which they handled the divorce.

Impact

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed ways in which their experiences with their parents' divorce impacted their development of their identity and overall self-concept. Multiple participants discussed feeling difficulty trusting themselves or experiencing self-doubt. Participant 1003 described seeking out advice, particularly about relationships, because she was unable to trust her decisions:

"I didn't trust my own instincts with making my own choices about what was right at the time. Because what I knew is that we needed to live together first. But my grandparents that had been together for fifty years said, no you should get married first because that's the right thing to do and I didn't trust myself enough. I was leaning more towards them because they were still together than on my own parents which actually taught me to really get to know the person before you get married and have kids. And I think I didn't trust my intuition in relationships at that time, I think that kind of, I was just trying to cling on to something that was more stable than my own parents relationship so I thought getting married right away would create more stability, which it didn't."

Participant 1005 described similar feelings of self-doubt, "It negatively impacts me because I question, I have a lot of self-doubt. So, I'm not as confident in relationships and in my choices, as I thought, as I thought I would be." When asked what role their parents' divorce plays in their life now as an adult, participants detailed a number of impacts from career choices to relationships, as participant 1005 summarized:

"I know that I do not trust people as much as I would like to believe that I do. Um, specifically men, I don't trust men, almost, almost like at all. I think it impacts me as far as like career choice, does that count? So, marriage and family,

I kind of became obsessed with like couples therapy and divorce because I thought like there must have been things to prevent this, like there must have been factors that play in to this. So originally, I had made an assumption as a 14 year old, well if people just go to premarital counseling, I should become a premarital counselor because then I can prevent divorce… some of the couples that I see probably should get a divorce or might get a divorce later on or maybe there aren't these like telltale clear signs. So I think about that a lot. Um, it impacts my relationships so like I don't trust that people will not abandon me eventually. So that leads to me, always being very guarded as far as like not being as vulnerable as I could be.

Some discussed the way in which their experience with their parents' divorce impacted their identities. Participant 1003 gave a lot of credit to her parents' divorce saying:

"When I look back on it now, it's you know, it's shaped who I am, which I feel like has helped me, um, view the world more compassionately than maybe other people have. Especially the kids, because I know what it's like to be in that position, so I think for me, I kind of view this situation all the time that it makes you a better person and stronger."

Participants who felt confused about the divorce and were not able to develop a full understanding of what to expect or what they were experiencing seemed to have diminished trust in their ability to make sound decisions. Those who had different experiences seemed to express confidence in their ability to make decisions and interact with others. They seemed to have more confidence in the idea that things would work out

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and if they were presented with challenges that they would be able to navigate them appropriately, as participant 1008 explained:

> "I think it's kind of the whole just like divorce happens but you can be civil about it. You hear nasty divorce stories and custody battles but my parents have actually been pretty cool with it. So, it makes me less scared of it happening to me one day, I guess. I think, you know, divorce happens and, I'd like to think that I could deal with it in a reasonable manner in a way similar to what my parents did."

Each child of divorce develops an identity based on the way that they experience their childhood; some develop resiliency and adaptive coping mechanisms while others seem to develop less of a sense of self-efficacy and trust in their ability to manage decision making and relationships.

The combination of the way that children of divorce view themselves and develop their own unique identity and their experience with divorce leads to the development of attitudes about monogamous relationships, marriage, and divorce. Participant 1004 discussed how her lack of trust in her ability to commit to a long-term monogamous relationship changed her views about divorce. Throughout the interview she discussed her views on long term commitment and monogamous relationships:

> "My perspective on long term, monogamous relationships. I really don't think that they exist. And if they do exist, for me the connection immediately is that, somebody is sacrificing, or they're both sacrificing a lot to do that. Just in maybe the realm of experience."

Those who had negative experiences of divorce including lack of communication, difficulty understanding, and exposure to overt conflict expressed extremely strong

desires to avoid repeating their parent's mistakes. They described seeing their parents experience as an example of what not to do, placing strong importance on creating a different experience both for themselves as 1002 described:

> "I didn't ever want to go through a divorce, not because it had a negative impact on me but because it had a negative impact on my parents. Um, you know, it being painful for them to be divorced. Especially because they're both on their fourth marriage, something that was happening to them, relationships falling apart for them, um, was something that was hurting them so I always viewed marriage as something I only wanted to do once."

Others described the importance of creating a different experience for their kids as 1002 continued:

> "I would say that our number one goal with our kids, um, is you know, happy relationships above everything else. So, you know, do I want my kids to excel in school and go to grad school and have successful careers, yes. But that takes a back seat to you know, a functional, happy relationship with somebody else. And I think that's definitely the result of watching my parents struggle in a relationship."

Participant 1010 also stressed the importance of creating a different experience for his children based on his views of divorce and how negatively divorce can impact a child saying that he did not want to, "give them the short end of the stick" by repeating his parents mistakes. He talked about the lasting impacts of divorce on children and how the impacts can be passed down and felt across generations.

Children who saw their parents successfully navigate post-divorce relationships discussed feeling more hopeful that things could be ok after a divorce and that everyone could get through it, as 1006 discussed:

"It gave me an insight into reality of relationships and how they can go sour, you know really badly and that, you know also, that you can be civil with your ex because now luckily my parents are civil with each other and that you can be, have relationships continue on once you're not in a committed marital relationship."

Participant 1009 echoed similar sentiments when she described that seeing her parents be able to carry on a productive relationship after the divorce helped her to recognize that sometimes divorce is the best option when a relationship is no longer working or fitting the partners' needs. She discussed how seeing her parents be able to functionally deal with the divorce and seeing them work together to take care of her needs afterwards led her to believe that divorce can be ok, "that it's not the end of the world."

The experiences that children have with their parents' divorce, and the subsequent views about relationships, marriage, and divorce that they develop culminate in an impact on the way that they view, approach, understand, and participate in relationships. Participants were asked to discuss their relationships with their parents since the divorce up until now, as well as their relationships with their siblings since the divorce until now. All of them discussed ways in which their experience with divorce impacted these relationships. Many described developing a closer relationship with one parent and a subsequent distant or disingenuous relationship with the other parent; a phenomenon that we labeled alignment. Some discussed how their views on the divorce led them to align

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with one parent and in some cases place blame on the other parent. Participant 1007 discussed how her mother would encourage her to avoid her father leading up to the divorce:

> "My mom would say things like ok well call me when you get home and let me know if your dad's home and if he's home then I'll come pick you up, we'll go get dinner together. Oh ok, and I didn't think much of it because I liked spending time with my mom. I was 15 and I liked shopping and I had a great time.

She discussed how this led to her having different relationships with each of her parents:

> "I would say though that my relationship with my parents is good. My one with my mom is much better. I see her very often, but um, yeah I do talk to my dad, I don't ignore his phone calls, you know, if something would happen god forbid I would obviously be there for him. Do I enjoy spending a lot of time with him that I have to? Not necessarily."

Participant 1002 discussed how the divorce led her to develop a deeper and at times, unhealthy relationship with her mom while struggling to develop a genuine relationship with her dad:

> "I have a great relationship with her [my mom] but it varies in between being, you know, healthy and unhealthy in our involvement in each other's lives. And then on my dad, there was definitely a, you know kind of a, people pleaser, that started at a young age. I was always sort of smiling and happy and loving with my dad and he was always the same way with me but we both were putting on an act so that maybe we weren't being as 100% genuine with each other as possible and so, I would say that's still sort of, I still play daddy's girl with him, um, I can't say

that I have a 100% genuine relationship with him but it's a very good relationship with him. I wasn't as, argue with him, it was more that I argue with my mother, or push him the way that I push my mother. Um, I just don't feel that level of honesty with him I suppose, or, um, like intimacy with him as I do with my mother.

In addition to the impact on their relationship with their parents, participants discussed the ways in which their relationships with their siblings changed throughout the course of the divorce. Participant 1006 described being close with her brother as a child, spending time together, and then drifting apart to the point where they barely keep in contact and spend little to no time together. Participant 1004 expressed similar sentiments when she discussed how her brother developed a perspective that the siblings were treated differently by their parents, this led him to develop a level of resentment that has kept them from developing a healthy or loving relationship with one another:

"So it always created this sort of rift between the two of us, he would always look to me like he was getting different treatment. I think he made meaning about my parents cared about him less or whatever. So he would hold a lot of that resentment towards me. And I don't think that's ever been fixed. So, um, we've never ever been close, and we probably have not had a conversation, uh, by phone or in person without or kind of our own volition, for probably 15 or 18 years. When he graduated from Army boot camp in 2009 I flew out there, but there was no real conversation, just show up. So, yeah, no relationship. We're friends on Facebook. (Laughing) That's something."

Participant 1003 described how she became close with her sister throughout the course of the divorce, that they were able to support each other throughout the process which was not only helpful to their adjustment but helpful to their relationship. She described how her relationship with her brother suffered from the fact that he seemed to experience the divorce very differently than they did:

"My sister and I basically went through the whole thing just her and I, we didn't have really my brother around. And so, it's created actually some distance between us and my brother because we have a bond that my sister and I developed, kind of like a trauma bond, you know, where we leaned on each other and hated each other at the same time during this whole thing because we were so mad and confused that we would be mean to each other but I think we both knew deep down that we were both hurting and as we got older and I went away to college, we became super close, and now, we're very close, we continue to be close. And my brother, is almost like a cousin sometimes, it's kind of, he's very distant because, I don't think he, I don't think he's forgiven my parents and like I don't think he went through all the stages that my sister and I went through together to understand what happened during the divorce, and um, he didn't really have anyone to bond with about it. And so it created some distance between us, we still, we get along really well, but there's definitely we don't have the same relationship with him."

Participants were asked a series of questions aimed at exploring the ways in which their experience with parental divorce impacted their views of, approach to, and participation in romantic relationships. They discussed a range of careful to avoidant

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when it comes to picking romantic partners. Many discussed that experiencing their parents' divorce made them weary of the type of people they were getting into relationships with, and again, many attributed this to a desire to avoid repeating their parent's mistakes. Participant 1006 described:

"It always serves as a backbone for my relationships to let me know what I don't want for my family. And to make me work twice as hard to never make that happen, and if, you know, god forbid it does happen that I would handle it 100% differently and not fight the way my parents did around my daughter."

Participant 1007 described how this desire to avoid her parents' mistakes impacted her choices in partners stating:

"Being careful as to who I get into a relationship with. Making sure that they've got, um, positive traits that I want. Like that old adage, they say you're going to marry your father, but, um, I work very adamantly to not do that."

Participant 1002 repeated these feelings:

"As an adult I always wanted to be married but I only wanted to do it once and put a lot of time into it and put a lot of time into my relationship so, the behavior of a lot of serial dating or a lot of, you know, dating the wrong person or, falling in love with somebody that they shouldn't have been falling in love with to begin with, in my head was always something. I'm not even giving myself the option of falling in love with somebody who isn't going to make a good husband or make a good father. Just taking that off the table and only interested in or only dating or showing interest in people that I can see would be a good husband later on.

In addition to an impact on the partners they choose to get into a relationship with, participants discussed impacts that their parents' divorce had on the way they participate in relationships. For example, participant 1004 discussed how her view of divorce as an inevitability in marriage, and her beliefs that long-term monogamous relationships do not exist and the resulting impact that this view had on her willingness to work through conflict when it arose:

> "It probably informed my decision to leave over working on it when like it gets tough. I would say that the relationship that I'm in currently is probably different than those in the past with regard to working on things. There have been opportunities for me to bail on it and I didn't and I don't really know how or why that is exactly other than, you know, I think it's uh, probably a product of where I am in my own personal development and just sort of the dynamics of the relationship with my partner. But in the past that was not the case, at the first sign of trouble or disconnection I would get distracted by somebody else or, just bail on it. So, in that way I would probably, if I believed in marriage and sort of that long term commitment it would probably impact my perceived options when things got rough. I might maybe dig in a little more and try to work through things."

Participant 1007 described how her experience with her parents' divorce impacts the approach she takes to relationships and how she recommends that others take more time when entering into long-term or committed relationships:
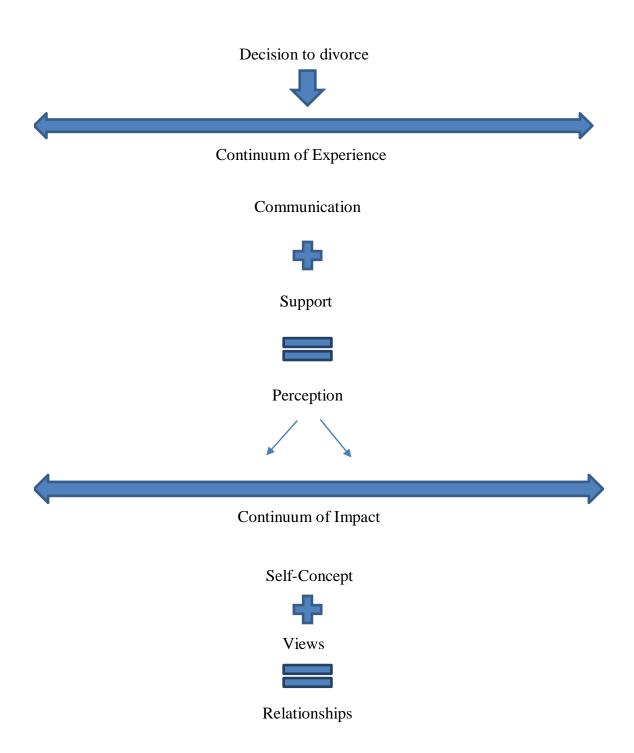
> "I teach high school so I see a lot of young girls who are just chomping at the bit to have kids and get married and this, that, and the other. I usually kindly try to

tell them, you know what, you shouldn't just, you should take it slowly, you know

see what you're getting yourself into, be cautious about it, um, take time to get to

know this person and who they really are. And it's not that my parents didn't, but,

you know, it never hurts to wait, to find out who you're in a relationship with. I

take that, I would say personally. I'm comparing myself to others, 25 year old

people that I know, I'm certainly not ready to have kids or, you know, get

married, but, you know, it's something that I want to do. It's certainly not

something that I'm chomping at the bit to do."

Summary

Results were separated in to two categories; experience and impact. There was a

continuum of experience, which began at the time parents decided to divorce. Participants

discussed experiencing varying degrees of communication and support which led them to

have certain perceptions of their parents and of divorce in general. Based on their

perceptions, adult children of divorce are able to identify the impact that their experience

has had on their adult lives. Participants in this study discussed a continuum of impact

across themes of self-concept, and views on marriage, relationships, and divorce which

together determined how they present in adult relationships. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2

Overview of Results

Decision to divorce

⬇

⬅ ➡

Continuum of Experience

Communication

✚

Support

🟰

Perception

↙ ↘

⬅ ➡

Continuum of Impact

Self-Concept

✚

Views

🟰

Relationships

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this study was to give children of divorce a voice in the research that seeks to understand their unique experience. By focusing on adult children of divorce, the study allowed participants to look back on their experiences and articulate the impact that those experiences had throughout the course of their lives. Three common themes of *experience* were identified through the semi-structured interviews: Communication, Support, and Perceptions. After exploring their experiences, participants communicated in their own words how they felt those experiences impacted them from the time they happened and through adulthood. Three common areas of *impact* were identified and explored; self-concept, views, and relationships.

Experience

Participants described varying levels of communication within the family, with two distinct experiences emerging. On one hand, participants described their parents being open in regards to the divorce; that they were able to ask questions and that parents were willing to discuss the divorce and what it meant for the child. On the other, participants discussed how their parents were not approachable about the subject; with many recalling that their parents framed the divorce as a separation or as no longer living together and did not provide much additional information. The results of the qualitative analysis suggest that open communication is helpful in divorcing families, which supports the findings of Hans and Fine (2001) that communication in the home can have a direct impact on the experience of children. Open communication allows children to ask questions in order to gain a solid understanding of the changes their family is

experiencing, from which they can develop expectations for what is to come, overall leaving them feeling more secure and accepting of their parents' divorce.

In contrast to open communication, closed communication or avoidance of the topic of divorce led children to struggle to understand what was going on, to make sense of the changes, and to cope and adjust to the new family structure. Campbell (1995) found that children and parents often engage in a role reversal where children are forced to take on adult responsibilities like making sense of the changes or communicating between parents. Many participants in this study discussed their parents' inability to communicate with one another and how that often led to them being put in the middle of the conflict. Similar to what Campbell (1995) and Amato (1999) have found, these participants reported a struggle to avoid repeating their parents' mistakes.

The findings indicate that parents need to engage in open and productive communication with one another as well as with their children during the divorce process in order to help children feel supported and to allow them to gain an understanding of the changes they are experiencing and what it will mean for them moving forward. As Amato (1999) found, children of divorce often repeat the communication patterns they learn from their parents. Not only does communication need to support children developing an understanding of what is going on but also it needs to be healthy and effective in order to serve as a positive model for children.

All participants discussed needing support in dealing with the divorce at the time, developing an understanding and making sense of what was going on, and being able to adjust, cope, and know what to expect. Thomas and Woodside (2001) discussed how immediate family members could be helpful to provide emotional support and

50

consistency. Although not all participants in the current study reported obtaining support at home, those that did receive it indicated that it had a positive impact. Participants who found support in their parents were those who identified open communication throughout the process.

There was a split in support received from siblings. Those who had similar experiences with the divorce as their siblings reported that their siblings were a sense of support, someone to commiserate with, and someone who could relate to their experiences. On the other hand, those who felt their experience with divorce was different from their siblings reported that the divorce seemed to have a negative impact on the sibling relationship. They described a marked disconnect between them and their siblings, causing them to have little to no relationship with those siblings in adulthood. Greef and Van Der Merwe (2004) found that intra-family support was the most important factor in resilience; some participants in this study reported similar feelings while others discussed seeking support elsewhere.

Those who were sought outside support discussed finding support in friendships with individuals whose parents had either divorced in the past or were currently divorcing. They echoed what researchers have found in the past; friends who had not experienced divorce were not able to provide support (Hans & Fine, 2001). Similar to the findings of Hans and Fine (2001), participants described how helpful it was to have someone who knew what they were going through. They discussed sharing divorce stories with their friends; joking about what they were experiencing or comparing experiences to be able to normalize what they were going through and develop expectations of what was to come in the future. Some described developing an

understanding that things would be ok by being able to compare with friends who were living positive post-divorce lives. Some described gaining a sense of appreciation for their adjustment after watching friends who experienced divorce and were unable to cope in healthy or positive ways. These findings that children of divorce benefit from support received from friends who have had similar experiences match the researcher results of Thomas and Woodside (2001).

The experience that children have with their parents and the divorce led them to develop perceptions about both their parents and about divorce in general. The findings in this study echo what previous researchers have found about the positive impact on children that comes from parents being able to maintain positive interactions post-divorce (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Heatherington & Kelly, 2001; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Those who were able to develop an understanding about what was going on, who were able to see their parents navigate divorce in a positive and healthy manner, and those who saw their parents be able to carry on productive post-divorce relationships whether immediately or in the future reported less negative views of divorce overall. These views of divorce directly impacted the level to which they felt a need to avoid divorce. Those who had less extreme or negative views of divorce reported a sense of acceptance of divorce and a feeling that if they were to experience a divorce in their lifetime they would be able to get through it and be ok afterwards.

Impact

Children who had negative experiences with divorce also seemed to develop impacted relationships with their parents. Many discussed resentment towards their parents over being put in the middle or being subjected to overt conflict in the home. Past

research has shown that children of divorce often feel differently about each parent (Rhyne, 1990). Several participants in this study discussed what the research team labeled *alignment;* having a close relationship with one parent, while experiencing distance or a disingenuous relationship with the other parent. The combination of these perceptions led them to develop attitudes about how they would create different experiences for themselves, within romantic relationships, and for their kids; so as never to put their kids through what they had experienced.

Participants described the impact that their experience with their parents divorced had on their development of self-concepts. Multiple participants discussed how their experiences led them to certain career choices, as a result of feeling more empathetic, feeling a desire to help others, and feeling an understanding and empathy for children who were experiencing divorce. One participant discussed how her career choice came as a direct result of wanting to help other people avoid the experience that their parents created with their divorce.

Through the interviews, some participants discussed how their experience with their parents' divorce led them to feel a sense of self-doubt. Multiple participants discussed a lack of confidence in their ability to make decisions, particularly around relationships. Many discussed feeling a lack of trust in themselves and in turn in others as a result of their experiences. Similar to the findings of Raschke and Raschke (1979), those who perceived higher levels of conflict in the home reported negative impacts on their sense of self-efficacy and self-concepts. Those who were supported throughout their experience and who saw their parents successfully navigate divorce reported less of an

impact on their sense of self and more confidence in their ability to manage relationships, conflict, and divorce if it their relationship came to it.

Children who had positive experiences with their parents' divorce wherein they experienced a high level of open communication, were able to develop an understanding about divorce and what to expect, and who felt supported throughout the process developed positive views of their parents and more accepting views of divorce. Children who had negative experiences wherein there was closed communication and avoidance of the subject of divorce leading to their inability to understand what was happening or what to expect reported more negative views of their parents and of divorce. Those who had a negative experience expressed resentment towards their parents and only taking from them models about what not to do. Much of the past research also supports the idea that children who view divorce negatively express a desire to avoid repeating their parent's mistakes (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Wallerstein 2004). They place strong importance on creating different experiences and express significantly present desires to avoid repeating their parents' mistakes at all costs. Those children who had more positive experiences viewed divorce in a much more accepting light and reported feeling a sense that it would not be the end of the world if they were to get divorced themselves. Children in this situation repeatedly discussed being able to recognize their parents' divorce as the best decision given the state of their relationships.

Participants detailed the ways in which the divorce impacted their familial relationships with experiences ranging from strengthened bonds over going through the divorce process or distance and cutoff after having starkly different experiences. Those parents who seemed to have a lack of boundaries between their own experience and their

child's experience seemed to create a pattern of alignment towards one parent and distance or difficulty developing genuine relationships with the other parent. This impact on parental relationships is similar to the findings of Hoffman and Ledford (1996) that showed how a lack of boundaries between the parent child experiences can negatively alter the child's relationship with the other parent. Children who were able to go to their parents or their siblings to process and cope with divorce reported stronger bonds among familial relationships while those who experienced negative impacts on their familial relationships attributed this to having different perspectives or experiences with the way the divorce was handled. This finding is again in support of the benefit of intra-family support found by Greef and Van De Merwe (2004)

Finally, participants engaged in a discussion about the way that they perceive, approach, and participate in romantic relationships. There has been a wealth of research supporting the notion that the experience of parental divorce has an impact on commitment in future relationships (Amato, 1996; Cartwright, 2008; Heatherington & Kelly, 2001; Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Almost all of the participants discussed an emphasis on commitment and choosing the right partner before getting into a long term relationship, which they attributed to their experience with their parents' divorce. They discussed ranging impacts on relationships from being careful to avoidant when it comes to choosing a partner and participating in romantic relationships. Those who had negative experiences of divorce reported less willingness to work through conflict with partners and instead choosing to opt out of relationships that no longer seem to be positive or to provide a sense of happiness. Those who had more positive views of their parents and

divorce seemed less focused on avoiding divorce and more focused on creating happy, healthy, and meaningful relationships.

Clinical Implications for Family Therapy

From this study, we can begin to build a guide to helping couples, children, and families effectively navigate the divorce process in a way that supports the needs of the children involved. We determined from the results that parents have a responsibility to help children adjust to the changes that are inherent in divorce. In order to best assist children two things are needed, open communication and support. Family therapists can take this information to help divorcing individuals best support children by openly communicating about the divorce process, what changes can be expected, and to help the child process their feelings about the divorce. Therapists should seek to assist parents in developing the skills necessary to conduct healthy and productive communication with their children. Additionally, therapists, parents, and children should collaboratively develop a system of support that best meets the needs of the child. Therapists may create a supportive environment in family therapy sessions where effective communication and processing of feelings can take place. Parents should also attempt to identify other sources of support for children which may include attendance of support groups, promoting and encouraging support between siblings, and encouraging children to develop friendships and relationships with other children who have experienced parental divorce.

A new model for helping couples and families successfully navigate divorce is needed in order to best support the children involved. This researcher suggests a plan for divorcing families that includes concurrent treatment for the divorcing couple with family

therapy focusing on assisting the children to feel supported, to develop an understanding of divorce, and to successfully cope and move forward. The aim of the divorcing couple treatment should be two things: first, to educate the parents about the critical need to separate their experience as a divorcing couple from their children's experience, and second, to assist the couple in developing the skills necessary to divorce effectively, in a manner that best supports the needs of the children involved. Treatment for the divorcing couple should begin with psychoeducation about the potential impact of divorce on children. This education aims to help parents better understand the experience of children of divorce and the ways in which parents can affect them both positively and negatively with their choices throughout the divorce process. Therapists should inform the divorcing couple about how exposure to parental conflict and parents who expect that their children will experience their exes in the same way they do cause children to be resentful, less self-efficacious, and more fearful of experiencing divorce in their own lives.

The divorcing couple treatment should then follow a plan that is concurrent with general goals of family therapy: to improve communication skills, particularly around the topic of divorce, to create a support system for everyone involved, and to be approachable about the topic of divorce and the changes to be experienced by the family. Finally, the divorcing couple treatment should aim to assist the participants in shifting their role from that of a couple system to that of a co-parent system. In this piece, treatment should focus on assisting in the definition and understanding of the new roles and should attempt to develop consistency between the co-parents moving forward.

Concurrent family therapy should take place including the co-parent system and the children involved. The aim of this treatment should be to improve the system's ability

to communicate openly about divorce and the changing family and to develop a system of support for the children involved. Co-parents should use skills learned in their therapy to model the implementation of these new skills within the family system and to assist the children in learning and developing their skills. Structural family therapy can help families develop the post-divorce structure including the definition of family roles, rules, and expectations as well as assisting the family to develop appropriate boundaries. Parents must be supported in developing boundaries between the experience of the divorcing couple and the children impacted by their parents' divorce. Children should also be assisted in this process to understand the new roles of their parents as co-parents. Additionally, experiential family therapy may be beneficial to allow each member of the family system to honestly explore their experience of the changing family. This may assist family members in developing an understanding of the experience of others which could encourage a stronger system of support for each member. A narrative approach may help family members explore their experience and make meaning of the changes and what they mean in their lives.

Previous research has failed adult children of divorce. The experience of children of divorce in navigating adulthood and its unique challenges is an area that has been underrepresented in the research. In the past it has been common practice to focus on the impacts of parental divorce on childhood without extending the focus to take into account the lasting impacts that may be present later in life. Additionally, past research has created a very bleak picture of divorce that has contributed to the stigma that divorcing parents feel. Wallerstein's research painted a grim and extreme picture of divorce that potentially led couples considering divorce to be fearful of ruining their children's lives.

It is possible that this fear has impacted their ability to adequately support and openly communicate to their children about divorce. What has become clear from this research is that it is not simply the experience of divorce that is detrimental but instead, the way in which parents approach divorce. All of the participants in this study were able to identify that divorce was the best option for the relationship and the family as a whole, and that staying together for the children, an idea that Wallerstein reported gained popularity as a result of her findings, would have caused more damage. What we can learn then, is that family therapists have an obligation to help dispel some of the previously accepted rumors about divorce and children, and guide parents through the divorce process in a way that is productive for everyone involved.

Limitations and Future Research

The first limitation to this study was with the sample as it was relatively homogenous. Eight out of the nine participants were female, leaving questions about whether or not different themes or experiences would have emerged with a larger number of male participants. Additionally, almost all of the participants identified as either white or Caucasian and the ages only ranged from 24-34. There were also limitations related to the age at the time of divorce for the participants. The majority of the participants in this study experienced their parents' divorce during their teenage years. It is possible that the impacts discussed in this study are related to the age and developmental stage of the participants. Individuals who experienced parental divorce at a different age may have responded differently to the interview questions. Similar to criticisms of Wallerstein's study, one might question whether the results are generalizable to the public.

Another limitation in this study is relying on self-report of the participants in order to collect data. One participant who described a positive perception of her parents' divorce with limited negative impacts or experiences contacted the researcher a week after the interview to ask whether she should communicate reflections she was having about her relationship with her mother. She wavered when trying to determine whether the information would be useful and failed to follow up with the researcher to discuss what reflections were coming up for her. It is possible that participant's answers evolved after thinking about their experience. Many reported during the interview that they hadn't thought about their experience with divorce in some time with some stating that they had never before made the connection between past experiences with parental divorce and current impacts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that most adult children come to accept their parents' decision to divorce as being the best option given the state of their marriage. They discussed being keenly aware of the unhappiness that existed in their parents relationship, and many looked forward to divorce as a way to reduce the conflict in their lives. Communication both between parents and from parent to child was critical in the participant's view of the divorce and in turn their confidence in their ability to navigate divorce should they ever experience it in the future. Those children who felt supported in gaining an understanding of the changes that were occurring and had someone to talk to about their experience reported positive adjustment and attitudes about their parents, relationships, and divorce. Those who were unable to talk about divorce with their parents in turn reported feeling less supported and less confident in their ability to make

decisions and navigate relationships. They expressed overall having strong negative views about their parents, divorce, and relationships.

Wallerstein (2004) discussed the need for further interventions that could help heal families and children impacted by divorce and also to challenge and change the attitudes about divorce that are continually reinforced by the surrounding culture. Her research was monumental in enhancing our understanding of the phenomenon of divorce and the lasting impacts that it has on children. Wallerstein's research also paints a very grim picture for the outcome of divorce. Her results are presented with words like *nightmare, shattered, ripped, and daunting* that make divorce seem almost unmanageable.

There is a negative stigma towards divorce that leaves many parents fearful of the impact they will have on their kids if they choose to divorce. As a society, we present divorce as an atomic event that shatters the family around it which may be contributing to the lack of confidence that adults feel in their ability to successfully navigate a divorce. We avoid having a productive conversation about divorce and refuse to accurately depict it in the media where widely known movies like Liar Liar, Mrs. Doubtfire, and The Parent Trap sensationalize the conflict that exists in a post-divorce family and then all end in the parents getting back together; almost as if to say that there can be no happy ending while divorce is present.

First and foremost, further research is needed about adult children of divorce to learn what hurts and what helps in the experience of parental divorce. Future research should explore not only the impact that parental divorce has on these adult children but additionally the ways in which children and families can benefit from a successful

divorce. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample in order to further develop the literature regarding the experience of adult children of divorce. Future studies should consider gender, age at time of divorce, age at time of participation, and level of conflict present in the divorce. Additional research could explore the quality of the pre and post-divorce parent-child relationships in order to better understand whether the impacts are a result of the phenomenon of divorce or if there are other contributing factors that determine the outcome. Researchers need to explore the impact of societal attitudes on couples' decision to "stay together for the kids". We need to answer Wallerstein's call for research that changes both our views of divorce and the societal attitudes that support those negative views. Further research should also explore divorce with a more diverse lens, as much of the research has focused on a relatively homogenous sample of the population.

Demographic Questions (Questionnaire to be emailed to participants prior to interview)

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your Race/Ethnicity?

How old were you at the time your parents divorced?

What was the custody arrangement? (Who did you live with, were you with siblings?)

Did your parents re-marry? If so, what is the status of that/those relationships?

What is your current relationship status? (Choose from single, cohabitating, married, divorced, in a relationship less than one year, in a relationship more than one year)

Have you ever been engaged? (Yes/No)

Have you ever been married? (Yes/No)

Have you ever been divorced? (Yes/No)

Do you have children? If yes, how many?

Have you ever received therapy to address the divorce? (Yes/No)

If so, what was/wasn't helpful and why?

Semi Structured Interview Questions

Lead In: There has been much research into the impact of parental divorce on children with a variety of findings. Some studies have found that children and families gain strength and resilience from divorce, while others have shown that children of divorce tend to experience a wide range of psychological and social consequences following divorce. You are being asked to participate in this study to share your unique experience of parental divorce.

Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with divorce?

*How were you told about the divorce?

*Were you surprised by the divorce?

*What was the divorce like for you at the time?

*How characterize your parents' divorce? Positive, negative, neither, both?

What comes up for you now, when you think about the divorce?

What role does your parents' divorce have in your life now as an adult?

In what way, positively or negatively, do you think the divorce has impacted you as an adult?

What challenges has your parents' divorce presented for you?

In what way has your parents' divorce been beneficial to you?

Some people use the term "*divorce adjustment*." What does adjustment mean to you?

How would you describe your own adjustment to the divorce?

Has forgiveness played a role in your adjustment to the divorce?

Can you tell me about your relationship with your parents, since the divorce?

Do you have any siblings?

Can you tell me about your relationship with your siblings since the divorce?

*How are your relationships with your siblings now?

Adult relationships

How has your experience with your parents' divorce impacted your romantic relationships in adulthood?

> *How have these experiences impacted your approach to relationships?

> *How have these experiences impacted your attitude about committed relationships or   marriage?

> *How have these experiences affected the way you participate in your current (or past) relationships?

How has your experience with your parents' divorce impacted your friendships or non-romantic relationships in adulthood?

Do you haven children?

How has the divorce affected your decision about having children?

If so, how have your experiences with divorce affected your parenting and your relationships with your children?

*Indicates a probing question

APPENDIX B: FACEBOOK SCRIPT

Researchers, Dr. Stephen Fife and Sheala Morrison, in the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas are asking for your help on a research project *"The Presentation of Childhood Parental Divorce in Adulthood: A Retrospective Phenomenological Study"* they are currently conducting.

The interview will:

> * take place in person at the location of your choice or via telephone;

> *take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time;

> * ask about personal information, such as, your age, your relationship status, and your experience with the divorce of your parents;

> * help to enhance understanding of participants' experience of the way childhood parental divorce presents in adulthood

You must be 18 years or older to participate.

TO PARTICIPATE:

Please contact Sheala Morrison via phone or email

(702) 721-6637

Morris14@unlv.nevada.edu.

Your participation is voluntary. This means you may discontinue or withdraw at any time.

If you elect to participate in this study, you may choose the location of the interview. Once the interview is complete, all identifying information will be removed from the data. Your answers will be used to identify themes and processes common for adults who experienced parental divorce as children.

Your experience is a valuable resource to new as well as experienced therapists who seek to better treatment models for adults impacted by parental divorce.

In order to facilitate additional data collection, we ask that repost this onto your Facebook wall or that you refer anyone you know who might be eligible to participate.

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this study.

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for your consideration as a participant in this study. Divorce has the potential to be traumatic for every member of the family, particularly the children. Conversely, some children gain coping skills and resiliency as a result of their parents' divorce. The experience of parental divorce in childhood has the potential to impact children as adults as well, however, adults are rarely given the opportunity to voice their experience. In an effort to understand the lasting impact of parental divorce, we are interviewing adults who experienced the divorce of their parents during childhood. The interview will take 60-90 minutes.

The focus of the interview is your experience of how your parents' divorce presents in your life as an adult. We are committed to protecting your confidentiality and to creating an interview environment that is safe for all involved.

If you elect to participate in this study, you may choose the location of the interview. In the past, participants in similar studies have elected to be interviewed in their home or in the office of their therapist, with the therapist being present. You also have the option of being interviewed on UNLV campus or by telephone. The interview will take 60-90 minutes, and our conversation will be recorded with a digital recording device for later transcription.

Once the interview is complete, the interviews will be transcribed using aliases rather than your name to protect your identity, and all identifying information will be removed from the data. From here we'll analyze and compare your comments with those of other participants in order to identify themes and processes common for adults who experienced parental divorce as children.

Your experience is a valuable resource to new as well as experienced therapists who seek to better treatment models for adults impacted by parental divorce, we thank you for your contribution to this study.

TO PARTICIPATE:
Please contact Sheala Morrison via phone or email
(702) 721-6637
Morris14@unlv.nevada.edu

We greatly appreciate your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Stephen Fife at 702-895-3117.

Sincerely,

Sheala Morrison
Student of Marriage and Family Therapy
University of Nevada, Las Vegas   Stephen T. Fife, Ph.D.
                                                   Associate Professor

Marriage and Family Therapy Program
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
stephen.fife@unlv.edu

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED:
DID YOU EXPERIENCE THE DIVORCE OF YOUR PARENTS DURING CHILDHOOD?

Divorce has the potential to be traumatic for every member of the family, particularly the children. Conversely, some children gain coping skills and resiliency as a result of their parents' divorce. The experience of parental divorce in childhood has the potential to impact children as adults as well, however, adults are rarely given the opportunity to voice their experience. In an effort to understand the lasting impact of parental divorce, we are interviewing adults who experienced the divorce of their parents during childhood. The interview will take 60-90 minutes.

The focus of the interview is your experience of how your parent's divorce presents in your life as an adult. We are committed to protecting your confidentiality and to creating an interview environment that is safe for all involved.

Your experience is a valuable resource to new as well as experienced therapists who seek to better treatment models for adults impacted by childhood parental divorce. Thank you for your consideration.

TO PARTICIPATE:

Please contact Sheala Morrison via phone or email

(702) 721-6637

Morris14@unlv.nevada.edu.

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    Annual Conference, Seattle, WA

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EDUCATION
University of Nevada, Las Vegas   Las Vegas, Nevada
Master of Science, Marriage and Family Therapy   December 2014
Thesis: *The Presentation of Childhood Parental Divorce in Adulthood: A Retrospective Phenomenological Study*

University of Arizona   Tucson, Arizona
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology   December 2010
Minor, Sociology

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
University of Nevada, Las Vegas   Las Vegas, Nevada
MFT 225-Multicultural Issues and Families, Part-Time Instructor   Fall 2014

University of Nevada, Las Vegas   Las Vegas, Nevada
MFT 360-Contemporary Marriage and Families, Guest Lecturer   November 2013

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE
Center for Individual, Couple, and Family Counseling   Las Vegas, Nevada
Student Intern   May 2014-Present
- Fulfill all previously detailed duties of student therapist position
- Mentor first year student therapists as newly practicing clinicians through co-therapy
- Assist first year therapists in transitioning into new role by educating about center policies

Student Therapist   May 2013-May 2014
- Provide psychotherapy to individuals, couples, and families to address presenting issues
- Complete intake assessments to determine appropriate services
- Refer clients to community resources to address needs outside the scope of practice
- Develop therapeutic treatment plans and monitor progress towards goals

RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE
UNLV Career Services   Las Vegas, Nevada
Graduate Assistant Career Counselor   Aug 2013-Present
- Administer Strong, Focus 2, and MBTI career assessments to assist in career exploration
- Counsel students to assist in job search, major exploration, and career development
- Develop, review, and critique student resumes and cover letters
- Complete mock interviews to assist students in strengthening interview skills
- Facilitated selection, interview, and hiring of candidates for open GA position

Center for Individual, Couple, and Family Counseling   Las Vegas, Nevada
Graduate Assistant   May 2013-Aug 2013
- Receive and process session payments from clients
- Monitor office supplies and communicate requests for orders to site director
- Manage calls from current and prospective clients to complete phone intake and receive messages for therapists
- Communicate necessary updates to other front desk staff to maintain continuity

Providence Service Corporation   Tucson, Arizona
Intensive Case Manager / Counselor   Feb 2011-Jun 2012

- Managed a caseload of approximately 30-40 intensive behavioral health clients ages 0-17
- Assessed needs to determine services and treatment plans in collaboration with each client's unique CFT
- Monitored progress towards goals and advocated for clients' wants and needs
- Counseled groups and individuals and facilitated peer support of children in CPS, divorce, and changing families

ORGANIZATIONS & VOLUNTEER WORK

Delta Kappa Zeta, Membership Vice President, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2014-Present
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, Student Member, 2012-Present
Cognition and Neuroimaging Laboratory, Research Assistant, University of Arizona, 2008-2010
Divorce Recovery Inc., Children of Divorce Recovery Group Leader, Tucson, AZ, 2008-2010
University of Arizona Neuroscience Club, Active Member, 2008-2010
American Psychological Association, Undergraduate Student Affiliate, 2008-2010

ADDITIONAL TRAINING

Serving Every Returning Veteran, UNLV Veteran's Services   November 2013
Graduate Assistant Teaching Workshop, UNLV Graduate College   September 2013
Working With Diverse Student Populations, UNLV Graduate College   September 2013
Service Members and Veterans on Campus, Center For Deployment Psychology August 2013
Evidenced Based Couples Therapy, Johnson-Gottman Summit   July 2013

PRESENTATIONS

Building First Time Resumes, Nevada State High School Transition Series, January 2014
Building Effective Resumes, UNLV Library Certification Series, April 2014
UNLV Career Services Overview, UNLV Freshman Seminars, 2013-2014, ongoing
New Student Orientation Introduction to Career Services, UNLV Orientation, 2014, ongoing