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Parents' Marital Status, Conflict, and Role Modeling: Links With Adult Romantic Relationship Quality

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Abstract

This study investigated three parental marital statuses and relationship quality among unmarried, but dating adults ages 18 to 35 ($N = 1153$). Those whose parents never married one another tended to report the lowest relationship quality (in terms of relationship adjustment, negative communication, commitment, and physical aggression) compared to those with divorced or married biological parents. In addition, those with divorced parents reported lower relationship adjustment and more negative communication than those with married parents. Parental conflict and the degree to which participants rated their parents' relationship as a healthy model for their own relationships partially explained the associations between parental marital status and relationship outcomes. We suggest that this particular family type (i.e., having parents who never marry one another) needs greater attention in this field in terms of research and intervention.

Keywords

Parental divorce; unmarried; relationship quality; young adult; parental conflict

A large body of literature links family-of-origin structure to adult romantic relationship experiences. One of the most robust findings is that parental divorce is associated with a higher rate of divorce among offspring (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Segrin, Taylor, & Altman, 2005). This intergenerational transmission of divorce has been important to examine because of the widespread costs of divorce for the adults and children involved (Amato, 2000; Smock, 1993), and also for society (e.g., Schramm, 2006). Several studies have examined risks for divorce that might be apparent even in premarital or dating relationships, finding that parental divorce is associated with lower relationship satisfaction, more conflict, and less commitment (Cui & Fincham, in press; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

The present study extends this literature on family structure and early adult romantic relationships. We examined the influence of parental divorce on several indices of early adult romantic relationship quality, including general relationship adjustment, negative communication, commitment, and physical aggression. Additionally, we explored a family structure that has received very little attention in this field. That is, we assessed individuals whose parents never married one another. Lastly, we tested potential mediators of the association between parents' marital status (married, divorced, or never-married each other) and romantic relationship quality, including parental conflict and parental role-modeling of healthy relationships.

Parents Who Never Marry One Another

It was once easy to categorize parents' marital status as divorced or non-divorced ("intact"), however, at present, nearly 40% of children are born to unmarried mothers (Ventura, 2009). Many of them may never marry the baby's father. While some may live with the father, at least for a time, others may not have any kind of ongoing relationship with him, making this group highly heterogeneous. The ways in which this particular type of family-of-origin experience (having parents who never marry each other) impacts early adult romantic relationships has not been studied, at least to our knowledge.

Research on unmarried parents and child outcomes suggests that adults whose parents never married each other may face challenges in forming and maintaining their own romantic relationships. For example, Brown (2004) found that adolescents whose parents were unmarried yet cohabiting had lower well-being than those whose parents were married. This study did not examine romantic relationship quality directly, but indicates that at least as adolescents, those with parents who do not marry may have social and psychological problems that would make romantic relationships more difficult. Similarly, growing up in a mother or father-absent home has been linked with higher rates of physical aggression in adolescent dating relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Further, there is some evidence that children of teenage (and typically unmarried) mothers are more likely to have children as teenagers themselves (Hardy, Astone, Brooks-Gunn, Shapiro, & Miller, 1998; Whitehead, 2009) and, more generally, that being born to unmarried parents is associated both with premarital intercourse (Albrecht & Teachman, 2003) and with teenage pregnancy (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), suggesting that there may be characteristics of parents' unmarried relationships that are transmitted from one generation to the next. Along these lines, Teachman (2002) found that being born and raised in an unmarried family was related to a higher risk for divorce in one's own marriage. Although these findings collectively suggest potential negative effects of having parents who do not marry each other, none of the existing research has directly examined the research questions of interest in the current study. More research is necessary to understand how growing up with parents who never married one another might influence romantic relationship development and quality in early adulthood.

Potential Mediators for Parents' Marital Status and Romantic Relationship Quality

In addition to examining the direct associations between biological family structure and the quality of dating relationships, the current study tested two potential mediators of this association to better understand why family structure may impact adult relationship experiences. Specifically, we examined perceptions of parental conflict as a mediator as well as a new construct that is also directly related to social learning theory. Participants reported on the degree to which they viewed their parents relationship as a healthy model for relationships, and we examined whether this variable explains (at least in part) the association between family structure and early adult romantic relationship quality.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) provides one perspective on how parents' relationships influence children's own romantic relationship experiences in adulthood, for it suggests that children learn social behavior, in part, from the modeling they observe in their caregivers' social interactions and relationships. Thus, having a positive role model for what healthy romantic relationships look like may be important to developing positive relationships in early adulthood.

Much of the work on the intergenerational transmission of divorce has been based on social learning theory and many studies have examined how witnessing poorly managed conflict between one's parents is related to communication and conflict patterns in children's adult relationships. High levels of parental marital discord have been found to be associated with more conflict and risk for divorce in young adults' own relationships (Amato & Booth, 2001; Cui & Fincham, in press; Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004), presumably because these individuals did not learn more constructive ways of managing conflict from their parents' relationship. Observational research demonstrates that the same conflict patterns individuals experience in their families growing up are apparent in their own marriages later on (Whitton, Waldinger et al., 2008). Further, there is considerable evidence that many negative impacts of parental divorce on child and subsequent adult adjustment are more proximally attributable to high levels of parental conflict (Cummings, 1994; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Based on social learning theory and this previous research, the current study tested whether parental conflict mediated the association between parents marital status (married, divorced, or never married) and relationship quality in early adulthood. Although it seems reasonable based on prior research to hypothesize that parental conflict may explain at least part of the association between parental divorce and lower relationship quality as an adult, no research, to our knowledge, has examined whether parental conflict also helps explain possible differences in relationship quality between those whose parents are married and those whose parents never married each other.

It may be the case that the conflict a child witnesses between his or her parents is important in understanding why parental divorce impacts a child's own romantic relationships, but that it is less useful in understanding why having parents who never enter marriage together is associated with lower romantic relationship quality. Many with parents who never married may not have lived with both parents at all or long enough to witness parental conflict. Parental conflict may be less relevant to romantic relationship quality among those with never married parents than it is for those with divorced or married parents. Thus, we wished to test an additional variable that was related to social learning theory that could help explain why having unmarried biological parents might be associated with lower quality romantic relationships in adulthood. The essence of social learning theory is that observing models of healthy relationship behavior is important to developing one's own romantic relationships. Thus, we assessed the degree to which participants rated their parents' relationship as a good model and tested whether this variable could explain, at least in part, why parents' marital status was related to romantic relationship quality.

Gender Differences

Some research indicates that there may also be important gender differences in the influence family structure has on later romantic relationships. Among engaged couples, women's parental divorce was associated with lower commitment to their partners and less confidence in their future marriages (Whitton, Rhoades et al., 2008). In this study, it was only women's parental divorce that was linked with lower commitment and confidence, not men's. Other research has suggested that parental divorce may be a stronger predictor of problems in marriage for women than men (Amato, 1996; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). Additionally, family structure may affect men and women's relationship appraisals somewhat differently. Women from divorced families reported lower trust and satisfaction and higher conflict and ambivalence while men's perceptions tended to be more dependent on their partners' parents' marital status (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). The current study does not include data from both partners in a dyad, so we are unable to examine cross-partner effects,

but we do test whether any of the differences between those with married, divorced, or never married parents are moderated by gender.

Central Hypotheses

Based on previous research and social learning theory, we predicted that compared to having divorced or never-married parents, having married parents would be associated with higher relationship quality in terms of relationship adjustment, interpersonal commitment, negative communication, and frequency of physical aggression. For the differences in relationship quality between those with divorced versus married parents, we predicted that both parental conflict and the degree to which participants saw their parents marriage as a good model would mediate (at least partly) the association between parents' marital status and relationship quality. For the differences in relationship quality among those with married versus never-married parents, we tested parental conflict and parental role-modeling as potential mediators, but did not make hypotheses about mediation because of the lack of previous research on this topic. Given the prior research on gender differences in the ways family structure relates to adult romantic relationships, we also tested whether gender moderated any of these findings.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 1153$) in the current study were individuals who took part in the first wave of a larger, longitudinal project on romantic relationship development. The current sample included 425 men (36.9%) and 728 women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 35 ($M = 25.24$ $SD = 4.68$), had a median of 14 years of education and made \$15,000 to \$19,999 annually, on average. All participants were unmarried but in romantic relationships; 31.0% were cohabiting. In terms of ethnicity, this sample was 8.5% Hispanic or Latino and 91.5% not Hispanic or Latino. In term of race, the sample was 77.9% White, 13.0% Black or African American, 3.2% Asian, 1.0% American Indian/Alaska Native, and .3% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; 3.6% reported being of more than one race and 1.0% did not report a race. Regarding parental marital status, 767 (59.2%) had biological parents who were married to each other, 262 (20.4%) had biological parents who were divorced from each other, and 122 (9.4%) had parents who never married each other.

Procedure

To recruit participants for the larger project, a calling center used a targeted-listed telephone sampling strategy to call households within the contiguous United States. After a brief introduction to the study, respondents were screened for participation. To qualify, respondents needed to be between 18 and 34 and be in an unmarried relationship with a member of the opposite sex that had lasted two months or longer. Those who qualified, agreed to participate, and provided complete mailing addresses ($N = 2,213$) were mailed forms within two weeks of their phone screening. Of those who were mailed forms, 1,447 individuals returned them (65.4% response rate); however, 152 of these survey respondents indicated on their forms that they did not meet requirements for participation, either because of age or relationship status, leaving a sample of 1295. Individuals who were missing data on the variables regarding parental marital status were excluded from these analyses ($n = 8$), as were participants who experienced the death of a parent ($n = 134$); thus the final sample for analysis included 1153 individuals. Participants were paid \$40 for completing the 30–45 minute survey.

Measures

Parents' marital status—All participants were asked a series of questions about their parents' marital status to determine if their parents had ever married one another, if they had ever divorced one another and if they were still married. In this portion of the survey, participants also indicated if either one of their biological parents had passed away (see exclusion criteria above) and the type of parental relationship that they spent the most time living with while they were growing up (see Table 1). For those whose parents never married, participants indicated here whether their parents ever lived together.

Relationship adjustment—The 4-item version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005; Spanier, 1976) was used to measure relationship adjustment. This measure includes items about thoughts about dissolution, frequency of confiding in one another, and a general item about how well the relationship is going. In this sample, Cronbach's alpha (α) = .81. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale was scored by summing the items. Higher scores indicate better relationship adjustment.

Dedication—Dedication, also called interpersonal commitment, was measured using the 14-item Dedication Scale from the Revised Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Example items are "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter" and "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' than 'me' and 'him/her.'" Each item is rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale. Several studies have demonstrated this measure's reliability and validity (e.g., Kline et al., 2004; Stanley & Markman, 1992). In this sample, α = .88. The mean of these items was used in the current study and higher scores reflect more dedication.

Negative communication—To measure negative communication, we used the Communication Danger Signs Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1997). On this 7-item scale, respondents rate items about communication in their relationships such as "little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts" on a 1 (*never or almost never*) to 3 (*frequently*) scale. This scale has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity in previous work (Kline et al., 2004). In the current study, α = .81. The mean of these items was used in analyses and higher scores indicated more negative communication.

Aggression—The frequency of physical aggression in participants' current relationship was assessed using the Minor Physical Assault subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity across several different samples (Newton, Connelly, & Landsverk, 2001; Straus et al., 1996). The Minor Physical Assault subscale assesses the frequency of behaviors such as pushing, grabbing, and slapping the partner on five items using a 0 (*this has never happened*) to 7 (*happened more than 20 times in the past year*) scale. The mean of these items was used in the current study; higher scores reflect more physical aggression toward the partner. In this sample, α = .81.

Parental conflict—Five items from the intensity and frequency subscales of the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) that have demonstrated reliability and validity with young adults (Kline, Wood, & Moore, 2003) were used to assess parental conflict. Sample items included "I saw my parents arguing" and "My parents nagged and complained about each other." All items were rated on a 1 (*definitely false*) to 6 (*definitely true*) scale. The mean of the items was used in analyses and higher scores indicate more intense and frequent parental conflict. In this sample, α = .73.

Parents' relationship as a model—To measure the extent to which participants considered their parents relationships a healthy model, we used the item “My parents' relationship is a good model for what a good relationship is like”. This item was measured on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale and was designed for this project. Thus, no prior research exists on its reliability or validity. It does, however, appear to have high face validity and to directly measure the construct we are interested in. This item was given at the next wave of the larger project from which the current sample was drawn. There were 136 (11.7%) participants from the sample who did not complete this second assessment and so were missing data on this item. ANOVAs indicated that those who answered this item and those who did not were not significantly different from each other on any of the other measures used for this study, suggesting that the data are missing at random.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Before running inferential statistics, we wished to understand with whom those in the never married and divorced parents groups lived while they were growing up. Table 1 shows that most participants whose parents never married grew up with a single mother (41.0%), their mother and a stepfather (19.7%), or “other” (22.1%). Very few of those with never married parents lived with both their biological parents (6.6%) whereas a sizable proportion of those with divorced parents indicated that they lived primarily with both biological parents together (29.9%). Similar to those with never married parents, many of those with divorced parents reported living primarily with a single mother (36.0%). Among those whose parents never married, 47.5% indicated that their parents never lived together while 34.7% said they parents did live together at some point, and 17.8% said they didn't know if their parents lived together. The individuals in the married-parents group who said they grew up with someone other than their biological parents together (3.6%) likely represents noise or unreliability in this measure.

Before testing the key hypotheses, we examined the associations among the measures included in the study (Table 2) and tested whether there were differences between those whose parents were married, divorced, or never married on the two potential mediator variables: parental conflict and parental role-modeling of romantic relationships (Table 3). The magnitude of correlations indicated our relationship quality measures (i.e., relationship adjustment, dedication, negative communication, physical aggression) were measuring distinct, though related constructs and that both parental conflict and parental role-modeling were significantly related to these indices of relationship quality.

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used to test for difference among those whose parents were married, divorced, and never married on the two potential mediator variables. There were significant differences among the three groups on parental conflict ($F(2,1141) = 53.32, p < .001$) as well as whether participants considered their parent's relationship a good model for a good relationship ($F(2,1014) = 179.64, p < .001$; Table 3). T-tests indicated that those with married parents perceived significantly less conflict and agreed more strongly that the parental relationship was a good model than those with divorced or never married parents. Also, those with never married parents perceived significantly less parental conflict and were more likely to agree that the parental relationship was a good model than those with divorced parents. Follow-up 3(parental marital status) \times 2(gender) ANOVAs indicated that none of these effects were significantly moderated by gender, $ps > .10$.

Hypothesis Tests

To test the first hypothesis that those with married parents would report higher relationship quality than those with divorced or never-married parents, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. Parents' marital status was the independent variable and the dependent variables included relationship adjustment, dedication, negative communication, and physical aggression. There were significant differences among the three groups on relationship adjustment ($F(2,1033) = 12.69, p < .001$) dedication ($F(2,1149) = 3.05, p < .05$), negative communication ($F(2,1148) = 10.95, p < .001$), and physical aggression ($F(2,1147) = 6.26, p < .01$; see Table 3 for means and SDs as well as effect sizes). Follow-up t-tests for bivariate associations indicated that those with married parents had significantly higher relationship adjustment and dedication as well as less negative communication and physical aggression than those whose parents never married. In addition, those with married parents had high relationship adjustment and less negative communication than those with divorced parents. Finally, those with divorced parents had higher relationship adjustment and less physical aggression than those whose parents never married. The differences tended to be largest between the married and never married groups. None of these effects were significantly moderated by gender, p 's $> .10$.

Tests of mediation—To test the second set of hypotheses and research questions we conducted tests of mediation. Baron and Kenny (1986) recommend that four steps be passed to establish mediation. To pass these steps, parents' marital status must be significantly associated with the indices of relationship quality (step 1), parents' marital status must be associated with parental conflict and/or the degree to which respondents saw their parents relationships a good model (i.e., the mediator; step 2), the mediator must be related to relationship quality when controlling for parental marital status (step 3), and the association between parental marital status and relationship quality must be reduced (step 4) to conclude that the association is mediated. We used this approach and Kenny's (2009) mediation computer program to test whether the significant differences in relationship quality between those with married versus divorced parents as well as between those with married versus never-married parents can be explained by parental conflict or parental role-modeling. A summary of results for the 16 mediational analyses are presented in Table 4. As was clear from the ANOVAs presented above, step 1 was not passed for the association between parental divorce and dedication or physical aggression. In addition, step 1 was not passed for the test of never-married parents \rightarrow parents a good model \rightarrow dedication. Finally, as might have been forecasted from the correlations in Table 2, step 3 was not passed for the never-married parents \rightarrow parents a good model \rightarrow physical aggression test. Thus, there were 10 mediation tests that passed steps 1–3. Sobel's tests indicated that in all twelve cases, the indirect effect was significantly different from zero (Table 4). The indirect effect accounted for 7.50 – 35.03% of the total effect for the married versus never-married comparisons and 34.48 – 76.31% of the total effect for the married versus divorced comparisons (Table 4). However, the direct path from parents' marital status to relationship quality remained significant when controlling for the mediator (i.e., c' in Table 4) in all but three of the 10 cases and the direct relationship was not reduced completely to zero in any case. Taken together, these results suggest that the mediators tended to explain the differences between divorced versus married groups better than for the never-married versus married groups, but that for both comparisons, the mediators only partially mediated the association between parents' marital status and relationship quality.

Discussion

The current study examined differences among those with married parents, divorced parents, and parents who never married each other in terms of several indices of romantic

relationship quality during early adulthood. Based on a social learning perspective and prior research, we predicted that those with married parents would report the highest relationship quality. This hypothesis was supported in that those with married parents reported higher relationship adjustment and less negative communication than those with divorced or never married parents. In addition, those with married parents reported stronger commitment to their relationships and less physical aggression than those with never married parents. For each of these indices of relationship quality, those whose parents never married tended to have the lowest quality relationships; the largest effect sizes were of medium size and were for the differences between those with married versus never-married parents. In fact, there was some evidence that those whose parents divorced were experiencing higher levels of relationship functioning than those whose parents never married, at least in terms of relationship adjustment and physical aggression. With regard to physical aggression, for example, 39% of those whose parents were married and 39% of those whose parents were divorced reported experiencing some form of physical aggression in their current relationship. The rate was higher for those whose parents never married each other; 53% of them reported ever experiencing physical aggression in the current relationship.

This study also focused on mediators of the association between parents' marital status and relationship quality in early adulthood. The two variables we examined as potential mediators were parental conflict and the degree to which individuals rated their parents relationship as a good model for their own relationships. Interestingly, although those with never married parents, among the three groups examined, tended to report the lowest relationship quality, it was the divorced group who rated their parents' relationship as being most conflictual and who were least likely to agree that their parents' relationship was a good model. We tested whether these parental conflict and role-modeling mediated the association between parents' marital status and relationship quality. Our hypothesis that the differences in relationship quality for those with divorced versus married parents would be at least partly explained by parental conflict and parental role-modeling was supported for relationship adjustment and negative communication. These findings suggest that part of the reason why having divorced parents may be associated with lower adjustment and more negative communication is that divorced families are characterized by both more parental conflict and less positive role-modeling of romantic relationships, providing support for social learning theory (Bandura, 1977).

These mediators tended to explain less about the differences between those with married and never-married parents than they did for the differences between those with married versus divorced parents. Thus, although we know that those whose parents never married have lower relationship quality during early adulthood than are those whose parents remain married, the mechanisms are not yet clear. There is likely a great deal of heterogeneity among the group of early adults whose parents never married in terms of growing up and family experiences, as might be indicated by the sizable "other" category in Table 1 for this group. There were very few in this group whose parents stayed together in a committed relationship throughout their lives and it is likely that this group also experienced the highest number of family transitions while growing up (cf. Aquilino, 1996). These transitions may relate to outcomes in ways that were not captured with the current data. Future research should consider subcategories of this group and possible distinctions among them. More detailed measurement of these subcategories and family experiences will be necessary than what was available in the current study to fully understand the impact of this understudied form of parental marital instability.

Nonetheless, the finding that positive relationship role-modeling can account for some of the differences between those with married versus divorced or never-married parents provides a potential new target for intervention. More robust measurement of this role-modeling

construct and replication studies are necessary, but the preliminary findings of the current study suggest that those with divorced or never-married parents might benefit from psychoeducation about what healthy relationships and marriages look like and how to achieve them. As practitioners, we cannot do much to change past levels of parental conflict, but we may be able to help early adults better understand positive, healthy models of romantic relationships. Given the high number of marriages that end in divorce and the declining rate of marriage, it could be that our society has entered an age in which fewer and fewer children grow up with positive models of what romantic relationships can be. Thus, psychoeducation about relationships may begin to play a more important role in forming and maintaining satisfying healthy relationships in early adulthood (Rhoades & Stanley, 2009).

One puzzling finding in the current study is that even though those with never married parents reported less parental conflict and saw their parents relationship as a better model for relationships than those with divorced parents, they experienced lower relationship quality than those with divorced parents, at least in terms of relationship adjustment and physical aggression. Given the directionality of these findings, parental conflict and role-modeling cannot explain these differences between those with divorced versus never married parents. What other mechanisms might help us understand why those whose parents never married report experiencing lower relationship adjustment and more physical aggression than those with divorced parents? One possibility is father involvement. We were not able to measure father involvement directly in the current study, but the descriptive data about who participants primarily lived with while growing up imply that those in the never married group, on average, likely had less contact with their fathers than those in the divorced group. Prior research indicates that father involvement, especially financial support and feelings of closeness, is positively linked to a host of child well-being indices (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999) and there is some evidence that father involvement is associated with better relationship functioning among college students (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001). In fact, father involvement has also been shown to mediate the relationship between family structure and behavior problems during adolescence (Carlson, 2006). It could be the case that those whose parents never married had less involved fathers than those whose parents divorced. In fact, some of them may not have ever known their fathers whereas as most of those in divorced group would have lived with their fathers for at least part of the time growing up. Father involvement may be a key construct to include in future research on early adults with never married parents.

There are several other possible explanations for the differences in relationship quality observed between early adults with divorced versus never-married parents. In the early literature on divorce, stepfamilies, and single parents, researchers theorized that cultural stereotypes against these “nontraditional” family forms may have made them more difficult for the family members involved (Cherlin, 1978; Uzoka, 1979). There is also evidence that at least in the 1970s and 1980s, individuals whose parents were not married were seen less favorably than those with married parents (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990). Perhaps those whose parents never married face more negative stereotypes or stigmas than those with divorced parents today, making relationships more difficult for them. It may also be that individuals whose parents never married and those whose parents divorced have different relationships with stepparents and that these relationships could help explain the differences in relationship quality among offspring. Additionally, the number and types of family transitions a child experiences while growing up is related adult relationship formation behaviors (Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009) and those whose parents never married may have had very different family transitions than those with divorced parents. Lastly, in addition to these process explanations, sociodemographic characteristics, such as lower family income and lower educational attainment among those with never-married parents may help explain differences among these groups.

Although previous research has demonstrated stronger effects of wives' parental divorce on marital outcomes (Story et al., 2004; Whitton, Rhoades et al., 2008), none of the effects reported in this paper were significantly moderated by gender. It may be that these kinds of gender differences are more likely to appear in marriage than in early dating relationships, as much of the previous research has focused on married couples, or it could be the case that the within-couple gender differences are stronger than gender differences in a between-subjects design like the current study. That is, it could be the case that wives' family structure influences marital quality more than husbands' family structure, but that in general, both men and women are influenced by their family structures, as is suggested in the current study. Future research that includes both a within and between-subjects design with dyadic data could be useful in helping the field to understand these somewhat paradoxical findings.

There are several limitations to the present study that should be considered. First, although the sample used in the current sample was fairly representative of unmarried individuals between 18 and 35 who were in relationships, there is some evidence that having divorced parents is associated with a lower likelihood of being in a close relationship (Segrin et al., 2005). Thus, it will be important for future research on family structure to examine not only the quality of close relationship, but also the timing and likelihood of being in them altogether. An additional limitation is that this study captured only three static family-structure categories. Examining the role of never-married parents on relationships in early adulthood is novel, but it may be important in future research to capture more nuanced information about family background. For example, we were unable to directly analyze how long these never-married parents lived together or whether they married other partners at some point. Additionally, future research should examine what role, if any, the timing of parental divorce plays in children's outcomes. Some participants in the study might have had parents who recently divorced while other participants' parents divorced when participants were young children. Similarly, we were unable to examine how subsequent parental marriages or the amount of contact participants had with each biological parent might relate to outcomes.

Clearly, the increasingly common experience of growing up with parents who never married one another needs further attention in this field. In particular, it seems important to better understand what aspects of this family structure may impact future adult relationships. The mediators that at least partly explain differences in relationship experiences between those with divorced and non-divorced parents (parental conflict, relationship modeling) do not function as well in explaining differences between those with never married versus married parents. This study demonstrates that among those with married, divorced, or parents who never married each other, those with never-married parents tend to report the lowest romantic relationship quality and the highest amount of physical aggression in their dating relationships. Although parental conflict can partly explain the differences between those with married versus divorced parents, parental conflict is not useful in explaining why those with never-married parents tend to report lower quality relationships than those with married parents. Individuals' appraisals of whether their parents' relationship was a good role model explained more of the association between parents' marital status and relationship quality, but was not useful for the comparison between the married and never-married groups as it was for the married versus divorced group comparisons. Nevertheless, the current study highlights the importance of continuing to examine how having parents who never marry affects relationship development and quality in early adulthood and how role models for healthy relationships may buffer against possible negative effects of parents' marital status. As noted earlier, this study also suggests new areas for intervention with young adults about romantic relationships.

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Table 1

Participants' Primary Living Arrangements by Biological Parents' Marital Status

| | Parents' Marital Status | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------|---------------|
| | Married | Divorced | Never married |
| Single mother | 9 (1.2%) | 94 (36.0%) | 50 (41.0%) |
| Single father | 1 (0.1%) | 19 (7.3%) | 0 (0.0%) |
| Both biological parents | 739 (96.4%) | 78 (29.9%) | 8 (6.6%) |
| Biological father and stepmother | 4 (0.5%) | 11 (4.2%) | 3 (2.5%) |
| Adoptive parents | 3 (0.4%) | 1 (0.4%) | 10 (8.2%) |
| Biological mother and stepfather | 4 (0.5%) | 34 (13.0%) | 24 (19.7%) |
| Other | 7 (0.9%) | 24 (9.2%) | 27 (22.1%) |
| Total | 767 | 261 | 122 |

Note. One participant whose parents were divorced and two whose parents were married were missing data on who they lived with most while growing up.

Table 2

Correlations among Key Variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. Relationship Adjustment | — | | | | |
| 2. Dedication | .66*** | | | | |
| 3. Negative Communication | -.62*** | -.34*** | | | |
| 4. Physical Aggression | -.22*** | -.12*** | .33*** | | |
| 5. Parental Conflict | -.14*** | -.06* | .16*** | .10*** | |
| 6. Parents a Good Model | .18*** | .08** | -.13*** | -.04*** | -.52*** |

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

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes for Parental Marital Status Comparisons

| Construct | Married M (SD) | Divorced M (SD) | Never Married M (SD) | Married vs. divorced | | Divorced vs. never | | Married vs. never | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|--------|--------------------|--------|-------------------|--------|
| | | | | ES | ES | ES | ES | ES | ES |
| Relationship Adjustment | 16.39 (3.44) | 15.56 (3.59) | 14.75 (4.04) | .24** | .21* | .24*** | .21* | .44*** | .23* |
| Dedication | 5.40 (1.01) | 5.36 (0.98) | 5.16 (1.10) | .04 | .19 | .04 | .19 | .23* | .23* |
| Negative Communication | 1.61 (0.48) | 1.72 (0.50) | 1.81 (0.56) | -.22** | -.17 | -.22*** | -.17 | -.38*** | -.29** |
| Physical Aggression | 0.39 (0.83) | 0.38 (0.71) | 0.67 (1.07) | .01 | -.33** | .01 | -.33** | -.29** | .94*** |
| Parents a Good Model | 3.69 (1.22) | 2.06 (1.10) | 2.50 (1.31) | 1.41*** | -.37** | 1.41*** | -.37** | .94*** | -.28** |
| Parental Conflict | 2.45 (0.72) | 3.00 (0.79) | 2.67 (0.84) | -.73*** | .40*** | -.73*** | .40*** | -.28** | -.28** |

Note. Effect sizes are Cohen's *d* values. Significant differences between two group, based on *t*-tests:

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Summary of Tests of Mediation

| Construct | Mediator: Parental Conflict | | | | Mediator: Parents a Good Model | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--|--------------------|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|---|
| | Married vs. divorced | | Married vs. never | | Married vs. divorced | | Married vs. never | |
| | % | c (c') | % | c (c') | % | c (c') | % | c (c') |
| Relationship Adjustment | 34.48 | -.87 [*] (-.57 [*]) | 7.50 [*] | -1.62 [*] (-1.50 [*]) | 76.31 [*] | -.89 [*] (-.21) | 35.03 [*] | -1.38 [*] (-.89 [*]) |
| Dedication | Step 1 not passed | | 9.41 [*] | -.23 [*] (-.21 [*]) | Step 1 not passed | | Step 1 not passed | |
| Negative Communication | 53.39 | .11 [*] (.05) | 11.44 [*] | .20 [*] (.18 [*]) | 58.75 [*] | .12 [*] (.05) | 25.51 [*] | .18 [*] (.13 [*]) |
| Physical Aggression | Step 1 not passed | | 7.99 [*] | .29 [*] (.27 [*]) | Step 1 not passed | | Step 3 not passed | |

Note. % = percentage of total effect that is mediated. c = unstandardized estimate for the association between parents' marital status and the relationship quality variable. c' = unstandardized estimate for the association between parents' marital status and the relationship quality variable controlling for the mediator.

* $p < .05$.