

Young women's comfort with closeness after parental divorce: Does a close relationship with dad make a difference? What promotes resiliency?

by

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B.A., Ben Gurion University, 2006  
M.Sc., University of Victoria, 2010

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University of Victoria

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## **Abstract**

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Study 1 examined the role closeness to father plays in the developmental-like process associating family form (divorced/non-divorced) with later young adulthood attachment style in a sample of 525 men and women. Participants reported their closeness to father while growing up and current comfort with closeness. As expected, closeness to father fully mediated the association between family form and comfort with closeness for both men and women, but more strongly for women. The association between family form and comfort with closeness was only evident for women; women who experienced parental divorce reported feeling less comfortable with closeness in relationships. Contrary to expectation, the mediating role of closeness to father in the association between family and form and comfort with closeness was not moderated by gender. The key role fathers may play in fostering their male and female children's later attachment style in divorced and nondivorced families, as well as the attenuated role of gender in explaining young adults' attachment style, are discussed. Study 2 examined the role of

dyadic and family environment factors which are implicated in young adults' insecure attachment in predicting relational resilience. Relationally resilient women were defined as women who experienced parental divorce yet experience comfort with closeness. Ninety-three women reported on the level of overt and subtle conflict in their families-of-origin, the effectiveness of their parents' coparenting, and their closeness to father. Hierarchical logistic regression analyses predicted membership in the relationally resilient group based on these dyadic and family environment predictors. As expected, results demonstrate that lower pre-divorce subtle and overt conflict; higher levels of coparenting before separation, during separation, and after separation; and closeness to father while growing up all predicted membership in the relationally resilient group. However, no one variable uniquely predicted membership in the relationally resilient group. Study 2's results are translated to preventative implications at the family, parental, dyadic and individual levels. Final remarks integrating the results of both studies follow.

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## Précis

Drawing on attachment theory as a framework, my dissertation aimed to illuminate how young adults' feelings of closeness with their fathers influenced their comfort with closeness in romantic relationships. The investigation, comprised of two studies, focused particularly on young women, who appear most vulnerable to attachment insecurities, and their perceptions of their fathers, who are understudied in comparison to mothers.

As is elaborated in the literature review, the current research built on the empirical evidence for adult children of divorce (ACOD) tending to express higher levels of insecure attachment than those raised by continuously married parents. For example, ACOD show less commitment to their relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010) and exhibit more pro-divorce attitudes (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011) than their non-divorced counterparts. Scant literature examines the influence of parental divorce on women's attachment style. However, the available research demonstrates that young women from divorced backgrounds are more prone to exhibiting difficulties with trust and closeness in relationships than men from the same family form (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Some research suggests that the effect sizes for the potentially deleterious influences of divorce diminish considerably once the quality of parent-offspring relationship is taken into account (King, 2002), which highlights the importance of examining the role parent-child relationships may play in explaining the association between family form and attachment style. Further to the well-understood literature on mother-offspring relationships post-divorce (Luedemann, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2006), it was now important to focus on the father-offspring relationship, and its discriminatory importance in relation to young

adults', and in particular young women's, attachment styles. Studies demonstrate that the experience of parental divorce negatively impacts young adults' (e.g., Aquilino, 2006), and in particular, young women's (Finley & Schwartz, 2007) relationships with their fathers. Moreover, it seems that a divorced father's involvement in his adult children's lives (Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruu, Haukkala, & Aro, 2011), and especially his adult daughters' lives (Clark & Kanoy, 1998), may foster these young persons' abilities to develop close intimate relationships.

The current study used attachment theory as a framework for understanding the relationship between closeness to fathers and comfort with closeness in relationships, and to reflect these summarized findings and the gaps they reveal. Using a large existent data set (Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009), the first study examined whether young adults from divorced backgrounds, and in particular, young women, feel less close to their fathers, compared to those raised by continuously married parents. A mediation model was suggested such that closeness to father mediated the association between family form (divorced/non-divorced) and comfort with closeness. It was further expected that young women who experienced parental divorce feel less close to their fathers, and thus that the mediation effect was pronounced for young women, resulting in a moderated mediation. Lastly, it was expected that young women who experienced parental divorce feel less comfortable with closeness in romantic relationships than their male counterparts.

It is in the context of Study 1's findings that Study 2 focused on the understudied population of young women who experienced their parents' divorce. Adopting a strengths-based lens, Study 2 "profiled" a group of relationally resilient women - women from divorced families who demonstrate comfort with closeness. The profiling was

illuminated by recognized protective factors identified in the literature as mitigating the potentially adverse effects of parental divorce, including low levels of interparental conflict and high levels of coparenting cooperation as well as high levels of closeness with father. The second study's findings were elaborated in the form of clinical practice implications.

## Study 1

### *Attachment Theory as a Framework*

It is widely accepted that children's early relationships with their parents provide the foundation for adult relationships, including romantic involvements (Bretherton, 1985). In its original conceptualization, attachment theory generated an empirically validated framework for understanding how under healthy circumstances the quality of children's relationships with their parents shapes their adult relationships through a gradually developing confidence that an attachment figure will be available at times of stress and need (Bowlby, 1973). Individual differences in achieving this confidence or "secure attachment" – or under less positive circumstances "insecure or anxious attachment" – were identified and categorized as children's "attachment styles" (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). A second generation of attachment theory development went on to propose adult attachment styles to describe internal "working models" or interpersonal orientations to close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1987) which are rooted in Ainsworth's et al.'s (1978) original categories of children's "secure," "anxious," and "avoidant" attachments. Feeney, Noller, and Hanrahan (1994) termed these same dimensions of attachment as "confidence," "preoccupation with relationships," and "discomfort with closeness" respectively, in the context of developing a reliable and valid measure of adult attachment. With measurement advances, scholars have demonstrated continuity of attachment over the course of the human life span (see Rothbard & Shaver, 1994, for a review), as well as its discontinuity; the latter sometimes occurring when

adults experience relationships that disconfirm their working models (Hazan, Hutt, & Markus, 1990), such as parental divorce (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Considering both continuous and discontinuous childhood experiences through the inclusion of divorced and non-divorced family backgrounds, the current research uses attachment theory as a framework for understanding how young adults' feelings of closeness to their fathers – much less frequently studied than relationships with their mothers – influence their comfort with closeness in romantic relationships.

### ***The Role of Divorce in Young Adult Attachment***

Compared to being raised by continuously married parents, adult children of divorce (ACOD) tend to express lower levels of commitment to their romantic relationships (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). From an attachment theory perspective, these results may be interpreted as expressions of attachment insecurity; children who witness the fracture of their parents' bond, and who may experience a negative impact of these family changes on their relationships with their parents, may go on to fear the termination of their own romantic relationships. This, in turn, may potentially cause them to make less of an emotional investment in their relationships or to avoid becoming close to romantic partners altogether. In fact, studies have found parental divorce to be related to a positive attitude toward divorce (Cui et al., 2011; Riggio & Weiser, 2008) and to diminished beliefs in lifelong marriage (Segrin & Taylor, 2006). While these researchers suggest that parental divorce may impact relationship commitment and foster pro-divorce attitudes – both of which can be seen as expressions of attachment insecurity – they neglect to examine ACOD's levels of discomfort with closeness (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). This diminished comfort

with closeness is a dimension of attachment corresponding with attachment avoidance (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) and referring to difficulties with trusting, depending upon, or getting close to others.

Only a small number of studies have examined the association between parental divorce and young adults' difficulties establishing trust in romantic relationships, and their results are mixed. In a sample of 464 coupled heterosexual partners, women raised in divorced families reported less trust in their close partners' honesty and benevolence, and overall more ambivalent feelings regarding their relationships than women from non-divorced families (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). In contrast, using data from a 17-year longitudinal study of marital instability, King (2002) examined whether parental divorce is associated with young adults' trust in partners and others. She found that parental divorce is unrelated to offspring's trust in intimate partners, but related to offspring's trust in others (King, 2002).

It is noteworthy that these studies either centred on adults' feelings of trust in their partners in a current romantic relationship, or did not report participants' relationship status. Since trust in relationships constitutes a component of comfort with closeness corresponding with avoidant attachment (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994), it would be reasonable to examine these connections in a multitude of relationship statuses (i.e., single, casually dating, stable relationship, married, divorced). This is because experiencing discomfort with closeness may inhibit young adults from developing committed romantic relationships in the first place. Therefore, in only sampling coupled partners when examining links between parental divorce and young adults' difficulty in establishing trust and closeness in romantic relationships, it is plausible that researchers

may have under-sampled their population of interest. This hypothesis was indirectly examined in a qualitative study including 40 unmarried young adults' views of the impact of their parents' divorces. In conducting life-story interviews, Cartwright (2006) found the theme of "problems in intimate relationships" to emerge as a significant and discrete category. Specifically, participants reported hesitation about entering relationships, doubts about their own ability to sustain relationships, as well as a lack of trust in others. Cartwright's (2006) study further highlights the importance of examining discomfort with closeness as a facet of attachment insecurity in a sample of young adults of varying relationship situations.

### **Role of Divorce in Young Women's Attachment**

While few studies examine the association between parental divorce and young adults' difficulties establishing closeness in romantic relationships, even fewer examine gender differences in this association. This is surprising, since a large body of literature suggests that the intergenerational transmission of divorce is stronger for females than for males (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). The limited existing research suggests that women from divorced families are more prone to exhibiting difficulties with trust and closeness than men from the same family form. Mullett and Stolberg (2002) assessed differences in levels of intimacy in four types of couples including those in which: Neither person experienced parental divorce, only the woman experienced parental divorce, only the man experienced parental divorce, or both partners experienced parental divorce. Their findings suggest that while couples in which the woman experienced parental divorce reported significantly lower levels of intimacy, divorce did not predict lower levels of



intimacy in couples in which the man experienced parental divorce, or in couples in which both partners experienced parental divorce.

Using the sample examined in this study, Ehrenberg, Perrin, and Bush (2009) examined differences in attachment style in 537 young men and women, half of whom experienced parental divorce. Their results show that young adults who experienced parental divorce feel less comfortable with closeness in relationships. In particular, results demonstrate that women who experienced parental divorce are significantly less comfortable with closeness than their male counterparts.

Although research suggests that parental divorce is negatively associated with trust in relationships, and that these effects may be stronger for women, some research suggests that these effects are considerably smaller once the quality of past parent-offspring relationship is taken into account (King, 2002). In a sample of 646 young adults, King (2002) examined the associations among parental divorce; trust in parents, partners, and others; and the quality of earlier parent-adolescent relationships. Her results demonstrated that parental divorce has no influence on trust in partners, but did impact trust in mothers and in people in general. Even then, once the quality of parent-adolescent relationship is taken into account, this effect disappeared (King, 2002). In an earlier study examining the association between family form and romantic relationships, family cohesion and expressiveness accounted for a significant and substantial amount (30%) of variance in levels of trust in their current romantic partner in respondents whose parents had divorced, versus less than 10% in respondents from non-divorced families (Sprague & Kinney, 1997). These findings emphasize the importance of examining mechanisms that can better explain the association between family form and attachment

in romantic relationships, especially in young adults who experienced their parents' divorce.

In sum, parental divorce may play a considerable role in predicting expressions of attachment insecurity, especially among women. However, some evidence suggests that the potentially adverse impact of divorce on young adult attachment may be mitigated by the quality of parent-offspring relationships. From an attachment vantage point, relationship closeness with parents may serve as a model for relationship closeness with romantic partners, so that young adults who are close to their parents may be better able to develop trust and closeness with their romantic partners, perhaps even despite experiencing parental divorce.

### ***The Role of Divorce in the Relationship with Father***

An accumulation of studies demonstrates that the experience of parental divorce negatively impacts young adults' relationships with their parents (e.g., Booth & Amato, 1994), especially with their fathers (e.g., Aquilino, 2006). Young adults' relationships with their mothers may remain unaffected (e.g., Aquilino, 2006), and sometimes even become closer (e.g., Riggio & Valenzuela, 2011). If, as purported by attachment theory, relationship closeness with parents may serve as a model for relationship closeness with romantic partners, young adults' relationships with their fathers might be of paramount importance in influencing their ability to develop closeness in romantic relationships (especially in heterosexual relationships). Therefore, building upon the well-understood literature on mother-offspring relationships post-divorce (Luedemann, Ehrenberg, & Hunter, 2006), it is now important to focus on the father-offspring relationship, how it changes after the divorce, and its discriminatory importance in relation to young adults,

and in particular, young women's attachment styles and their expressions.

Research demonstrates that ACOD report less paternal involvement than children from non-divorced homes (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). This may be due, in part, to a decreased opportunity for fathers to spend time with their children, as following divorce, most children reside with their mothers, 14% of children have a shared living arrangement, and 5% have split living arrangements (in which some children reside with one parent and the others with the other parent) (Statistics Canada, 2009). Consistent with these current custody trends, Schwartz and Finley (2009) also demonstrated that ACOD report less paternal involvement than their non-divorced counterparts. Recruiting an ethnically representative sample of 1,376 young adults, Schwartz and Finley (2009) examined the extent to which reports of, as well as desires for, paternal involvement differed between divorced and non-divorced participants across instrumental and expressive domains of paternal involvement. These domains of paternal involvement were previously empirically derived using factor analysis (Finley & Schwartz, 2004). Instrumental involvement includes discipline, protecting, providing income, monitoring schoolwork, moral development, developing responsibility, career development, and developing independence. Expressive paternal involvement includes caregiving, companionship, sharing activities, emotional development, social development, spiritual development, physical development, and leisure. Schwartz and Finley's (2009) results demonstrate that young adults from divorced families report significantly lower rates of instrumental as well as expressive paternal involvement than young adults from non-divorced backgrounds. Moreover, the five domains associated with the strongest family form differences are in the instrumental domain. Interestingly, albeit experiencing

substantially lower rates of instrumental involvement, ACOD convey the greatest desires for expressive, and not instrumental, involvement with their fathers. Taken together, this study's results suggest that ACOD perceive themselves to have benefitted considerably less from their fathers' involvement, compared with young adults from non-divorced families. These findings regarding the gap between reported and desired fathers' involvement are especially concerning since lower levels of post-divorce paternal involvement are related to diminished father-offspring relationships over time (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003), and further highlight the importance of using young adults' (opposed to solely parents') self-reports.

While considerable research has focused on paternal involvement after divorce, only one study could be located that examined young persons' feelings of closeness with their fathers. Drawing on literature indicating the importance of post-divorce paternal involvement to later adolescent well-being (King & Sobolewski, 2006), Scott, Booth, King, and Johnson (2007) used a 3-wave longitudinal survey to examine feelings of closeness with fathers in a nationally representative sample of 483 adolescents. Their findings show that while a majority of young persons experienced some decline in paternal closeness after their parents' divorce, there was still considerable variability in post-divorce father-child closeness, including some close pre-divorce relationships being preserved over time and some poor relationships becoming closer. These results, considered solely from young persons' perspectives, underscore the importance of investigating patterns of post-divorce closeness with fathers among young adults.

## **The Role of Divorce in the Relationship with Father: A Closer Look at Young Adult Daughters**

Research examining gender differences in the association between family form and father-offspring relationships is scant. The small body of literature available has focused on gender disparities in actual and desired time spent with fathers after the parents' divorce (Fabricius, 2003), and has investigated discrepancies in actual and desired paternal involvement (Finley & Schwartz, 2007). In a study of 829 college students from divorced families, young adults were asked to report on their actual and desired living arrangements, as well as perceptions of their fathers' and mothers' desired living arrangements for them. Interestingly, women reported wishing to spend significantly less time with their fathers than did men. Young women in this study also perceived that their fathers desired to spend more time with them than they themselves desired, whereas there was no significant difference between the time young men perceived that their fathers wished to spend with them and the time they themselves wanted to spend with their fathers (Fabricius, 2003).

Finley and Schwartz (2007) surveyed 1,989 young adult university students about the extent of involvement they wanted with their fathers. They found that young women from divorced families were significantly less likely than both young men from divorced families and young women from non-divorced families to characterize the reported level of paternal expressive involvement as "just right," with 86% of them desiring more expressive involvement (e.g., caregiving, companionship).

At first glance, the results of the above studies may appear incompatible. Specifically, it is somewhat surprising to discover that women would like to spend less

time with their fathers but would also like them to demonstrate more expressive involvement. However, this disparity may speak to the importance of differentiating between the quantitative and qualitative aspects of father-daughter relationship. For instance, insofar as desired involvement indices may tap into “emotional longing” for a father-daughter relationship (Finley & Schwartz, 2007), daughters may convey their wish for more quality in the relationship with their father, and not necessarily an increase in the quantity of time spent with their fathers. Furthermore, during current times more than ever before, fathers may demonstrate their involvement while not physically present. For example, a father might be sending encouraging and caring emails, texts or social media messages before an important athletic completion or during a stressful period in the daughter’s life. These results are also consistent with findings suggesting that custody is not related to changes in the quality of adult child–parent relationship following divorce (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003) nor to young adult attachment style and relationship satisfaction (Olivas & Stoltenberg, 1998).

Further evidence of gender differences is provided in a Canadian study of the long-term effects of parental divorce on parent-offspring relationships (Frank, 2007). Two hundred and seven young adults from divorced and non-divorced families who attended a university mental health clinic reported on their current relationships with their fathers and mothers using a 24-item relationship survey. Their findings showed that young adults from divorced families rated their father-offspring relationships significantly more negatively than young adults from non-divorced backgrounds, with young women from divorced families in particular reporting significantly more negative relationships than young men from divorced families.

In investigating the quality of father-daughter relationships post-divorce, only a few studies have considered father-daughter closeness. This is surprising since feelings of closeness to divorced fathers are particularly important to offsprings' well-being (Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007) and are an essential element in the development of intimate relationships (Golish, 2000). While paternal involvement may represent one facet of the parental role, closeness to father as experienced by his daughter may tap more into the experiential quality of the relationship. Therefore, it is possible that daughters may rate their fathers as "involved" (e.g., driving them to extra-curricular activities, attending parent-teacher meetings) yet not feel close to them. In considering the role of father-daughter closeness in affecting daughters' later comfort levels with closeness in romantic relationships, the differentiation between these two constructs of "involvement" and "closeness" is important, and one cannot be extrapolated from the other.

Concerning the limited research exploring father-daughter closeness after parental divorce, in a recent Finnish study of 1471 adolescents, Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruusu, and Haukkala (2011) examined whether parent-adolescent closeness mediated the relationship between parental divorce and offspring's quality of intimate relationships in young adulthood. Their results revealed that young women from divorced families demonstrate less closeness with fathers as teenagers, compared with young men from divorced families. Research further demonstrates that daughters are also less likely than sons to experience an increase in closeness to their fathers when they become a parent themselves (Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007).

In a qualitative study of 13 young women, Radina (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with adult women of divorce in order to assess the closeness they experienced

with their fathers post-divorce. Her results revealed four typologies of the father-daughter relationship: “Father-Daughter,” in which women described experiencing closeness to father and spoke of him in predominantly positive ways; “Friends,” in which women considered their fathers to be friend-like yet somewhat less close than the former category; “Ambivalence,” expressed as both feelings of closeness as well as resentment and distance, and; “Angry” in which women described little or no affection toward their fathers and had little contact.

### ***Divorced Fathers’ Role in Young Adult Attachment Style***

Divorce researchers have contributed to the vast literature depicting paternal love as a significant predictor of psychological well-being by studying the effects of non-resident father-offspring closeness on children’s and young adults’ well-being. In a meta-analysis spanning 63 studies from 1970 to 1998, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) concluded that feeling close to one’s father diminishes the risk of externalizing and internalizing behaviours, and these results were recently replicated (King & Sobolewski, 2006). However, lacking is research focusing more specifically on the influence of divorced fathers on their young adult children’s attachment styles and their relationship functioning. One recent study examined the impact of parental divorce and paternal involvement on dimensions of insecure attachment in a sample of 408 young adults (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001). Replicating earlier studies (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Summers, Forehand, Armistead, & Tannenbaum, 1998), their results showed that college students who experienced parental divorce exhibited more insecure attachment in romantic relationships, and less trust in intimate partners, whereas paternal involvement was associated with young adult commitment, intimacy, and trust in intimate partners.



Interestingly, the interaction effect of paternal involvement and family form was not significantly predictive of relationship variables. However, as the authors point out, ACOD are still more susceptible to poor relationship outcomes since they usually receive considerably less involved fathering than their non-divorced counterparts (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001).

### **Divorced Fathers' Role in their Adult Daughters' Attachment Styles**

Although a growing body of literature acknowledges the importance of attending to the father-daughter relationship in non-divorced and divorced families (Nielsen, 2011), virtually no studies have investigated the specific roles divorced fathers play in possibly enhancing their young adult daughter's intimate relationship experiences. One exception is a recent examination of the association between parental divorce in childhood and young adult intimate relationship quality (Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruusu, Haukkala, & Aro, 2011). Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruusu, Haukkala, and Aro (2011) surveyed 1,471 high-school students with histories of parental divorce about their parent-child relationships, and the presence and quality of intimate relationships at age 32. Their results showed that while women and men from divorced families were more often divorced or separated by the age of 32 years than those with married parents, parental divorce was associated with poorer intimate relationship quality for women only.

In an earlier study, Clark and Kanoy (1998) examined the effects of father-adult daughter closeness on 96 young adult daughters' levels of trust, anxiety and satisfaction in dating relationships, 26% of whom had experienced their parents' divorce. Their results showed that young women from divorced families experienced significantly less closeness to their fathers. However, their results further point to comparable levels of

trust, anxiety and satisfaction in their dating relationships. In discussing this finding the authors suggest that since participants experienced parental divorce at an average age of six, “it is possible that young women may have recovered from the divorce sufficiently to show few negative effects other than in their intimate relationship with their noncustodial father” (p. 175). However, it is also possible that in studying young women who are romantically involved, the authors are inadvertently examining a sample which may be more resilient and who is indeed less affected by the father-daughter relationship.

### ***Current Study***

Taken together, presented findings suggest that parental divorce impacts young adults’ expressions of attachment, with women more vulnerable to insecure attachment. Research further suggests that women experiencing parental divorce have less satisfactory relationships with their fathers than women in non-divorced families. A third line of research indicates that the quality of the father-offspring bond is instrumental in fostering offspring relationship quality, especially for young adult women. This study draws on these three discrete lines of research, offering a unique, convergent examination of the process linking family form to comfort with closeness via closeness with father in men and women, in a single, systematic investigation. This study goes beyond examining mean differences between groups to highlight specific causal pathways in the link between family form and comfort with closeness. As far as could be ascertained, the current study is the first to examine closeness between divorced fathers and their offsprings’ later comfort with closeness. The current study further aims to address a few other notable gaps in the literature. Specifically, a) While past research mainly focused on relationship functioning as a way to assess some of the psychosocial consequences of

divorce, this study draws on attachment theory to focus on comfort with closeness, a representation of avoidant anxiety, as a key construct; and b) Past research focusing on expressions of attachment insecurity largely studied young adults in romantic relationships. This practice excludes those individuals who do not regard themselves as capable of being in a close relationship, which is of considerable theoretical interest to the study of avoidant attachment (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). The current study therefore examines links between family form and young adult attachment insecurity in a sample of young adults of various relationship statuses.

### ***Study Hypotheses***

Using attachment theory as a framework, this study proposes a model of the link between family form and comfort with closeness (see Figure 1). It suggests that closeness with father may act as a buffer, contributing to elevated levels of comfort with closeness in romantic relationships for young adults, and that this “buffering” is stronger for women than men. Specifically, it is hypothesized that 1) Young adults from divorced families will feel less close to their fathers than their non-divorced counterparts; 2) Women who experienced parental divorce will feel less close to their fathers than their men counterparts; 3) Women who experienced parental divorce will feel less close to their fathers than women who did not experience parental divorce. Next, mediation, moderation and moderated mediation models are proposed as follows: 1) Model 1: Closeness with father will mediate the association between family form and comfort with closeness; 2) Model 2: The association between family form and closeness to father will be moderated by gender; divorced women will feel less close to their father; 3) Model 3: The link between family form and young adults’ comfort with closeness will be stronger

for young women than young men, suggesting a moderation of the effect of family form on comfort with closeness; and 4) Combining models 1, 2, and 3, Model 4 proposes that the mediating role of closeness to father on the association between family form and comfort with closeness will be more pronounced for women than men, resulting in a moderated mediation; and that the link between family form and young adults' comfort with closeness will be stronger for young women than young men, suggesting a moderation of the effect of family form on comfort with closeness.

### ***Method***

#### **Participants**

This study drew upon the “Young Adult Study” dataset (Ehrenberg, Perrin & Bush, 2009). As such, the original sample consisted of 537 young adults. Seven participants did not report their closeness to father, and seven other values were missing on reports of comfort with closeness. Missing values analyses were conducted to determine whether these values were missing completely at random. The Little's MCAR test obtained for this study's data resulted in a chi-square = 2.86 ( $df = 2$ ;  $p = .24$ ), which indicates that any missing data is missing completely at random. Therefore, listwise deletion was used to obtain the final sample, which consisted of 525 men and women.

Participants reported being enrolled at a mid-sized university (87%), attending a local high-school (2.6%) or living in the community (10.4%). Undergraduate students were recruited from a psychology participant pool composed of Psychology 100 students, who received bonus points in exchange for their participation. Ages ranged from 15.5-30.6 years ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 2.74$ ). Participants identified as Canadian (65%) and were of

Western European (13%), Asian (9%), East-Indian (4%) or other (5%) ethnic or cultural background. Participants self-identified as upper class (1.5%), upper-middle class (56%), lower-middle class (27%), or lower class (16%). Two hundred and seventy participants had experienced their parents' divorce (50.3%) and two hundred sixty-seven grew up with continuously married parents (49.7%). Mean and modal ages at parental separation were 9 years ( $SD=5.5$ ), and the range was from 0 to 24 years. Of the total sample, 165 participants (30.7%) were living with one or both parents, 196 participants (36.5%) were living with roommates, 79 participants (14.7%) were living alone, 45 participants (8.4%) were living with their romantic partners, and the rest (9.7%) reported various other living arrangements. Of participants from divorced families, 59% reported they were in their mother's custody, 10% reported father's custody, 23% reported joint custody, 1% reported that custody changed back and forth while they were growing up, and 1% reported that they were near adults at the time of divorce and no custody arrangement was established.

### **Procedure**

The "Young Adult Study" procedures used to gather the larger data set (Ehrenberg, Perrin & Bush, 2009) are in compliance with the Ethical Standards of the Canadian and American Psychological Associations and were approved by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Committee. The researchers saw each participant individually. After informed consent was obtained, participants were asked to complete a self-report demographics and background information questionnaire. Following the completion of the questionnaire, participants were interviewed by the researcher for approximately half an hour, and were asked largely similar and some slightly different

questions based on their family background (divorced/non-divorced). Then, participants completed a questionnaire packet, including, among others, the measures of closeness to father and comfort with closeness considered in the currently proposed study. Finally, each participant was debriefed and any questions were answered. The entire procedure entailed approximately an hour and a half per participant.

### **Measures**

The Young Adult Interview (YAI; Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009) is a 23-item semi-structured interview measuring comprehensive personal demographics, past and current family structure and family functioning, relationship history, as well as perceptions of the relationship between parents' divorce and relationship style. All participants were asked the same set of initial questions (e.g., gender, age, SES, ethnicity, religion), but slightly different questions were asked in a second section, depending on whether the individual experienced their parents' divorce during childhood or whether their parents remained married.

*Closeness to Father* was measured using a modified version of Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch's (1991) self-report closeness scale. This scale is composed of 10 items that assessed participants' perceived affection, psychological closeness, comfort level, and time spent with their fathers. The Likert-type scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating a closer relationship. Previous researchers using the closeness scale with adolescents reported good internal consistency as indicated with an alpha coefficient of .81 (Afifi & McManus, 2010). The scale was slightly modified to reflect the young adult population examined, and eliminated 4 questions pertaining more to the "caught-in-the-middle" construct, which is not a direct interest in this study. Cronbach's

alpha in the current sample was .91.

*Comfort with Closeness in Romantic Relationships* was measured using the Discomfort with Closeness subscale of the Attachment Security Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Discomfort with Closeness is a 10-item subscale measuring difficulties with trusting, depending upon, or getting close to others. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). Scores were reversed to reflect the construct of comfort with (rather than discomfort with) closeness, which is of central interest to the present study. Past studies have reported good internal consistency and test–retest reliability (.84 and .74, respectively; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Cronbach’s alpha in this sample was .87.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive statistics and differences between groups**

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted using closeness to father as the outcome measures, and family form x gender as the independent variable in order to determine differences between groups. As can be seen in Table 1.1, young adults from divorced families reported feeling significantly less close to their fathers than those from non-divorced families [ $F_{(3, 521)}=14.02, p<.000$ ], supporting the first hypothesis. Planned contrasts revealed that young women from divorced families reported feeling significantly less close to their fathers than young men from divorced families [ $t_{(1,52)}=2.38, p<.05$ ], and than young women in non-divorced families [ $t_{(1,521)}=4.93, p<.000$ ], supporting the second and third hypotheses, respectively.

Table 1.1

Means, standard deviations and sample sizes by gender and family form

| Variables                 | Divorced<br>(N=265) |                  | Non-Divorced<br>(N=260) |                 | Total<br>(N=525) |      |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------|------------------|------|
|                           | Female              | Male             | Female                  | Male            | Female           | Male |
| Gender<br>( <i>n</i> )    | 134                 | 131              | 130                     | 130             | 264              | 261  |
| Closeness to<br>Father    | 18.72<br>(6.85)     | 20.65<br>(6.35)  | 22.32<br>(4.90)         | 22.88<br>(4.54) | 19.71 (6.67)     |      |
| Comfort with<br>Closeness | 36.78<br>(10.06)    | 33.65<br>(10.09) | 32.47<br>(8.83)         | 33.09<br>(8.71) | 22.53 (4.76)     |      |
| Age ( <i>n</i> )          | 35.2 (10.15)        |                  | 32.83 (8.8)             |                 | 21.12 (5.96)     |      |
|                           | 20.74 (2.80)        |                  | 20.67 (2.72)            |                 | 20.7 (2.76)      |      |

*Note.* Mean values are outside parentheses and standard deviations are inside parentheses.

A means table (Table 1.2) was created in order to describe means, standard deviations and frequencies of participants' comfort with closeness levels based on relationship status. As can be seen in Table 1.2, a few different relationship statuses are represented in the sample, with almost half of the sample reporting currently not being involved in a romantic relationship.



Table 1.2

Means, standard deviations and frequencies for comfort with closeness

| <i>Relationship status</i>        | <i>Mean (SD)</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------|
| Not dating                        | 34.92 (9.66)     | 247      | 47       |
| Dating one person                 | 33.41 (10.13)    | 27       | 5        |
| Dating more than 1 person         | 35.94 (10.51)    | 32       | 6        |
| Steady relationship with 1 person | 33.07 (9.68)     | 179      | 34       |
| Engaged but not living together   | 28.25 (7.94)     | 8        | 1        |
| Married or living with partner    | 32.35 (5.7)      | 32       | 6        |
| Total                             | 34.02 (9.57)     | 525      | 100      |

*Note.* Percentages rounded to the nearest integer.

### **Mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation models**

Model 1 proposes that closeness to father mediates the association between family form and comfort with closeness. In order to test Model 1, the associations between family form (divorced/non-divorced), closeness to father, and comfort with closeness were computed.

Table 1.3

Intercorrelation matrix

|                        | (1) | (2)   | (3)    | (4)   |
|------------------------|-----|-------|--------|-------|
| Family form            | (1) | .24** | -.13** | ns    |
| Closeness to father    | (2) |       | .30*   | -.10* |
| Comfort with closeness | (3) |       |        | ns    |
| Gender                 | (4) |       |        |       |

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

As can be seen in Table 1.3, family form is significantly correlated with closeness

to father, and closeness to father is significantly correlated with comfort with closeness. Mediation, moderation, and moderated mediation analyses for Models 1, 2, 3, and 4 were conducted in SPSS via the macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), which allows modeling of multiple mediators, moderation of several model pathways, and assessment of direct, indirect, and conditional indirect effects (e.g. moderated mediation). PROCESS uses the bootstrapping approach, which avoids the false assumption that the sampling distribution of the product of paths is normal (Hayes, 2009; MacKinnon, Fairchild, & Fritz, 2007; Preacher & Hayes, 2004, 2008), to infer about indirect effects. Ninety-five percent bias-corrected confidence intervals, using 1000 resamples were used in the following analyses. The results of Models 1, 2, 3, and 4, including coefficients and *p* values are displayed in Table 1.4.

Results of Model 1 (see Figure 1.1 for a statistical diagram) demonstrate that upon entering closeness to father, the initial link between family form and comfort with closeness ( $r = .12$ ) is insignificant (see path  $c'$ , the direct effect) as it is fully mediated ( $r = .30, p < .00$ ) by closeness to father. Accounting for 9% of the variance in comfort with closeness, closeness to father explains 8% more variance than the simple regression of family form on comfort with closeness ( $r^2 = .01, B = 2.37, p = .005$ , not shown here).

Model 2 (see Figure 1.2 for a statistical diagram), in which gender moderates the association between family form and closeness with father, was tested next. As can be seen, both the main effect of family form on closeness with father (path  $b_1$ ) and the main effect of gender on closeness with father (path  $b_2$ ) are not significant. Contrary to expectation, the interaction term (path  $b_3$ ) was not significant as well ( $p = .25$ ). Hence, the association between family form and closeness with father is not different for men and

women.

Model 3 (see Figure 1.3 for a statistical diagram) demonstrates that family form does not significantly predict comfort with closeness (path  $b_1$ ) and that gender does not predict comfort with closeness (path  $b_2$ ). Of interest, the interaction term family form x gender significantly predicts comfort with closeness (path  $b_3$ ). Formally probing this interaction further demonstrates the conditional effect of family form on closeness to father based on gender: for women, but not for men, family form is associated with closeness to father, such that women who experienced parental divorce are less close to their fathers than women who did not.

Finally, Model 4 (see Figure 1.4 for a statistical diagram) proposes that the effect of family form on comfort with closeness is mediated by closeness with father, with this process being moderated by gender. In addition, the model proposes that the direct effect of family form on comfort with closeness is also contingent on gender. As established in Model 1, closeness to father fully mediates the association between family form and comfort with closeness (path  $b$ ). As established in model 3, gender moderates the association between family form and comfort with closeness (path  $c_3$ ), and does not moderate the mediation. Model 4 provides a 10% attenuation of the direct effect of family form on comfort with closeness, compared with Model 1's 9% attenuation of this effect. This indicates that gender's moderation of the link between family form and comfort with closeness adds only 1% unique variance to the model, over and above the contribution of closeness with father.

Table 1.4 Ordinary least squares regression model coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

| Outcome                 | path               | <i>Model 1</i>            |          | <i>Model 2</i>                    |          | <i>Model 3</i>                    |          | <i>Model 4</i>                     |          |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|----------|
|                         |                    | Comfort with<br>closeness | <i>p</i> | Closeness with<br>father          | <i>p</i> | Comfort with<br>closeness         | <i>p</i> | Comfort with<br>closeness          | <i>p</i> |
| Intercept               |                    | 42.12<br>(2.15)           | <.00     | 24.63<br>(2.52)                   | <.00     | 36.64<br>(4.14)                   | <.00     | 47.62<br>(4.34)                    | <.00     |
| Family form             | $c_1' \rightarrow$ | 1.07<br>(.82)             | .19      | $b_1 \rightarrow$ -1.06<br>(1.59) | .51      | $b_1 \rightarrow$ -3.03<br>(2.62) | .25      | $c_1' \rightarrow$ -3.5<br>(2.52)  | .17      |
| Closeness with father   | $b \rightarrow$    | -.46<br>(.07)             | .00      | ---                               | ---      | ---                               | ---      | $b \rightarrow$ -.45<br>(.07)      | <.00     |
| Gender                  |                    | ---                       | ---      | $b_2 \rightarrow$ .48<br>(1.59)   | .76      | $b_2 \rightarrow$ -4.1<br>(2.61)  | .12      | $c_2' \rightarrow$ -3.89<br>(2.52) | .12      |
| Family form x<br>Gender |                    | ---                       | ---      | $b_3 \rightarrow$ -1.17<br>(1.01) | .25      | $b_3' \rightarrow$ 3.59<br>(1.65) | .03      | $c_3' \rightarrow$ 3.07<br>(1.59)  | .05      |
| Model $R^2$             |                    | .09                       | <.00     | .07                               | <.00     | .03                               | <.00     | .10                                | <.00     |

*Note.* All coefficients are unstandardized

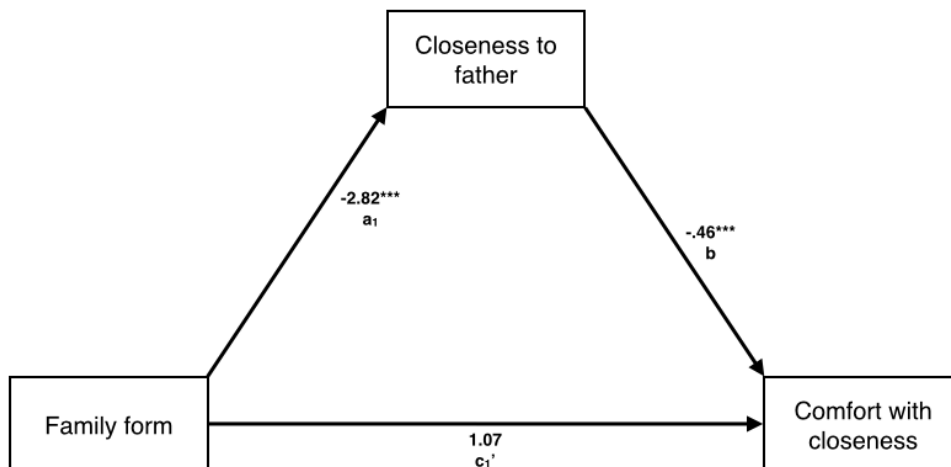


Figure 1.1 Model 1 – Closeness to father mediates the association between family form and comfort with closeness. \*\*\* Correlations significant at  $p < .00$ .

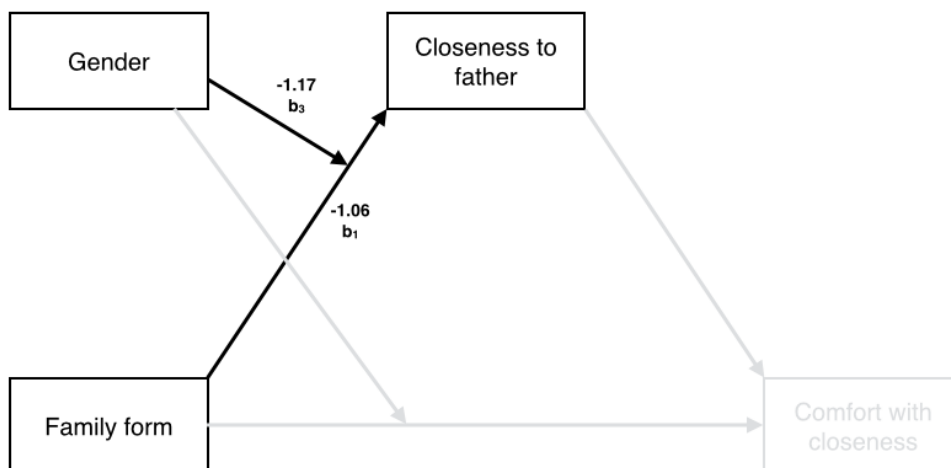


Figure 1.2 Model 2 – Gender does not moderate the association between family form and closeness to father. Correlations significant at  $*p < .05$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $***p < .00$ .

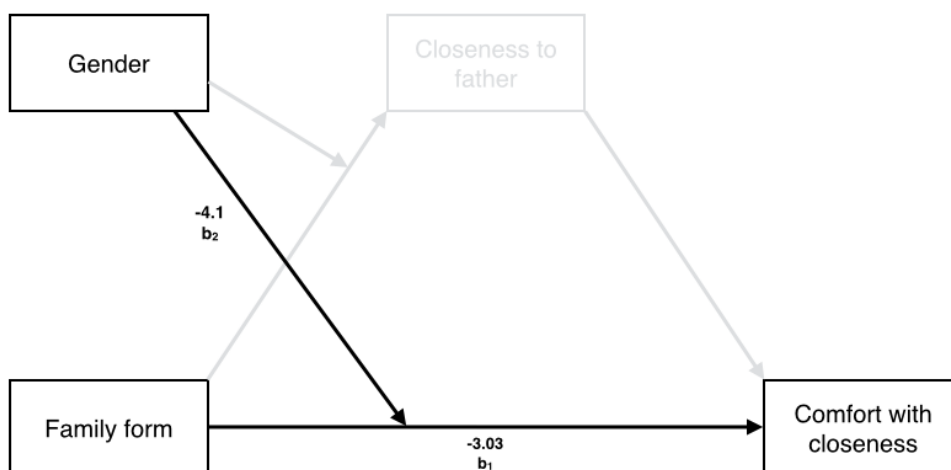


Figure 1.3 Model 3 – Gender moderates the association between family form and comfort with closeness. Correlations significant at  $*p<.05$ ,  $**p<.01$ ,  $***p<.00$ .

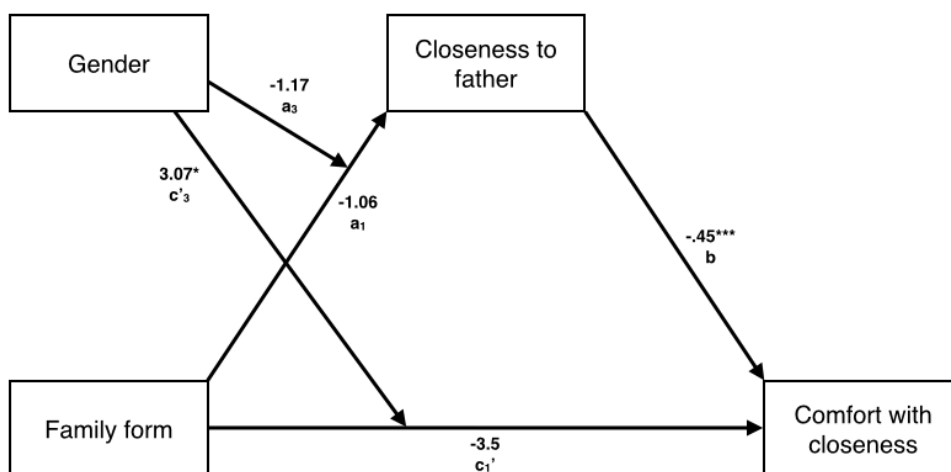


Figure 1.4 Model 4 – Closeness to father mediates the association between family form and comfort with closeness.

Mediation is not moderated by gender. Gender moderates the association between family form and comfort with closeness. Correlations significant at  $*p<.05$ ,  $**p<.01$ ,  $***p<.00$ .

## ***Discussion***

The current study sought to contribute to our understanding of the role closeness to father plays in the developmental-like process associating family-of-origin form (divorced/non-divorced) with later young adulthood attachment style in a sample of men and women.

### **Group and gender differences in closeness to father in divorced and non-divorced young adults**

Expanding on the literature suggesting that young adults experience less paternal involvement than their non-divorced counterparts (Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008; Schwartz & Finley, 2009), and adding to research demonstrating a decline in post-divorce father-adolescent closeness (Scott et al., 2007), this is the first known study to examine these specific group and gender differences in ratings of closeness with father in a sample of young adults from divorced and non-divorced families. Supporting the first hypothesis, young adults from divorced families reported feeling less close to their fathers than their non-divorced counterparts. Supporting the second hypothesis and consistent with previous research (Mustonen et al., 2011; Nielsen, 2011), women who experienced parental divorce reported feeling less close to their fathers than their male counterparts. Supporting the third hypothesis, women who experienced parental divorce reported feeling less close to their fathers than young women who did not experience parental divorce. These group and gender differences suggest that women who experienced parental divorce may be especially vulnerable to its influence on their relationship with their fathers, adding to past research suggesting that the father-daughter bond may be more easily damaged by divorce than the father-son bond (Nielsen, 2006).

**The mediating role of closeness to father in the association between family form and young adults' attachment style**

The current study's results strongly suggest that feeling close to one's father may "buffer" the potentially adverse effects of parental divorce on one's attachment style (Model 1, 4). Conversely, while experiencing divorce predicts avoidant attachment patterns, feeling close to one's father is a *better* predictor of young adults' capacity to feel comfortable with, and less avoidant of, closeness in romantic relationships, than the experience of parental divorce. In fact, once closeness to father is taken into account, experiencing parental divorce no longer predicts avoidant attachment. These results expand on research demonstrating that the quality of teen-parent relationships mediate the association between family form and trust in others during young adulthood (King, 2002) in that they highlight the discriminant and prominent role fathers have in accounting for young persons' attachment styles.

**The moderating role of gender in the association between family form and closeness to father, and in the association between family form and attachment style**

Study results (model 2) reveal that while young women feel less close to their fathers than young men, and young adults from divorced families perceive less closeness to their fathers than young adults who did not experience parental divorce, the association between family form and closeness to father is not contingent on gender.

Adding to the scant literature examining gender differences in attachment patterns in young adults who experienced parental divorce (e.g., Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009; Jacquet & Surra, 2001), the current study's results (model 3) demonstrate that the effect of divorce on young adults' attachment style is different for women than for men. That is



to say, women's attachment style in young adulthood appears influenced while men's is not. While these results suggest that women are more vulnerable to the effects of divorce on later attachment insecurity, it is noteworthy that taking the moderating role of gender into account when predicting attachment style explains only an additional 2% of the variance in attachment style compared to the 1% of variance family form explains when directly predicting attachment style. This may mean that although women's later attachment style might be compromised following the experience of parental divorce, its influence is statistically significant but small such that the consideration of a wider range of factors may better account for the variability in young adults' attachment style.

**Gender, closeness to father, and the link between family form and young adults' attachment style: Mediation, moderation, but no moderated mediation**

Taken together, this study's results demonstrate that closeness to father is a far better predictor of young adults' attachment style than family form. Not only do fathers have a key role to play in fostering their children's later attachment style, they can mitigate the adverse effect divorce has on their young adults' attachment styles to the point that experiencing divorce is no longer predictive of their young adults' attachment styles. These findings provide much hope to divorced fathers and highlight the opportune role fathers have when investing in a close relationship with their children, no matter the family form; it especially underscores the importance of developing these close relationships against a backdrop of marital dissolution.

Adding to existing literature documenting other important mediators in the link between family form and young adulthood attachment style (e.g., King, 2002), this study demonstrates yet again that once a potential mediator is taken into account, the divorce,

per se, does not have a causal effect on later young adults' well-being. Importantly, only when considered as a sole predictor, family form proved a significant predictor of young adults' attachment style; in all four models presented, once family form was considered together with other predictors, it did not significantly predict young adults' attachment style.

Furthermore, the unique role of gender in explaining the variance in young adults' attachment style is uncovered: Much like family form, group differences based on gender seem compelling; young women are less comfortable with closeness in relationships than young men. However, when the moderating role of gender on the association between family form and attachment style is examined, it is discovered that the association between family form and closeness with father is not contingent on gender. This means that the paramount role closeness to father plays in young adults' attachment style, over and above the role of family form, is true for men and women alike.

Moreover, while gender moderates the association between family form and attachment style, it explains very little, about 9 times less, variance in attachment style than closeness to father explains, adding a significant but meager 1% of variance to the overall model. This is not to discount the observed group differences in attachment style in young adulthood; these results may be important in informing interventions for men and women who experienced parental divorce and are struggling with avoidant attachment. However, when considering the practical implications of this study's results, focusing on factors that better explain avoidant attachment in this population and are modifiable (such as closeness to father) may prove more worthwhile.

Researchers and clinicians intuitively know that divorce is a proxy variable; a complex, often life-changing and highly variable process is often compacted into one dichotomous predictor. Thus, it is hoped that more and more researchers will focus on examining factors which may better account for the link between experiencing parental divorce and consequent attachment style, modelling a developmental-like process, even when using a cross-sectional design, that ultimately can be translated into a longitudinal investigation focusing on the revealed constellation of constructs.

Additionally, as Hayes (2013, p.326) aptly states: “it is safe to say that all (mediation) effects are moderated...” Therefore, although not evident in this sample, it is encouraged that scientists not only focus on modelling processes, and ask “what might account for differences between groups?” but also add the question “for whom?” – testing for moderations of direct and indirect (meditational) effects. The current study’s results exemplify the merit in modelling processes and moving beyond merely depicting group differences in explaining the variability in young adults’ attachment insecurity. In particular, the model comparison approach provides insight into the unique contribution of one predictor (gender, in this case) in comparison to another (closeness with father, in this case) and uncovers the compelling finding that closeness to father explains approximately nine times the variance in how comfortable young adults feel with closeness in relationships than does divorce, and approximately three times the variance gender explains.

Another strength of this study is that it included young adults’ reports of comfort with closeness in relationships in a sample of varying relationship statuses. Previous studies examining the association between divorce and young adults’ later difficulties

establishing trust (Jacquet & Surra, 2001; King, 2002) either centred on adults' feelings of trust in their current romantic partners, or did not report participants' relationship status. However, experiencing discomfort with closeness may inhibit young adults from developing committed romantic relationships in the first place. Therefore, in only sampling coupled partners when examining links between parental divorce and young adults' difficulty in establishing trust and closeness in romantic relationships, it is plausible that past researchers may have under-sampled their population of interest. The current study's results bolster this hypothesis; nearly half the sample reported not dating or casually dating, with a myriad of other relationship statuses represented. These results underscore the importance of shining a light on those young adults who do not initiate romantic contact or are casually dating because these behaviours may reflect an avoidant style of attachment.

Nevertheless, this study's strengths must be understood within its limitations. First, although the study's sample was representative of the ethnically and culturally homogeneous Canadian west coast city where the data were collected, the contextual role of ethnicity and culture in accounting for family form differences in the degree of closeness with father, comfort with closeness in young adult relationships, and the association between these variables, could not be examined. Previously reported ethnic differences in non-resident fathers' involvement and nurturance (King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Schwartz & Finley, 2005), and culture-specific gender differences in dimensions of adult attachment (Li, He, & Li, 2009; Wongpakaran, Wongpakaran, & Wedding, 2012) on the one hand, and research finding the link between ethnicity and adjustment to be fully mediated by fathering (Regev, Gueron-Sela, & Atzaba-Poria, 2012) on the other

hand, highlight the need to examine the current results within an ethnically and culturally diverse sample.

Second, although some participants were recruited from high-schools and from the community, most of the participants in this study are university students, largely from a higher family SES background, which might not be representative of the overall population of young adults who experience parental divorce. Consequently, some of these findings may not generalize to community samples. However, in support of using university students as participants, Fabricius (2003) points out that there exists no evidence that university students who experienced parental divorce represent a “select few” who somehow bypassed the effects of divorce. By using a large sample size, and by sampling a comparable number of young women and men who experienced and did not experience parental divorce it is hoped that the potential of these findings to be generalizable are increased. Providing further support of the adequacy of relying on a student sample, Bauserman (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of joint versus sole custody on later adjustment and found no differences associated with convenience (including college) samples.

Third, due to the retrospective nature of this study, it is possible that participants cannot accurately remember how close they felt to their father while growing up. However, young adults’ current perceptions of past closeness may be more reflective of any impact the quality of the father-child relationship has on their current attachment style. Furthermore, Pasley and Braver (2004) suggest that young adults are able to provide insightful and relatively unbiased accounts of father-child closeness, compared to parents, who may be more prone to under- or over-reporting.

Fourth, this study used the comfort with closeness subscale (Feeney et al., 1994), which corresponds most closely to Hazan and Shaver's (1987) conceptualization of avoidant attachment. It is noteworthy to emphasize that these results should not be extrapolated to infer about other insecure attachment styles, such as fearful attachment.

Fifth, it is important to note that while closeness to father fully mediated the link between family form and young adults' later avoidant attachment this does not imply that it is the only mediator of this link. Many other relevant factors may act as mediators and moderators, and the model suggested in the study is one of many alternative models. For example, since mothers were found to moderate the relationship quality between offspring and father (Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007) future studies would benefit from including young adults' accounts of closeness with their mothers. Researchers should also aim to incorporate other factors known to either promote or hinder a good father-child relationship (e.g., coparenting after separation, post-divorce conflict, see Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008) as mediators or moderators of the link between family form and young adult attachment style.

Future studies would also benefit from discerning the role closeness with step-fathers may have in affecting young adults' attachment style. Since 64% of study participants who experienced parental divorce reported that either one or two of their parents remarried, it would be interesting to investigate whether a close step-father relationship may change the trajectory to insecure attachment in this sample, and if there would be gender differences.

Lastly, closeness to father in the context of parental divorce is still largely understudied. Moreover, young adults are at a prime developmental stage in which they

are able to reflect on past and present perceptions, as well as transition from a more one-sided relationship to a more reciprocal relationship. Therefore, more qualitative accounts of what closeness to father means to young adults in this day and age are warranted. A recent qualitative study investigating closeness between siblings found such thematic indicators of closeness as shared laughter, physicality (e.g., “high 5s”, resting head on shoulder), and “inside jokes” (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2014). A research study in which dyads of fathers and their young adult offspring dialogue about “what does closeness to father mean to you” could provide a current and meaningful perspective and inform future studies. Importantly, such a therapeutic intervention could provide a golden opportunity for safely exploring not only past closeness, but also desires for current and future closeness, as well as what may promote it and what might hinder it.

The current study’s findings have some important practical implications for professionals working with divorcing families. Since these findings show that father-offspring closeness may help foster young adults’ comfort with closeness in relationships, even in light of parental divorce, preventative efforts to prevent losses in father-child closeness, and to promote the father-child bond, should be made prior to, during and after separation.

First, practitioners working with families undergoing separation should emphasize the protective role fathers can play in young adults’ attachment, framing it from a “best interests of the child” perspective, which may resonate with both mothers and fathers. In this sense, even the many parents who experience considerable post-divorce conflict may be able to “join forces” and find merit in working towards the goal of preserving or encouraging closeness.

Second, both parents can also be informed of factors, which may hinder the father-child relationship. For example, children who are triangulated or become one parent's confidante are likely to experience a decrease in closeness to the other parent. Therefore, both mothers and fathers might be helped to understand how their relationships with their offspring may help shape the offspring's relationship with the other parent.

Lastly, from an attachment perspective, change in attachment style in adulthood most often occurs in the direction of attachment security (insecure individuals transitioning towards experiencing secure attachment) through engaging in social experiencing which disconfirms their prior attachment style (Rothbard & Shaver, 1994). Therefore, practitioners working with young adults who experienced parental divorce and who are expressing avoidant attachment are in an advantageous position: In helping their clients to reflect on the attachment models they witnessed while growing up – not only their parents' relationships, but their own relationships with their fathers – practitioners may encourage their clients to acknowledge any attachment wounds they may harbour. Practitioners' reflections on how past attachment wounds may play a role in clients' current attachment styles could ultimately help clients proceed to taking steps towards creating connections that would help heal these wounds and foster attachment security.



## Study 2

Despite research demonstrating a stronger intergenerational transmission of divorce for women than for men (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002), meaning that women whose parents divorced are more prone to divorce themselves than men whose parents divorced, surprisingly few studies have examined the associations between parental divorce and young women's challenges in establishing closeness in romantic relationships.

Researchers who have, show that compared to women and men with continuously married parents – and even compared to men with divorced parents – women who experienced parental divorce report lower levels of intimacy (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002) and less comfort with closeness in their romantic relationships (Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009). These findings demonstrate the relative vulnerability of women who experienced parental divorce and underscore the need to closely examine this understudied group of women.

Comparisons of women who experienced divorce to women who grew up with continuously married parents, as well as to men who experienced parental divorce, are important first steps in understanding this seemingly vulnerable group of women. However, an additional consideration is that once the *quality* of the parent-child relationship is taken into account, the strength of connection between experiencing parental divorce during childhood and attachment difficulties during young adulthood is considerably diminished. Moreover, Study 1 results revealed that although women who experienced parental divorce feel less comfortable with closeness in relationships than men who experienced parental divorce, and than women who grew up with continuously married parents (Ehrenberg, Perrin, Bush, 2009), gender explained only 1 percent of the

association between parental divorce and young adulthood attachment style. This is compared to 9 percent of variance, which is explained by closeness to father. Taken together, these results warrant a closer examination of the variability in relational vulnerability *within* this group of women who experienced their parents' divorce. In examining this variability, there are family environment factors consistently identified in the empirical literature that may be implicated in the association between experiencing parental divorce and expressing insecure attachment in later romantic relationships. A review of these factors lends direction in how to study, and ultimately facilitate, comfort with closeness in romantic relationship among women who experienced parental divorce.

### ***Interparental Conflict***

The pivotal role of exposure to ongoing conflict between parents, or IPC, is well researched generally and more specifically in the context of adjustment to parental divorce. In fact, the magnitude of the association between IPC and offspring's maladjustment, as reported in a large meta-analysis (Buehler, Anthony, & Krishnakumar, 1997), was found to be nearly twice as large as the magnitude of the association between the offspring's maladjustment and the experience of parental divorce itself (Amato, 2001). Perhaps conflict, which precedes and outlasts divorce in most cases, can account for more of the variance in offspring's post-divorce adjustment than divorce per se (e.g., Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

In an effort to better conceptualize the construct of IPC, researchers have further categorized interparental conflict into different types (overt, covert, cooperative, avoidant, and withdrawn; see Buehler et. al., 1997 for a definition of each) and dimensions (frequency, intensity, mode or form of expression, chronicity, content, and

degree of resolution) (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Grych & Fincham, 1990). A meta-analysis (Buehler et. al., 1997) demonstrates the importance of such classifications; the strength of the association between inter-parental conflict and adjustment was found to be heavily dependent on the *type* of conflict in question: Studies assessing the magnitude of overt conflicts (using physical force, yelling or threatening) were found to almost double the effect size ( $M=0.35$ ,  $SD=0.36$ ) compared to studies reporting the presence of ‘conflict’ in general ( $M=0.19$ ,  $SD=0.32$ ).

While links between interparental conflict and child maladjustment are widely supported in the literature (e.g., Oppawsky, 2000; Whiteside & Becker, 2000), it appears that studies examining the link between interparental conflict and subsequent young adult attachment style are lacking, and little is known about the connection between interparental conflict and subsequent young adult romantic relationship functioning. In studying a construct that may be reflective of attachment style, Jennings, Salts, and Smith (1992) examined the effects of perceived interparental conflict, gender, and family form on young adults’ attitudes toward marriage. Their findings indicated a negative correlation between the amount of interparental conflict young adults reported and their positive views towards marriage, in that the greater the reported interparental conflict, the less favourable the views. From an attachment theory perspective, these results may imply that young adults who have witnessed attachment injuries in their parents’ bond may adjust their internal working models to reflect their own hesitation about creating a union.

In examining the specific link between interparental conflict and young adults’ interactions in romantic relationships, Herzog and Cooney (2002) demonstrated that

young adults reporting higher levels of interparental conflict, regardless of parental marital status, display poorer communication skills in non-romantic relationships. When examined by gender, these differences were only significant for women, which is consistent with literature demonstrating young women's relative vulnerability to the effects of divorce on their attachment style (e.g., Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Further highlighting the importance of considering both parental divorce *and* interparental conflict when considering post-divorce outcomes, Cui, Fincham, and Pasley (2008) examined the link among parental divorce, interparental conflict, and young adults' romantic relationships. Their results showed that once interparental conflict was taken into account, the association between parental divorce and young adult relationship difficulties became non-significant. Similarly to Herzog and Cooney's (2002) findings, these results also emphasize the importance of considering interparental conflict when assessing the influence of divorce on young adults' expressions of attachment style.

Based on the literature presented, it is apparent that relatively little exposure to interparental conflict may serve as a protective factor within divorced families, buffering the influence of parental divorce on young adults' romantic relationship functioning. Therefore, although never investigated before, it is plausible that young women who experienced low levels of conflict between their parents would express more comfort with closeness in romantic relationships than young women who experienced higher levels of conflict between their parents.

### ***Coparenting After the Divorce***

A relatively new construct, the term "coparenting" did not appear in the literature

until 1980 (Rosenthal & Hansen, 1980). It was initially coined to describe a post-divorce parent-parent relationship focused on mutual involvement in decision-making regarding the child's life (Rosenthal & Hansen, 1980). The term coparenting highlights the distinction between parents as romantic partners and as the subsystem heading the family, with the latter considered to remain intact after marital separation. As Mullet and Stolberg (1999) point out, although parents may divorce each other as romantic partners, they maintain their roles as parenting partners.

While research has positively linked coparenting with young adults' mental well-being (Shimkowski & Schrodtt, 2012), only one study was identified that investigated the influence of coparenting on young adults' relationship functioning. In examining the potentially mediating roles of coparenting and parenting practices on the relationship between marital status and young adult adjustment outcomes, Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, and Williams (2008) surveyed 340 undergraduate students from divorced and non-divorced families. Their analyses revealed that parental cooperation partially mediated the link between divorce and fear of intimacy. Their results suggest that while divorce has a direct influence on young adults' comfort with intimacy in relationships, a lack of cooperation between the parents (in both divorced and non-divorced families) is related to greater fear of intimacy in relationships in young adulthood. These results suggest that interparental cooperation likely also contributes to feelings of comfort with intimacy and closeness in young adults.

### ***Closeness to Father***

In investigating the quality of father-daughter relationships post-divorce, only a few studies have considered father-daughter closeness. This is in contrast to a relatively

far-reaching literature concerning mother-daughter relationship and is surprising since feelings of closeness to divorced fathers are particularly important to offspring's well-being (Scott et al., 2007) and are an essential element in the development of intimate relationships (Golish, 2000). While paternal involvement may represent one facet of the parental role, closeness to father as experienced by his daughter may tap more into the experiential quality of the relationship. Therefore, it is possible that daughters may rate their fathers as "involved" (e.g., driving them to extra-curricular activities, attending parent-teacher meetings) yet still do not feel close to them. In considering the role of father-daughter closeness in affecting daughters' later comfort levels with closeness in romantic relationships, the differentiation between these two constructs of "involvement" and "closeness" is important, and one cannot be extrapolated from the other.

Concerning the limited research exploring father-daughter closeness after parental divorce, in a recent Finnish study of 1471 adolescents, Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruusu, and Haukkala (2011) examined whether parent-adolescent closeness mediated the relationship between parental divorce and offspring's quality of intimate relationships in young adulthood. Their results revealed that young women from divorced families demonstrate less closeness with fathers as teenagers, compared with young men from divorced families. Research further demonstrates that daughters are also less likely than sons to experience an increase in closeness to their fathers when they become a parent themselves (Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007).

In a qualitative study of 13 young women, Radina (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with adult women of divorce in order to assess the closeness they experienced with their fathers post-divorce. Her results revealed four typologies of the father-

daughter relationship: “Father-Daughter,” in which women described experiencing closeness to father and spoke of him in predominantly positive ways; “Friends,” in which women considered their fathers to be friend-like yet somewhat less close than the former category; “Ambivalence,” expressed as both feelings of closeness as well as resentment and distance, and; “Angry” in which women described little or no affection toward their fathers and had little contact.

### ***Current Study***

The current study focuses on women who experienced parental divorce, a group who *on average* appears to feel less comfortable with closeness in romantic relationships than women who grew up with continuously married parents, and than men who did and did not experience parental divorce. Yet examining the *variability* in ratings of comfort with closeness through a resilience-based lens affords opportunity to shine a spotlight on those women who experienced parental divorce but nevertheless feel comfortable with closeness in romantic relationships. These women are referred to as “relationally resilient” as, from an attachment perspective, they allow themselves to be vulnerable and trust others romantically, despite their witnessing the rupture of their parents’ bond. Masten and Wright (1998) define resilience as “successful adaptation or development during or following adverse conditions” and, in Study 2, resilience specifically in the realm of close relationships called “relational resilience” is targeted.

By drawing on literature identifying key family environment factors that may buffer the association between divorce and avoidant attachment in later romantic relationships, this study poses the question of “who are the women who fare well in their approach to close relations despite their parents’ divorce.”

Specifically, it is hypothesized that (1) relationally resilient women experienced less overt and subtle interparental conflict while growing up than their less-resilient peers; (2) relationally resilient women perceive higher levels of coparenting before, during and after their parents' divorce than their less resilient counterparts, and; 3) resilient women feel closer to their father than their less resilient counterparts. Although this is a first exploration of "relational resilience," predictors were entered in order of their presumed importance: Conflict, a robust predictor of young adult post-divorce adjustment, was entered first; Coparenting, an important, yet perhaps secondary to conflict, predictor, was entered second. Women's closeness to father while growing up was entered last, since its link to women's later post-divorce adjustment is not well-examined in the literature.

## ***Method***

### **Participants**

This study drew upon the "Young Adult Study" dataset (Ehrenberg, Perrin & Bush, 2009). For the purposes of this study, only the data from young women who experienced parental divorce was analyzed. The Little's MCAR test obtained for this study's data resulted in a chi-square = 50.42 ( $df = 46$ ;  $p = .30$ ), which indicates that any missing data is missing completely at random. Therefore, listwise deletion was used to obtain the final sample, which consisted of 93 women. Participants were enrolled at a mid-sized university (84.9%), attended a local high school (4.3%), or were living in the community (10.8%). Undergraduate students were recruited from a psychology participant pool composed of Psychology 100 students, who received bonus points in exchange for their participation. Ages ranged from 16.6-29.5 years ( $M = 20.57$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ).



Participants identified as Canadian (74.2%) and were of Western European (18.3%), Eastern European (2.2%), Asian, Australian East-Indian and African (1.1% each) or other (.9%) ethnic or cultural background. In terms of socioeconomic status, participants self-identified as upper class (4.3%), upper-middle class (53.8%), lower-middle class (26.9%), or working class (15.1%). Mean age at parental separation was 9.54 years ( $SD=5.14$ ), mode was 16, median was 10 and the range was from 0 to 18 years. Of the total sample, 45 participants (48.4%) were living with roommates, 17 participants (18.3%) were living with one of their parents, 15 participants (16.1%) were living with their spouse or partner, 12 participants (12.9%) were living alone, and the rest (4.3%) reported various other living arrangements. Sixty-seven percent reported they were in their mother's custody, 6.4% reported father's custody, 22.6% reported joint custody, and 5.4% reported that they were near adults at the time of divorce and no custody arrangement was established.

### **Procedure**

The "Young Adult Study" procedures used to gather the larger data set (Ehrenberg, Perrin & Bush, 2009) were in compliance with the Ethical Standards of the Canadian and American Psychological Associations and were approved by the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Committee. The researchers saw each participant individually. After informed consent was obtained, participants were asked to complete a self-report demographics and background information questionnaire. Following the completion of the questionnaire, participants were interviewed by the researcher for approximately half an hour. Then, participants completed a questionnaire packet, including among others the measures of closeness to father, comfort with closeness,

coparenting and family conflict considered in the current Study 2. Finally, each participant was debriefed and any questions were answered. The entire procedure took approximately 90 minutes per participant.

### **Measures**

The Young Adult Interview (YAI; Ehrenberg, Perrin, & Bush, 2009) is a 23-item semi-structured interview measuring comprehensive *personal demographics*, past and current family structure and family functioning, perceptions of the relationship between parents' divorce and attachment style as well as current relationship status (not dating, dating more than one person, dating one person, steady relationship with one person, engaged but not living together, married or living with partner, separated/divorced, or other).

*Closeness to Father* was measured using a modified version of Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch's (1991) self-report closeness scale. This scale is composed of 10 items that assessed participants' perceived affection, psychological closeness, comfort level, and time spent with their fathers. The Likert-type scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating a closer relationship. Previous researchers using the closeness with adolescents reported good internal consistency as indicated with an alpha coefficient of .81 (Afifi & McManus, 2010). The scale was slightly modified to reflect the young adult population examined, and eliminated 4 questions pertaining more to the "caught-in-the-middle" construct, which is not a direct interest in this study. Cronbach's alpha in the current sample was .92.

*Comfort with Closeness in Romantic Relationships* was measured using the Discomfort with Closeness subscale of the Attachment Security Questionnaire (ASQ;

Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Discomfort with Closeness is a 10-item subscale measuring difficulties with trusting, depending upon, or getting close to others. Items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 6 (totally agree). Scores were reversed to reflect the construct of comfort with (rather than discomfort with) closeness, which is of central interest to the present study. Past studies have reported good internal consistency and test–retest reliability (.84 and .74, respectively; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Cronbach’s alpha in the current sample was .88.

*Family Conflict* was measured using 2 distinct measures. A modified version of the Family Environment Scale’s (FES; Moos & Moos, 1981) self-report conflict scale was used to assess overt family conflict. Respondents rated four questions on a 6-point Likert-type scale, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of overt conflict. Sample items include: “We fight a lot in my family,” “family members sometimes get so angry they throw things.” Reported internal consistencies for the FES’ conflict scale range from .75 to .78 (Moos, 1990). Cronbach’s alpha in this sample was .87. Subtle family conflict was assessed using a modified version of the ICPS Family Functioning Scale’s (Noller Seth-Smith, Bouma, & Schweitzer, 1992) self-report Conflict subscale. The (Subtle) Conflict subscale of the ICPS measures difficulties solving problems and making plans, as well as the extent of misunderstanding and interference (Noller, Seth-Smith, Bouma, & Schweitzer, 1992). Respondents rated five questions on a 6-point Likert-type scale, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of subtle conflict. Noller et al. (1992) found an alpha reliability of .82 for this scale, and a test–retest coefficient with a 2-week interval of .79. Cronbach’s alpha in this sample was .73.

*Perception of Parents' Coparenting* was measured by asking: "How able were your parents to get along with each other when it came to matters concerning you? For example, did they agree when you asked permission to do something or on how to raise you?" Participants were then asked to rate their answer on a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning "not at all able, and 5 meaning "very able" for the time their parents were married, for the period their parents were separating, and for the time following their separation. Due to the retrospective nature of the study, the sentence "generally speaking, while I was growing up..." preceded each of the questions in the questionnaire packet.

## ***Results***

### **Assignment to Relationally Resilient and Non-Resilient Group**

Based on a median split on their total scores on the Comfort with Closeness Scale, participants were assigned to one of two groups: (1) Relationally resilient women; and, (2) relationally non-resilient women. Women who rated their comfort with closeness as 36 or lower (median split) were defined as relationally resilient.

### **Descriptive statistics**

Table 2.1 shows descriptive statistics for variables used to predict membership in the relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient group, as well as effect sizes for the differences between the groups. As can be seen in this table, relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women differed significantly on all predictors. Effect sizes, based on Cohen's  $d$  (Cohen, 1988), ranged from small to moderate; with conflict variables demonstrating the largest effect sizes. Relationally resilient and nonresilient women did not differ on age at separation [ $F_{(1, 92)}=.11, p>.05$ ].

Table 2.1

Means, standard deviations and effect sizes for relationally resilient and non-resilient women.

| Variables                                 | Relationally resilient women | Relationally nonresilient women | Cohen's d effect size for difference between groups |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Subtle conflict                           | 13.31 (5.43)                 | 16.51** (5.47)                  | .59   |
| Overt conflict                            | 11.14 (6.00)                 | 14.24** (6.48)                  | .50   |
| Coparenting while parents were married    | 4.05 (1.25)                  | 3.55* (1.22)                    | .40   |
| Coparenting while parents were separating | 3.93 (1.28)                  | 3.33* (1.42)                    | .44   |
| Coparenting after parents' separation     | 4.1 (1.12)                   | 3.53* (1.25)                    | .48   |
| Closeness to father                       | 20.45 (6.75)                 | 18.45* (6.25)                   | .31   |

*Note.* Mean values are outside parentheses and standard deviations are inside parentheses. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

Table 2.2 was created in order to describe the distribution of relationship status for relationally resilient and nonresilient women. As can be seen in Table 2.2, relationally resilient and nonresilient women were represented in all relationship status categories, with more relationally nonresilient women not dating, twice the number of relationally resilient women dating one person when compared with relationally nonresilient participants; an equal number of relationally resilient and non-resilient women dating one or more than one person; the same percentage of relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women dating one person steadily; and more relationally resilient women engaged, living with partners or married than their relationally non-

resilient counterparts. Fisher's exact test revealed that relationship status differed significantly for relationally resilient and nonresilient women,  $\chi^2(5, N=93) = 11.76$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Table 2.2

Relationship status frequencies by resilience.

| Relationship status               | Relationally resilient women n (%) | Relationally nonresilient women n (%) |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Not dating                        | 10 (24%)                           | 26 (51%)                              |
| Dating one person                 | 2 (5%)                             | 1 (2%)                                |
| Dating more than 1 person         | 4 (10%)                            | 4 (8%)                                |
| Steady relationship with 1 person | 13 (31%)                           | 16 (31%)                              |
| Engaged but not living together   | 3 (7%)                             | 1 (2%)                                |
| Married or living with partner    | 10 (24%)                           | 3 (6%)                                |
| Total                             | 42                                 | 51                                    |

### Logistic Regression

Next, a hierarchical logistic regression analysis was performed in order to predict membership in one of two categories (relationally resilient women and relationally nonresilient women). Women who rated their comfort with closeness as 36 or lower (median split) were defined as relationally resilient. Predictors measuring similar constructs or facets of the same construct were grouped together and entered in a blocked order of entry. Next, predictors were entered according to their presumed causal priority and theoretical importance (see rationale in Current Study): Conflict was entered first, (overt parental conflict and subtle parental conflict), coparenting was entered second

(parents' ability to coparent during marriage, during separation, and after separation). Women's closeness to father while growing up was entered last. The analysis was performed using SPSS. Multicollinearity was assessed using SPSS collinearity diagnostics. No multicollinearity was evident.

There was good overall model fit on the basis of the first two predictors (conflict) in block 1 (a model with block 1 only),  $\chi^2 (2, N= 93) = 9.00, p<.05, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = .12$ . Fit remained acceptable after the addition of the coparenting predictors in block 2 (a model with block 1 and 2),  $\chi^2 (5, N= 93) = 12.19, p<.05, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = .16$ . Lastly, fit remained acceptable after addition of closeness to father as a predictor in block 3 (a model with blocks 1, 2, and 3),  $\chi^2 (6, N= 93) = 12.23, p<.05, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = .17$ . Note that these values reflect the overall model. Unique contributions for additional blocks are reported below.

Comparison of log-likelihood ratios for the model with coparenting predictors and without coparenting predictors showed no statistically significant improvement with the addition of coparenting predictors  $\chi^2 (3, N= 93) = 3.19, p>.05$ . Comparison of log-likelihood ratios for the model with closeness to father as a predictor and without closeness to father as a predictor also showed no statistically significant improvement with the addition of closeness to father as a predictor  $\chi^2 (1, N= 93) = .04, p>.05$ . Hence, no individual predictor makes a significant contribution to the prediction of membership in the relationally resilient group.

Overall classification was good, with 64.3% of women who are relationally resilient and 78.4% of women who are not relationally resilient correctly predicted, for an overall prediction success rate of 72%. Table 2.3 shows regression coefficients, Wald

statistics, odds ratios, and 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios for each of the six predictors. According to the Wald Criterion, none of the variables significantly and uniquely predicted relational resilience. Thus, although the predictors as a set reliably categorize women who experienced parental divorce into those who are comfortable and those who are uncomfortable with closeness, it appears that no one variable uniquely predicts membership in the relationally resilient group.

Table 2.3

Regression coefficients, Wald statistics, odds ratios, and 95% confidence intervals for odds ratios for each of the six predictors, when entered as a set.

| Variables                     | B    | Wald $\chi^2$ test | Odds Ratio | 95% Confidence Interval for Odds Ratio |       |
|-------------------------------|------|--------------------|------------|--|-------|
|                               |      |                    |            | Lower                                  | Upper |
| Subtle parental conflict      | .07  | 1.90               | 1.08       | .97                                    | 1.2   |
| Overt parental conflict       | .05  | 1.13               | 1.05       | .96                                    | 1.14  |
| Coparenting during marriage   | .12  | .17                | 1.11       | .67                                    | 1.84  |
| Coparenting during separation | -.14 | .35                | .87        | .54                                    | 1.4   |
| Coparenting after separation  | -.27 | .98                | .77        | .45                                    | 1.3   |
| Closeness to father           | -.01 | .04                | .99        | .92                                    | 1.1   |

*Note.* All variables significant at  $p > .05$ .



## *Discussion*

The current study sought to shine a spotlight on women who experienced parental divorce yet demonstrated aspects of a non-avoidant attachment style in the form of comfort with closeness; women who were considered to be “relationally resilient” in this study. While Study 1 demonstrated some gender differences in avoidant attachment, which point to the vulnerability of women who experienced parental divorce, it also suggested that gender explains very little variance in attachment style. Therefore, drawing on literature examining the link between family environment and post-divorce adjustment, this study identified parental conflict, coparenting, and closeness to father as factors that may help differentiate between relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women.

Group differences demonstrate that relationally resilient women report less conflict between their parents while they were growing up; perceived more cooperation between their mothers and fathers with regard to coparenting while they were still married, at the time of the marital separation, and after their divorce; and feel closer to their fathers than relationally nonresilient women. These results support the view that women who do well relationally despite experiencing parental divorce were exposed to more healthful family and dyadic dynamics before, during and after their parents’ divorce.

As expected, lower subtle and overt conflict; higher levels of coparenting before separation, during separation, and after separation; and closeness to father while growing up all predict membership in the relationally resilient group. As far as could be ascertained, this is the first study to profile relationally resilient women based on family

environment factors. Therefore, there were no specific hypotheses about the magnitude of each predictor in predicting belonging in the relationally resilient group. However, based on relevant literature, predictors were entered hierarchically, reflecting their hypothesized relative importance. As expected, conflict, an empirically longstanding and robust predictor of young adult post-divorce adjustment (Amato, 2001) demonstrated the only significant predictor of group membership. Coparenting before, during and after separation did not improve the prediction of group membership on its own, but did improve the overall prediction rate. Similarly, closeness to father did not improve the prediction of group membership on its own, but did improve the overall prediction rate.

Adding to the scant literature examining the influence of parental divorce on young adults' attachment styles, this study demonstrates that relatively little exposure to interparental conflict, subtle as well as overt, may serve as a protective factor, buffering the influence of parental divorce on young women's comfort with closeness in relationships. Perhaps not surprisingly, when considering mean differences between the relationally resilient and nonresilient groups, the effect sizes for subtle and overt conflict – both robust predictors of post-divorce adjustment – were moderate (Cohen, 1988). Contrary to previous literature (Buehler et al., 1997) the effect size for subtle conflict is greater than the effect size for overt conflict. It may be that unlike the prediction of *individual* adjustment risks, such as difficulties with anxiety or depression, where overt conflict demonstrates the greater impact, that for *relational* adjustment exposure to more subtle and covert forms of interparental conflict are implicated. Furthermore, it is worth noting that overt conflict was positively skewed in this sample, which may have influenced these results. Further study is warranted to assess the differential distribution,

and potentially differential influence of specific aspects of overt and subtle conflict of relational resilience in a similar population.

The current study appeared to be the first to examine the influence of coparenting before, during, and after separation on young women's attachment style. Expanding on Gasper and colleagues' (2008) finding that lack of parental cooperation is related to greater fear of intimacy in relationships in young adulthood, the current study underscores the importance not only of post-divorce coparenting, but, importantly, of coparenting before and during separation. The small to moderate ( $d=.40$ ) effect size of the differences between relationally resilient and nonresilient women on perceptions of pre-separation coparenting – coupled with this predictor's ability to reliably differentiate between relationally resilient and nonresilient women – were significant findings of this study. Parents who coparent effectively send their children the message: "I trust your father's/mother's decisions, I have faith in their way of navigating your needs and wants. We are a team." From an attachment perspective, the solidarity that is at the heart of coparenting conveys a sense of a connection that may act as a healthy model, to be internalized by children as the "bottom line" even if their parents' marital bonds are severed.

Findings pointing to the importance of the coparenting relationship have implications not only for families contemplating or undergoing separation, and the practitioners who work with them, but may also benefit all married parents. To this end, this study's results may be translated to inform not only selective preventive interventions (e.g., support groups for parents undergoing separation) but also universal preventive interventions (e.g., premarital counseling) which may focus on teaching effective

coparenting strategies.

In light of Study 1's results, in which closeness to father mediates the link between divorce and comfort with closeness, Study 2's finding, that closeness to father, along with other predictors, predicts belonging in the relationally resilient group, is not surprising. Taken together, these findings point to the discriminatory impact of closeness to father on daughters' relational resilience. These results provide much hope to divorced fathers and highlight the opportune role fathers play when investing in a close relationship with their daughters; it especially underscores the importance of developing these close relationships despite, and perhaps particularly when the daughters have experienced their parents' divorce in a backdrop of marital conflict and a challenging coparenting relationship. However, it should be noted that sometimes the interparental relationship is so disharmonious and uncooperative that parents may not be able to coparent effectively, or that the offspring may be better off if parents "parallel parent" instead of attempt to coparent.

Another strength of this study is that it includes young women's reports of comfort with closeness in a sample of varying relationship statuses. Previous studies examining the association between divorce and young adults' later difficulties establishing trust (Jacquet & Surra, 2001; King, 2002) either centred on adults' feelings of trust in their current romantic partners, or did not report participants' relationship status. However, experiencing discomfort with closeness may inhibit young women from developing committed romantic relationships in the first place. Therefore, in only sampling coupled partners when examining links between parental divorce and young women's difficulty in establishing trust and closeness in romantic relationships, it is

plausible that past researchers may have under-sampled their population of interest. The current study's results bolster this hypothesis; relationship status is significantly different for relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women. Further, different relationship statuses are represented in both relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women; some types of relationship statuses have similar or even equal percentage of women from each group. For example, the percentage of women who are steadily dating one partner is comparable in the groups of relationally resilient and nonresilient women. It is also noteworthy that the percentage of relationally resilient women who are not dating is comparable to the percentage of relationally resilient women who are married or living with their partners. These results clearly demonstrate the importance of including varying relationship statuses when examining women's attachment style. Importantly, these findings also emphasize that being in a steady relationship, or a marriage, may not be indicative of one's level of comfort with closeness.

Notwithstanding the representation of different relationship statuses in relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women, when comparing the different relationship statuses, especially at their "extremes" (not dating and married/living with partner) it seems that married women or women living with their partner tend to be relationally resilient, while women who are not dating tend to be relationally nonresilient. These results suggest that compared to relationally nonresilient women, relationally resilient women do tend to seek out and sustain romantic relationships.

This study's strengths must be understood within its limitations. First, to say that the probability of correctly classifying women who are and who are not comfortable with

closeness is related to the set of predictors studied is not to imply that any of those predictors cause comfort with closeness. These results certainly merit further research to assess the causal effect of these predictors, as a set and individually, on comfort with closeness of young women who experienced parental divorce, but causal inferences are currently premature.

Second, the predictors used in this study are wide-ranging in their variance (i.e., some predictors are highly variable compared to others). Moreover, some predictors in this study were skewed (e.g., overt conflict) while others were normally distributed (e.g., subtle conflict). Unequal variance and skewness of predictors may have impacted their predictive value in the logistic regression analyses. Furthermore, although multicollinearity assumptions were not violated, the interrelatedness of variables may have attenuated the significance of individual predictors.

This study measured coparenting using a single item for each time-frame (before, during, after the divorce). While the use of a single item to measure a construct has shown acceptable predictive value elsewhere (King, 2002), future studies would benefit from using a more comprehensive measure of coparenting. Similarly, family conflict was measured using modified, shortened scales. However, although selection of specific subscales and items might potentially compromise the validity of the findings, the relations of selected subscales with theoretically- and empirically-related subscales in the expected directions within the larger data set lend some foundation of confidence. While the representation of different relationship statuses in relationally resilient and relationally nonresilient women is compelling, future studies would benefit from separating the category of “married or living with partner” into “cohabiting” and

“married.” In a recent study examining reactivity to stress in couples who are married and couples who are cohabiting, elicited stress response was attenuated in married, but not cohabiting couples (Coan, 2014). This suggests that couples who made the commitment to marry may be qualitatively different than couples who live together in how they perceive their relationships.

Similarly, future research would benefit from examining relational resilience in women whose parents never married. Adults whose parents never married report lower relationship quality than comparable adults whose parents are married, or divorced (Rhoades, Stanley, Markman, & Ragan, 2012), suggesting that young adults of this particular family type (unmarried parents) warrant further research.

Moreover, since many insecurely attached women develop in the direction of experiencing secure attachment in adulthood, (Rothbard & Shaver, 1994) closely studying relationally nonresilient and relationally resilient young adult women longitudinally may elucidate the process by which one may shift from being relationally nonresilient to becoming relationally resilient. Incorporating fathers’ perspectives and, in particular, studying relationship change in father-daughter dyads over time would further increase our understanding of this process as it relates to daughters’ relational resilience.

Future studies would also benefit from examining post-divorce parental conflict as it relates to relational resilience, since post-divorce interparental conflict is a strong predictor of young adults’ relationship with their fathers, even 20 years after the divorce (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003).

In sum, profiling relationally resilient women brings us closer to answering the question “who are the women who fare well despite parental divorce”: This study’s

results show that women who experienced low levels of interparental subtle and overt conflict, those whose parents were able to coparent effectively when married, during the time they were separating and after the separation, and those who felt close to their fathers while growing up are the women who, as young adults, are most likely to feel comfortable with closeness in relationships. These women also seem more likely to be in committed relationships.

Predicting relational resilience based on these few modifiable predictors has great implications for parents experiencing marital distress and the professionals who work with them. First, since these findings suggest that low levels of overt and subtle conflict may help foster young women's comfort with closeness in relationships, practitioners should emphasize the importance of conflict de-escalation and provide strategies for conflict resolution. Second, the important role of coparenting during marriage in possibly fostering young women's relational resilience, has received little recognition (Shimkowski & Schrodt, 2012). Clinicians may wish to inform clients of the potency of their coparenting relationship, while married, during and after separation, and may aid clients in strengthening their coparenting relationship. Third, practitioners working with families undergoing separation should emphasize the protective role fathers can play in young women's attachment style. Efforts to prevent losses in father-child closeness, and to promote the father-child bond, should be made prior to, during and after separation.

Therefore, families undergoing separation, parents experiencing marital distress, and the practitioners working with them may all wish to consider the different avenues towards potentially fostering young women's relational resilience. Framed from a "best interests of the child" perspective, parents may be more likely to "join forces" and find



merit in working towards the goals of decreasing conflict, enhancing coparenting, and preserving or encouraging father-daughter closeness.

## **Final Remarks**

Taken together, the dissertation's findings shed light on young adults' – and in particular young women's – attachment styles, and family and dyadic factors that may help facilitate its development in the direction of comfort with closeness. Study 1 highlights the key role fathers may play in fostering their male and female children's later attachment style in divorced and nondivorced families alike. While suggesting that the association between a background of parental divorce and experiencing later difficulties establishing trust in relationships is only true for women, gender (which may be thought of as a proxy variable) does not provide compelling predictive ability in accounting for young women's comfort levels with closeness. Therefore, Study 2 focuses on low levels of interparental conflict, a constructive coparenting relationship, and closeness to father as protective factors, which may foster relational resilience. This study's results translate to preventative implications at the family, parental, dyadic (child-parent) and individual levels.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT BY INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATING IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

I understand that this research project, directed by dr. Marion Ehrenberg, is studying the influence of young adults' family histories on their current feelings about relationships. I understand that participation in this study involves being asked about my family background and my beliefs about relationships at present. I understand that I will be asked about these topics by completing an individual interview and a questionnaire, which will take approximately one hour of my time.

I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

I understand that any data collected in the study will remain confidential and that the interview and questionnaire results will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Furthermore, I understand that my name will not be attached to any published results and that my anonymity is guaranteed by using code numbers to identify the results obtained from individual subjects.

I understand that my interview will be recorded on paper and that the paper used to record my thoughts/feelings/experiences will be destroyed after the information has been used.

I understand that whether I participate or chose not to participate will have no bearing on my grade/academic standing. I understand that I will be provided with further information regarding this study after I complete the questionnaire and interview. I can receive a written summary of the research results as soon as they are complete, by indicating my interest below.

I wish to receive a written copy of the results of this study upon its completion: Yes\_No\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_  
 TELEPHONE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 EXPERIMENTER: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

### FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS UNDER THE AGE OF 19 YEARS ONLY

I am the parent or legal guardian of \_\_\_\_\_. I have read and understood this document, and provide permission for my son or daughter to participate in this study.

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
 SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Closeness to father – Modified Scale

Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Caught between parents: Adolescents' experience in divorced homes. *Child Development*, (62), 1008–1029.

1. While you were growing up, how openly did you talk with your father?

| Not at All |   | Somewhat |   | Very |
|------------|---|----------|---|------|
| 1          | 2 | 3        | 4 | 5    |
|            |   |          |   |      |

2. While you were growing up, how often did your father express affection or liking for you?
3. While you were growing up, how well did your father know what you were really like?
4. While you were growing up, how close did you feel to your father?
5. While you were growing up, how confident were you that your father would help you if you had a problem?
6. While you were growing up, how interested was your father in the things you did?

### Appendix C: Comfort with closeness subscale

Feeney, J. A., Noller, P., & Hanrahan, M. (1994). Assessing adult attachment. In *Attachment in adults: Clinical and developmental perspectives* (pp. 128–152).

1. I prefer to depend on myself rather than other people.

| <b>Totally<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Somewhat<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Slightly<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Slightly<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ | <b>Somewhat<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ | <b>Totally<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1                                | 2                                 | 3                                 | 4                              | 5                              | 6                             |

2. I prefer to keep to myself.

3. I find it hard to trust other people.

4. I find it difficult to depend on others.

5. I find it easy to trust others.

6. I feel comfortable depending on other people.

7. I worry about people getting too close.

8. I have mixed feelings about being close to others.

9. While I want to get close to others, I feel uneasy about it.

10. Other people have their problems, so I don't bother them with mine.



## **Appendix D: Excerpt used from Young Adult Study Interview**

Ehrenberg, M.F., Perrin, M.B., & Bush, J. (2009). *Young men's and women's opinions of marriage and divorce in the context of family of origin experience*. Poster presented at the Canadian Psychological Association's Annual Conference. Toronto, ON.

### **Demographics and Basic Background Information**

1. Indicate gender:        F            M

2. Are you currently in a relationship? *Query for options.*

|   |                                       |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| not dating _____                          | engaged but not living together _____ |
| dating more than one person _____         | married or living with partner _____  |
| dating one person _____                   | separated/divorced _____              |
| steady relationship with one person _____ | other _____ (specify): _____          |

3. Are you Canadian?        No                    Yes

4. Do you identify with any particular ethnic or cultural group or background?

No                    Yes (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

5. While you were growing up, which of the following classes would you consider your family as belonging to?

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| working class _____      | upper middle class _____ |
| lower middle class _____ | upper class _____        |

### **Divorced Version: Early Family Functioning**

1. Did your parents ever separate                    N    Y

2. (*If Yes*) How old were you at the time? \_\_\_\_\_ years

4. While you were growing up (and currently) how able were your parents to get along with each other when it came to matters concerning you? For example, did they agree when you asked permission to do something or on how to raise you?

(a) While they were married:

|                 |   |               |   |           |    |
|-----------------|---|---------------|---|-----------|----|
| 1               | 2 | 3             | 4 | 5         | DK |
| not at all able |   | somewhat able |   | very able |    |

(b) While they were separating / divorcing:

(c) After they were separated / divorced:

## Appendix E: Modified Family Environment Scale

Moos, R. and Moos, B., *Family Environment Scale manual*. Palo Alto CA:

Consulting Psychologists Press, 1981.

1. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, we fought a lot in my family.

| <b>Totally<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Somewhat<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Slightly<br/>Disagree</b><br>↓ | <b>Slightly<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ | <b>Somewhat<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ | <b>Totally<br/>Agree</b><br>↓ |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1                                | 2                                 | 3                                 | 4                              | 5                              | 6                             |

2. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, family members rarely became openly angry.

3. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, family members sometimes got so angry they threw things.

4. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, family members sometimes hit each other.

## Appendix F: Modified Subtle Family Conflict Scale

Noller, P., Seth-Smith, M., Bouma, R., & Schweitzer, R. (2003). Parent and adolescent perceptions of family functioning: A comparison of clinic and non-clinic families, 1–14.

1. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, we misunderstood each other.

| <b>Totally<br/>Disagree</b> | <b>Somewhat<br/>Disagree</b> | <b>Slightly<br/>Disagree</b> | <b>Slightly<br/>Agree</b> | <b>Somewhat<br/>Agree</b> | <b>Totally<br/>Agree</b> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| ↓                           | ↓                            | ↓                            | ↓                         | ↓                         | ↓                        |
| 1                           | 2                            | 3                            | 4                         | 5                         | 6                        |

2. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, even though we meant well, we interfered too much in each other's lives.

3. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, we interrupted and talked over each other.

4. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, one parent sided with children against the other parent.

5. Generally speaking, while I was growing up, making decisions and plans was a problem for our family.