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## AN EXPLORATION OF THE ADVERSE OUTCOMES OF DIVORCE

Emma Pascuzzi  
University of Rhode Island, emmap8123@uri.edu

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AN EXPLORATION OF THE ADVERSE OUTCOMES OF  
DIVORCE

BY

EMMA ANNE PASCUZZI

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

OF

EMMA PASCUZZI

APPROVED:

Dissertation Committee:

Major Professor      Hans Saint-Eloi Cadely

                                  Skye Leedahl

                                  Manshu Yang

                                  Cindy Tsotsoros

                                  Brenton DeBoef  
DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND  
2024

## General Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation was to gain a deeper understanding of the potential impact experiencing parental divorce has on later adulthood developmental outcomes. Divorce is considered an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) with significant implications for future life events. Given the high divorce rates in the U.S., understanding its impacts on children is crucial, with approximately 750,000 divorces recorded in 2019. Existing research indicates that children of divorced parents often face more mental and physical health issues compared to those from intact families (Amato, 2014). Current literature suggests that divorce, like other life events, can have long-term effects into adulthood (Bhrolcháin et al., 2000; Fagan & Churchill, 2012). However, divorce can be beneficial depending on the quality of the marriage (Amato et al., 2011). The current dissertation adds to existing literature by utilizing a mixed methods approach that analyzed quantitative survey data from the Child Development Project (CDP) ( $N=411$ ) and qualitative data from one-on-one interviews with participants from a university in the northeast region of the United States ( $N=9$ ). Findings from this dissertation indicate that experiencing parental divorce before the age of 18 is associated with increased sexual risk-taking behaviors, reduced romantic relationship outcomes, higher levels of anxiety/depression, and the development of insecure attachment styles in adulthood. Additionally, participants emphasized the lasting impact divorce has had on their mental health, romantic relationships, coping mechanisms, family dynamics, engagement in sexual activity, and roles in friendships. This dissertation identifies specific areas of concern for children from divorced families, offering insights for more effective support strategies to address the challenges they face. Future research on

offspring of divorced families should aim to include a diverse sample across all demographics.

*Keywords: divorce, adult outcomes, mixed methods*

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## General Introduction

Divorce has been regarded as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) having implications for many future life events (Ausperg et al. 2019; Frisby et al. 2012). With the current high rates of divorce, 14.6 divorces per 1,000 married women in the U.S. (Marino, 2022), it is imperative to understand the potential concurrent and future impacts on children who experience parental divorce. In 2019, there were approximately 750,000 divorces in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 2020) and studies have found that children who experience divorce express more mental and physical health problems compared to children with continuously married parents (Amato, 2014). On the other hand, it is important to recognize that in certain situations divorce may be necessary and beneficial for the children depending on the quality of the marriage (Amato et al., 2011). Current research suggests that life events, such as divorce, are related to long-term effects that can last up to adulthood (Lament, 2019). To build on this literature, I utilized the Child Development Project (CDP) to examine whether children of divorce differ from those whose parents remained married in terms of attachment styles, various romantic relationship outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors and experiences, and mental health outcomes in emerging adulthood. Additionally, I explored whether the associations between attachment styles and these remaining outcomes vary according to divorce status (**Study 1**). Lastly, I conducted qualitative interviews with college aged students who experienced divorce before the age of 18 regarding romantic relationships, sexual risk-taking behavior, mental health, and attachment styles (**Study 2**).

## **Study 1**

### **Abstract**

The current study explored the potential impacts of experiencing parental divorce on later adulthood outcomes, focusing on attachment styles, mental health, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and romantic relationship outcomes. Specifically, this study explored divorce as a predictor of adverse adult outcomes (i.e., sexual risk-taking behaviors, lower romantic relationship outcomes, insecure attachment styles, and mental health issues), and whether the relationship between insecure attachment styles and these adverse outcomes is stronger for those who come from divorced families. Participants in this study ( $N=411$ ) were part of the Child Development Project (CDP), a longitudinal study that followed individuals from ages five to 27. The analysis sample were about half male (50.3%) and half female (49.7%), and the majority reported their race as White (87.5%). Results revealed that parental divorce is associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviors, lower romantic relationship satisfaction, and a decreased likelihood of future marriage. Results also found that those who experienced parental divorce were more likely to report adverse mental health outcomes (i.e., anxiety/depression and thought problems) and insecure attachment styles (i.e., preoccupied and fearful). A multi-group analysis showed that attachment styles have different impacts on individuals with and without parental divorce experience, particularly in the context of sexual risk-taking behaviors, romantic relationship satisfaction, and chances of being married in the future. Additionally, the relationship between a preoccupied attachment style and anxiety/depression is stronger for those who come from divorced families. This research emphasizes the need to acknowledge and

support individuals from divorced families in addressing the unique challenges they face, ultimately promoting their overall well-being.

*Keywords: divorce, mental health, insecure attachment, romantic relationships*

*Possible Journals: Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, Journal of Family Studies,*

*Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal.*

## **Review of Literature**

Divorce can cause lasting harm specifically to the children who experienced it. Researchers have found that divorce has the capability to put children on a descending path that they may never be able to turn away from (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Divorce can lead to many negative outcomes and life events for children including disruptions to the parent-child relationship, continuing discord between former spouses, and loss of emotional support (Amato, 2010). It is important to note that not any one child will endure the same outcomes as another (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). It is also important to note that divorce may be necessary based on the quality of the marriage. For example, Amato et al. (2011) found that children may actually show improvement in well-being when the divorce removes them from high-conflict households. Though based on previous research, the prevalence of negative outcomes later in life for those who have experienced parental divorce is significant enough to draw attention to (Amato, 2010; Bhrolcháin et al., 2000; Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Previous research has suggested that future studies should aim to explore whether those from divorced homes are at an increased risk for adversity (Bhrolcháin et al., 2000), and to understand the overall effects of marital dissolution on offspring (Lansford et al., 2006).

### **Romantic Relationships**

Enduring parental divorce can exert long-term repercussions on a child's outlook toward marriage and divorce (Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016). In addition to views and beliefs on marriage, offspring of parental divorce are twice as likely to divorce themselves compared to those who come from intact families (Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016). Collardeau and Ehrenberg (2016) aimed to investigate the relationship between

parental divorce and children's attitudes towards both marriage and divorce. Findings imply that children of divorce held more negative feelings toward marriage but more positive feelings toward divorce when compared to those who come from intact families. Parental divorce has also been shown to predict less commitment in offspring's romantic relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers found that feeling as though divorce is acceptable is related to fewer positive feelings towards marriage and fewer expectations for romantic relationships (Shimkowski et al., 2018).

*The current research will explore multiple romantic relationship outcomes such as the quality of the relationship, beliefs and values pertaining to romantic relationships, and feelings of jealousy/possessiveness within romantic relationships across participants in intact families versus those from divorced households.* Examining these specific outcomes are important for the purpose of this study as existing literature regarding experiencing divorce and later romantic relationship outcomes suggests that those individuals may be at a disadvantage when it comes to quality, views, and expectations for romantic relationships due to having adverse experiences (Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Shimkowski et al., 2018). Individuals who experienced divorce are more likely to display a lack of trust within their relationships (Bernstein et al., 2012), and tend to feel less stable within their romantic relationships (Washington & Hans, 2013). Children of divorce are also more likely to see divorce as an acceptable alternative to dealing with problems within their marriages (Wolfinger, 2005). Similarly, Shimkowski et al. (2018) found that children of divorce are more comfortable with the idea of divorce than same-age peers whose parents are still married.

### **Sexual Experiences/Risk-Taking Behaviors**

Children of divorce tend to start dating (Harkonen et al., 2017) and engaging in sexual relations at an earlier age (Anderson, 2017). A previous study examining these phenomena using the Child Development Project (CDP) data suggests that experiencing parental separation or divorce before the age of five increases the chances of having many sexual partnerships by age 16 (Donahue et al., 2010). Anderson (2017) found that having divorced parents is associated with an increased odds of ever getting tested for HIV.

Individuals who engage in sexual activities at a young age are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors, such as having multiple sexual partners, a lack of birth control use, and using drugs or alcohol at the time of these activities (Donahue et al., 2010; Simons, Burt, & Tambling, 2012). Engaging in these risky behaviors ultimately increases the chances of experiencing negative outcomes. For instance, engaging in risky sexual behaviors increases the likelihood of contracting sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies, resulting in threats to an individual's health (Lansford et al., 2014). *The current study will examine sexual risk-taking behaviors by looking at participant's overview of sexual experiences such as number of sexual partners, forms of contraception, and history of sexually transmitted infections and compare these outcomes between children from divorced versus those from intact families.*

### **Mental Health Outcomes**

Facing parental divorce is associated with an increased chance of displaying mental health disorders (Auersperg et al., 2019; Tebeka et al., 2016). Participants from divorced families reported more depression, loneliness, childhood trauma, attachment

avoidance, attachment anxiety, and chronic stress compared to participants from non-divorced families (Tebeka et al. 2016).

Auersperg et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis with 54 studies examining the relationship between experiencing parental divorce and the long-term effects on various mental health outcomes. Researchers found a significant association between parental divorce and every aspect of negative mental health outcomes (i.e., depression, anxiety, suicide attempt, suicide ideation, distress, alcohol, smoking, and drugs). Similarly, Schaan et al. (2019) examined women of parental divorce and their level of risk for developing adverse mental health outcomes. Results showed an increased risk for women of divorced families compared to women of intact families when it comes to developing mental health disorders. *Based on these findings, it is hypothesized that individuals who have experienced parental divorce will display more issues with mental health.*

### **Attachment Styles**

Attachment Theory posits that early caregiver relationships establish social-emotional developmental foundations, which in turn impacts how an individual acts in intimate relationships (McLeod, 2024). Sutton (2019) suggests that future research on divorce should explore attachment styles more often, as it is possible that the combination of parental divorce and insecure attachment styles is the most predictive of later developmental outcomes. Attachment styles affect the way individuals deal with relationship conflicts, how they feel toward sex, and their expectations of romantic intimacy (Columbia Psychiatry, 2022). Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) developed four romantic attachment styles; secure, which includes those with a positive view of self and others, dismissive, or those who have a positive view of self but negative view of others,



preoccupied, where individuals have a negative view of self but positive view of others, and fearful, or those who have a negative view of both self and others. Existing research has found that those with insecure attachment styles, such as anxious (i.e., preoccupied) and avoidant attachment (i.e., dismissive or fearful), tend to escalate conflict within relationships, have a negative view on conflict, and are less responsive to their partner's needs (Roper et al., 2020).

Divorce has been considered a life event that has the ability to alter childhood experiences and parenting behaviors (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009; Washington & Hans, 2013), which in turn can affect offspring's attachment styles in adulthood. A study done by Crowell et al. (2009) found that parental divorce increased the likelihood of having an insecure attachment style in adulthood. Specifically, researchers found a significant relationship between attachment styles in women and parents' marital status, with 85% of those with divorced parents displaying an insecure attachment style. Additionally, parental divorce is an essential correlate of romantic attachment insecurity in later life (Bernstein, Keltner, & Laurent, 2012).

Insecure attachment styles are also related to increased levels of depression in individuals (Clery et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2015; Nottage et al., 2021). Fearful attachment styles have been found to be related to the belief that marriage is not a priority or permanent (Sutton, 2019). Furthermore, insecure attachment styles, specifically avoidant and ambivalent (Güçlü et al., 2017), have been found to be related to feelings of jealousy within romantic relationships (Clery et al., 2021; Wegner et al., 2018). Additionally, insecure attachment styles lead to a higher risk of sexual behaviors such as engaging in sexual intercourse earlier and with more people, early pregnancies, and

transmission of sexually transmitted infections (Saint-Eloi Cadely et al., 2020, 2022; Sentino et al., 2018). *Thus, in line with previous literature, it is expected that those who have an insecure attachment style will report lower levels of romantic relationship quality, more mental health issues, and increased engagement in sexual risk-taking activities.* Existing research has not identified whether there are differences in these associations regarding children of divorce versus children of intact families. Although we can assume based on previous research that children from divorce households will have an insecure attachment style (Crowell et al., 2009), this gap in the literature gives reason to examine these differences.

### **The Present Study**

The current study aims to explore two main questions. First, it seeks to determine whether children of divorced parents are more susceptible to developing insecure attachment styles, experiencing negative mental health outcomes, engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviors, and having more negative romantic relationship outcomes in adulthood compared to individuals from non-divorced families. It is hypothesized that individuals who have experienced parental divorce will be more likely to display insecure attachment styles, report more negative romantic relationship outcomes, be inclined towards risky sexual behaviors, and face challenges in terms of mental health.

The second question the study addresses is whether the relationship between insecure attachment styles and negative mental health outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and romantic relationship outcomes is stronger among those who experienced parental divorce in comparison to those who did not.

It is hypothesized that individuals who come from divorced families and have insecure attachment styles, will likely report lower levels of satisfaction in their romantic relationships, encounter more mental health issues, and be more prone to engaging in sexual risk-taking activities when compared to those who come from intact families.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were part of the Child Development Project (CDP). The CDP is a multisite longitudinal study on the behavioral and social development of children and changes in these developments up to adulthood. The CDP followed 585 participants from the age of five to 27 years old. A little more than half of the sample were males (52%), and the majority reported being White (81%). Only about 17% of participants were African American and 2% reported being from other ethnicities. More than half (60%) of the samples' parents reported being married at the time of Wave 1 data collection, and the average income for parents was \$39,500 a year for Wave 1. Information regarding parents' marital status and year of divorce were collected from ages of five to 16 (waves 1-11). Data regarding attachment styles, romantic relationship outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and mental health outcomes were collected from waves 14 through 23 when participants were aged 18 to 27.

### *Analysis Sample*

The final sample for analysis consisted of 411 participants. Inclusion criteria was based on the primary predictor variable, parent's divorce. Participants were included in the study if they provided data for this variable. The final sample was about half male (50.3%) and half female (49.7%). Most participants in this sample were White (87.5%). The average yearly income of participants' parents at Wave 1 was \$41,900 (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). The chi-square test of association and independent samples t-test were used to compare demographic differences between those who were included in the study and those who were excluded (see Supplemental Table 1). Results revealed that

those who were included were more likely to be White and less likely to be Black ( $\chi^2_{(df=2)} = 9.25, p < .05$ ). Results also revealed that, on average, parents of the TC had a significantly higher income than the parents of TC who were excluded ( $t_{(df=530)} = 6.52, p < .001$ ).

## **Measures**

### ***Parent's divorce***

From waves 1-11, mothers completed the *Family Information Form* (FIF). At Wave 1, the mother of the target child (TC) indicated their marital status as either married, cohabitating, single parent, or other. From waves 2-11, parents indicated whether they experienced a divorce or separation (0-*no*, 1-*yes*) in the past 12 months. Using these variables, a new variable was created called “divorce status”. Those who indicated they were married at Wave 1 and experienced divorce between waves 2-11 were coded as 1 (*yes*) and those who indicated they were married at Wave 1 and never experienced divorce or separation between waves 2-11 were coded as 0 (*no*).

### ***Attachment***

At wave 20, participants completed the *Shortened Relationship Styles Questionnaire* (SRSQ; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). The original RSQ has been used in previous research to measure attachment styles (Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994). Participants responded to questions regarding their perception of self and others. Four items (e.g., “I find it difficult to trust others completely”) assessed a fearful attachment style and two items (e.g., “I worry that others don’t value me as much as I value them”) assessed a preoccupied attachment style. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). These items were

used in a previous study to assess their indicated attachment styles (e.g., Saint-Eloi Cadely et al., 2021). Mean composite scores were computed for both scales with higher scores indicating higher tendencies of that style. Cronbach's alpha and correlations were conducted to determine the reliability of the subscales. The Cronbach's alpha was .79 ( $\alpha = .79$ ) for the fearful attachment style and the two items measuring the preoccupied attachment style were moderately correlated ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ).

### ***Romantic Relationship Outcomes***

Four outcomes regarding romantic relationships were assessed (i.e., romantic relationship quality, romantic relationship satisfaction, relationship/marital beliefs, and feelings of jealousy). First, the quality of the romantic relationship was examined. Information regarding an individual's romantic relationship quality were collected at wave 21. Specifically, the *Romantic Relationship Questionnaire* (RRQ; Braiker & Kelly, 1979) was administered at wave 21 and included the following two items: a) "How often do you go out as just a couple," with responses being (1) *very seldom*, (2) *sometimes*, (3) *usually/always*, and b) a dichotomous variable (1-*yes* or 0-*no*) "Do you have/are you thinking about having any serious commitment in your relationship?" These questions refer to the participant's current relationship with their boyfriend/girlfriend and were observed as individual items. At the time of data collection, 227 participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship.

Additional information regarding an individual's romantic relationship satisfaction was assessed at wave 21. Participants responded to 12 questions referring to their current relationship with their boyfriend/girlfriend. Examples of items included were "We create the time to talk," "I involve him/her in important decisions," and "I

support him/her in handling conflict.” Responses ranged from (1) *not at all well* to (7) *extremely well*. A mean composite score was created, with higher scores indicating better relationship satisfaction. Cronbach’s alpha was used to test the reliability of the new scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

Individual’s beliefs and views on marriage and relationships were also examined. The *Career and Future Aspiration* (CFA) form was given to adolescents at wave 16. Respondents were asked “What are the chances you will be married in the future?” Responses ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating a higher chance of marriage in the future ( $M = 4.09$ ).

Lastly, the *Interpersonal Jealousy Scale* (IJS; Mathes & Severa, 1981) was administered at wave 21. The IJS assessed participant’s views on a hypothetical situation between them and their current romantic partner, most recent partner, or any past relationships. This measure included seven items and was used to measure feelings of jealousy and possessiveness within romantic relationships (Goodnight et al., 2017). Items were answered on a nine-point scale from (1) *absolutely false* to (9) *absolutely true*. A mean composite score was created from the seven items. Reliability for the scale was .86 ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

### ***Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors***

Two questions from the *Young Adult Behavior Questionnaire* (YABQ; Ma, 1988) were used regarding participants sexual experiences from Wave 23 to have the most current answer from participants; ““With how many different persons have you had sexual relations?” and ‘How many times have you been pregnant [gotten someone else pregnant]?’”

The *Overview of Sexual Experiences* (OSE; Capaldi, 2002) administered at wave 23 provide a more in-depth look at participants' experiences. Questions included in the measure are, "have you ever had an STI?", where possible responses included (0) *no* and (1) *yes*, and "when you have had any kind of sexual intercourse, how often did you use a condom (rubber)?", with responses ranging from *never* (1) to *every time* (5).

### ***Mental Health Outcomes***

To assess mental health in emerging adults, self-report forms from wave 20 were used. The *Young Adult Self-Report* (YASR; Achenbach, 1997) was used to measure feelings of anxiety and depression with 32 items (e.g., "I am too fearful or anxious" or "I am unhappy, sad, or depressed"), and thought problems with 7 items (e.g., "I have trouble concentrating"). Each item was rated on a 3-point scale ranging from (0) *not true* to (2) *very or often true*. Raw scale scores were provided for both outcomes in the CDP dataset. Both of these scales are part of the established Achenbach system and have been utilized in previous research (Achenbach et al., 1995; Achenbach, 2019; Klimes-Dougan et al., 2013).

### ***Demographic Covariates***

Parent's yearly income, TC gender (0-*male*, 1-*female*), and TC race (0-*White*, 1-*Black*, 2-*Other*) were considered as covariates in subsequent analyses to control for their potential influence on the study outcomes. Demographic covariates come from the FIF that mothers completed during wave 1 of data collection. These covariates were included in the models to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

### **Plan of Analysis**



Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) were used to summarize and describe the key features of the data in SPSS v29. This included calculating measures of central tendency such as mean, median, and mode, as well as measures of variability such as standard deviation and range. These descriptive statistics helped provide a clear understanding of the distribution and characteristics of the variables of interest. The mean and standard deviation were computed for continuous variables. Additionally, frequency distributions were generated for categorical variables, such as number of sexual partners, to explore the minimum and maximum responses within each category (Abu-Bader, 2021).

Bivariate correlations (see Table 2) were conducted to examine the relationships between the variables of interest in the study. Pearson's correlation was utilized to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between variables. These findings served as a foundation for the path analysis to better understand the factors influencing the study's outcomes.

Path analysis was used to address both research questions using R Studio. This procedure is a statistical method that examines the relationship among multiple variables in simultaneous ways (Collier, 2020). Path analysis was used to estimate and test a network of relationships between variables. Research question one consisted of four path analysis models. Each model consisted of divorce status and the covariates as the predictor variables. The outcome variables for model one were the sexual risk-taking behaviors, the outcome variables for model two consisted of the romantic relationship outcomes, the outcome variables for model three were the two attachment styles, and the outcome variables for model four were the mental health outcomes. Correlations between outcomes and between predictors were controlled for in each model.

Logistic regression was used to account for dichotomous outcome variables. Specifically, logistic regression was utilized for “ever having contracted an STI” and “serious commitment to partner in relationship”. The main goal of logistic regression is to evaluate the probability of belonging to a specific outcome category using a set of predictors (Maroof, 2012). In this dissertation, logistic regression is used to analyze the chances of ever contracting an STI or being seriously committed to their partners in relation to experiencing parental divorce.

Research question two consisted of three path analysis models, with attachments styles as the independent variables in each model, sexual risk-taking behaviors as the outcomes in model one, romantic relationship outcomes as the outcomes in model two, and depression and anxiety as the outcomes in model three. Multi-group analysis was used to examine the difference in pathway coefficients between those who experienced parental divorce and those who did not.

For both research questions, model fit was evaluated using established fit indices, including CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR, providing insights into how well the models resembled the observed data. The model fit is deemed acceptable if the RMSEA is  $<0.07$ , the SRMR is  $<0.08$ , and the CFI is  $>0.90$  (Bielderma et al., 2015).

Covariates were included to address potential confounding effects based on the results of the bivariate correlations (see Table 2). Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) was used to account for missing data. FIML is the recommended method in path analysis for effectively dealing with missing data (Bielderma et al., 2015) as it helps maximize the likelihood function by considering missing data patterns, which results in unbiased and efficient estimates. FIML allows researchers to include cases with missing

data, keeping the sample representative and increasing the statistical power of the analysis. Additionally, it treats missing data as parameters to be estimated, which, in turn, optimizes the likelihood function, ultimately improving the reliability of path analysis results (Enders & Bandalos, 2001).

## Results

**Research Question 1:** Are children of divorce more at-risk for developing insecure attachment styles, negative mental health outcomes, risky sexual experiences, and lower romantic relationship outcomes in later life compared to individuals who come from non-divorced families?

### *Model 1. Divorce as a Predictor of Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors*

Results of the first path analysis model are displayed in Figure 1 (see below). Based on bivariate correlations, this model controlled for gender, race, and parent's income. Specifically, gender was significantly associated with number of sexual partners ( $r = -.67, p < .05$ ) and number of times been/gotten someone else pregnant ( $r = .49, p < .001$ ). Parent's average yearly income ( $r = -.02, p < .001$ ) was significantly correlated with number of times been/gotten someone else pregnant. Twelve participants were excluded from this model as they reported having "0" sexual partners throughout their lifetime at the time of data collection for Wave 23. This path analysis model indicated to be a great fit to the data, as evidenced by a non-significant chi-square value ( $\chi^2 = 1.2, df = 1, p = .27$ ), a CFI of .99, a RMSEA of .02, and a SRMR of .01. Results revealed significant relationships between variables. Specifically, there was a statistically significant direct path from experiencing divorce to number of sexual partners ( $\beta = .52, p < .05$ ) and number of pregnancies ( $\beta = .52, p < .01$ ). These results suggest that experiencing parental divorce is associated with a higher number of sexual partners and more times of becoming or getting someone else pregnant. However, experiencing parental divorce was not a significant predictor of how often an individual uses a condom

during intercourse. Additionally, results from the logistic regression showed that experiencing divorce as a child was not related to ever contracting an STI (Table 3).

### ***Model 2. Divorce as a Predictor of Romantic Relationship Outcomes***

Results from model two also showed a great model fit based on fit indices ( $\chi^2(0) = 0.0, p = .00$ ; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = .00; SRMR = 0.00). In preliminary analyses, results revealed that gender was significantly associated with serious commitment to partner ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ) and chance of marriage in the future ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ). Race was significantly correlated with romantic relationship satisfaction ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ) and chance of marriage in the future ( $r = -.15, p < .01$ ). Parent's average yearly income was significantly related to romantic relationship satisfaction ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ) and serious commitment to partner ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), therefore these demographics were controlled for in the model. Path coefficients within the path analysis model showed significant negative associations between experiencing parental divorce and overall romantic relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.16, p < .05$ ) and chances of being married in the future ( $\beta = -.33, p < .01$ ). On the other hand, results revealed there was not a significant relationship between feelings of jealousy, or how often individuals go out with their partner. Lastly, results from the logistic regression also revealed a non-significant relationship between parental divorce and serious commitment in a relationship (Table 4). Only participants who reported being in a relationship at the time of data collection ( $n=227$ ) were included in this model. Thus, results imply that experiencing parental divorce may predict lower romantic relationship satisfaction and lower chance of being married in the future (see Figure 2).

### ***Model 3. Divorce as a Predictor of Mental Health Outcomes***

Perfect model fit to the data was indicated in model three ( $\chi^2(0) = 0.0, p < .001$ ; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.00). This model controlled for gender as it was the only demographic that was significantly associated with anxiety/depression ( $r = .15, p < .01$ ) and thought problems ( $r = -.22, p < .001$ ) in preliminary analyses. Results of the path analysis showed that experiencing parental divorce was significantly associated with high levels of anxiety/depression ( $\beta = 1.66, p < .05$ ) and thought problems ( $\beta = .15, p < .05$ ) (see Figure 3). Findings suggest that individuals who experience parental divorce in early life may display more issues with anxiety, depression, and thought problems in adulthood.

#### ***Model 4. Divorce as a Predictor of Insecure Attachment Styles***

Lastly, Figure 4 represents the results of the final path analysis model. Based on the results of the Pearson's correlation analysis, a fearful attachment style was significantly related to race ( $r = .15, p < .05$ ) and parent's average yearly income ( $r = -.19, p < .001$ ), and were therefore controlled for within this model. Fit indices showed great model fit to the data ( $\chi^2(0) = 0.0, p < .000$ ; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = 0.00; SRMR = 0.0). Results of the path analysis revealed that experiencing parental divorce was a significant positive predictor of both preoccupied ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ) and fearful ( $\beta = .26, p < .01$ ) attachment styles, indicating that experiencing parental divorce may increase the likelihood of displaying insecure attachment styles.

**Research Question 2:** Is the relationship between insecure attachment styles, negative mental health outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and lower romantic relationship outcomes stronger for those who experienced parental divorce versus those who did not experience divorce?

Multi-group path analysis was performed to compare the relationships between insecure attachment styles and mental health outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and romantic relationship satisfaction between Group 1 (those who did not experience parental divorce) and Group 2 (those who did experience parental divorce). Based on the results of research question one, only outcomes that were significantly associated with divorce were included in the models for research question two.

### ***Model 1. Attachment Styles and Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors***

The first multi-group analysis (see Table 5) showed good model fit to the data ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.02, p = .22$ ; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .02). Results indicated significant differences between certain pathways between groups. Specifically, there was only a significant relationship between fearful attachment style and number of sexual partners for the “no divorce” group ( $\beta = .53, p < .05$ ). Further, there was only a significant relationship between fearful attachment style and number of times been/gotten someone pregnant for the “divorce” group ( $\beta = .52, p < .05$ ). Results indicated that individuals who display fearful attachment style and have not experienced parental divorce may have an increased number of sexual partners in their lifetime. Results also indicated that those with a fearful attachment who have experienced parental divorce may be more likely to become or get someone else pregnant. The preoccupied attachment style was not significantly associated with any sexual risk-taking outcomes for either group. Similar to research question one, 12 participants were excluded from this model due to their indication of being virgins at the time of data collection.

### ***Model 2. Attachment Styles and Romantic Relationship Satisfaction***

Results from model two also showed great model fit to the data through a non-significant chi-square value ( $\chi^2 = 39, df = 2, p = .82$ ), a CFI of 1.0, a RMSEA of .00, and a SRMR of .01. Pathway coefficients revealed significant differences between groups. Results showed significant relationships between a fearful attachment style and both romantic relationship satisfaction ( $\beta = -.11, p < .01$ ) and chances of being married in the future ( $\beta = -.36, p < .01$ ) for the “no divorce” group. There were no significant pathways for the “divorce” group. These findings suggest those with a fearful attachment style who have not experienced parental divorce may have decreased relationship satisfaction and see themselves as less likely to be married in the future (see Table 6).

### ***Model 3. Attachment Styles and Mental Health Outcomes***

Lastly, model three exhibited perfect model fit to the data ( $\chi^2 (0) = 0.0, p < .000$ ; CFI = 1.0; RMSEA = 0.0; SRMR = 0.0). Significant pathway coefficients emerged for three out of the four pathways for both groups (see Table 7). For the “no divorce” group, a fearful attachment style was significantly associated with anxiety/depression ( $\beta = 2.2, p < .01$ ) and thought problems ( $\beta = .11, p < .01$ ). A preoccupied attachment style was also significantly associated with anxiety/depression ( $B = 1.6, p < .01$ ) for this group. Similarly, a fearful attachment style was also significantly associated with anxiety/depression ( $\beta = 1.6, p < .01$ ) and thought problems ( $\beta = .30, p < .01$ ) for the “divorce” group. A preoccupied attachment style was also significantly associated only with anxiety/depression ( $\beta = 3.14, p < .01$ ) for the “divorce” group. These findings imply that individuals with a fearful attachment style may experience higher levels of anxiety/depression and thought problems, and those with a preoccupied attachment style



may have higher levels of anxiety/depression, regardless of whether or not they experienced parental divorce.

To further explore whether these pathways were significantly different across groups, the pathways were constrained to equality and were then compared using  $\Delta\chi^2$  tests. This procedure was conducted one at a time for each pathway. Pathways are significantly different when the change in the overall  $\chi^2$  between the constrained and unconstrained model exceed the critical value for one degree of freedom ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.84, p < .05$ ).

Paired comparisons for the paths from fearful attachment style to anxiety/depression ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = .61, p=.44$ ) and thought problems ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.33, p=.07$ ) indicated that the groups did not differ in strength (i.e., the  $\Delta\chi^2$  tests did not exceed the critical value). However, the path from preoccupied attachment style to anxiety/depression was found to differ in strength between groups. Results from the  $\Delta\chi^2$  test comparing “no divorce” and “divorce” groups exceeded the critical value ( $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3.86, p < .05$ ), thus indicating that the positive association was stronger for individuals in the “divorce” group. Overall, findings from the multi-group analysis suggest that the association between preoccupied attachment style and anxiety/depression is stronger for those who experienced parental divorce than those who did not.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the potential consequences of parental divorce on various aspects of an individual's life, particularly exploring attachment styles, mental health outcomes, sexual risk-taking behaviors, and romantic relationship outcomes. These results shed light on the multifaceted interaction between these variables and whether the experience of parental divorce strengthens these relationships.

### **Divorce as a Predictor of Adverse Outcomes**

The first path analysis model revealed a significant association between experiencing parental divorce and engaging in risky sexual behaviors. In line with previous literature that explored the relationship between parental divorce and sexual risk-taking behaviors (Donahue et al., 2010; Lansford et al., 2014), individuals from divorced families reported a higher number of sexual partners and pregnancies compared to individuals from intact families. This finding suggests that parental divorce may be linked to an increased likelihood of engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviors, potentially due to disrupted family dynamics or emotional consequences of divorce (Jeynes, 2001). On the other hand, the results of this study did not find a significant association between parental divorce and condom use or number of STIs. This finding could be a result of our study exploring condom use as the only form of contraceptive when there are various different options available (i.e., oral pills, IUDs, injections) and gives reason for future studies to explore associations between experiencing parental divorce and other forms of contraception.

The second model indicated that parental divorce is associated with lower levels of romantic relationship satisfaction and a decreased likelihood of future marriage. This

finding highlights the lasting impact of parental divorce on romantic relationships. Findings from this study further support previous research which has found that children who experience parental marital failure often leads to the belief that their future marriage will fail as well (Akhtar & Blue, 2019). Additionally, adverse childhood experiences may influence how individuals perceive and engage in adult romantic relationships, potentially leading to less satisfying relationships and lower chances of marriage (Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Shimkowski et al., 2018).

The third model demonstrated a significant relationship between experiencing parental divorce and higher levels of anxiety/depression and thought problems in adulthood. This indicates that children of divorce may be more vulnerable to mental health challenges later in life. These findings are in line with existing literature that have found increased levels of mental health disorders later in life for children of divorce (Auersperg et al., 2019; Tebeka et al., 2016). The emotional distress and turmoil associated with divorce may contribute to these outcomes, emphasizing the importance of providing support and intervention for individuals from divorced families.

The final model revealed that experiencing parental divorce is positively associated with preoccupied and fearful attachment styles, suggesting that divorce may increase the likelihood of developing insecure attachment patterns. Previous research surrounding attachment styles has found that when children experience parental divorce, they tend to lose security in their parents' trust, support and comfort. This may lead to children integrating the conflict experienced into their identity, relationships, and interpersonal dynamics (Akhtar & Blue, 2019). This finding stresses the potential long-term

consequences of disrupted family structures on an individual's attachment style, which can impact their relationships throughout life.

The current study found that experiencing divorce in early childhood and adolescence is linked to increased risky sexual behaviors, reduced romantic relationship outcomes, higher levels of anxiety/depression, and the development of insecure attachment styles in later life. These findings emphasize the far-reaching impact of parental divorce on various aspects of an individual's life. Further, this study emphasizes the need for comprehensive support and intervention strategies for individuals from divorced families across multiple developmental areas, including mental health, romantic relationships, and sexual behavior. It also suggests the need for further exploration into the diverse implications of parental divorce, such as different contraceptive methods and attachment patterns, to better understand and support those who have experienced it.

### **Insecure Attachment Styles and Adverse Outcomes Across Groups**

The multi-group path analysis explored whether the relationship between insecure attachment styles and various outcomes differed between individuals who experienced parental divorce and those who did not. Several significant differences emerged.

For those who did not experience parental divorce, a fearful attachment style was linked to a higher number of sexual partners. Individuals with a fearful attachment style may engage in more sexual acts with more sexual partners but may not view such behaviors as means to commit or to develop intimacy. Although this coincides with previous literature that has consistently found links between a fearful-avoidant attachment style and an increased number of sexual partners (Favez & Tissot, 2019; Saint-Eloi Cadely et al., 2020), these findings potentially add to previous literature by indicating this linkage specifically

for individuals from intact families. In contrast, for individuals who have experienced parental divorce, a fearful attachment style was associated with an increased likelihood of pregnancies. These findings also suggest that the impact of a fearful attachment style on sexual risk-taking behaviors may be influenced by the experience of parental divorce as research has found that children of divorce are more likely to become pregnant without being married compared to those from intact families (Anderson, 2014). To further put findings into context, group differences in attachment styles and number of sexual partners were examined using crosstabs and t-tests. Results of the tests revealed significant differences between the divorce and non-divorced groups for both fearful attachment style ( $\chi^2(8) = 28.51, p < .001$ ) and number of sexual partners ( $t(340) = -3.60, p < .001$ ). These results indicated that those who experience parental divorce are more likely to develop a fearful attachment style, and those who come from intact families are more likely to have an increased number of sexual partners.

For individuals without parental divorce experience, a fearful attachment style was associated with reduced relationship satisfaction and a decreased likelihood of future marriage. No such relationship was found for the group with parental divorce experience. It is possible that individuals who come from an intact family have higher expectations for their romantic relationships, thus, when they display a fearful attachment style, their expectations may not align with their experiences. This contrast may lead to greater dissatisfaction and lower chances of commitment in adulthood. These findings also suggest that experiencing parental divorce may provide individuals with the resilience and coping mechanisms needed to counterbalance insecure attachment styles.

Lastly, across both groups, a fearful attachment style was associated with anxiety/depression and thought problems, and a preoccupied attachment style was only related to anxiety/depression. However, the latter association was notably stronger in the "divorce" group. A preoccupied attachment style, defined as a strong desire for emotional closeness and a fear of abandonment (Bowlby, 1979), might be intensified in individuals who have experienced parental divorce due to the stress and emotional turbulence that comes with experiencing divorce.

### **Limitations**

Although this study has the ability to provide valuable insights into the impact of early life divorce on outcomes in adulthood, it does not come without limitations. First, this study utilizes observed variables from self-report surveys. Self-report data comes with the potential for response and social desirability bias (Paulhus, 2017). Additionally, parents of TC did not indicate their marital status across all waves, only at wave one. Therefore, we could not identify the different types of households across waves (e.g., single parent, cohabitating, engaged, etc.) It is also important to note that the majority of the sample identified as White, making it difficult to apply these results across different races and ethnicities. These limitations emphasize the need for cautious interpretation and the potential for further research to build upon this foundation.

### **Future Directions**

Future research exploring the impact of childhood divorce should take mediating and moderating effects into consideration. For example, the nature of marriage quality prior to divorce, the way in which the divorce was communicated to children, and the relationship between the parents' post-divorce are all important aspects that have the ability

to contribute to the child's development in later life (Akhtar & Blue, 2019; Cao et al., 2022). Recent research has stated that it may be the post-divorce family environment that mainly cause great variability in the child's development rather than just the act of divorce (Avcı et al., 2021; Cao et al., 2022; Lamela et al., 2016). Additionally, future research should utilize a more diverse sample to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of divorce across various demographics.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the long-term consequences of parental divorce on various aspects of individuals' lives. It highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by individuals from divorced families, such as their increased vulnerability to insecure attachment styles, mental health issues, decreased romantic relationship satisfaction, and sexual risk-taking behaviors. These findings emphasize the need for support and intervention programs to help individuals from divorced families navigate these challenges and promote their well-being throughout the lifespan.

## **Study 2**

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how experiencing parental divorce before the age of 18 has impacted offspring in terms of romantic relationships, mental health, attachment styles, and sexual risk-taking behaviors. Limited research that utilizes qualitative methods has aimed to focus on the lived experiences and perceptions of children of divorce. The current study used one-on-one interviews with participants who experienced their parents' divorce before the age of 18 ( $N=16$ ) and are now students at a major research university in the northeast region of the United States. Findings revealed significant themes on family dynamics, mental health, communication patterns, and long-term impact on romantic relationships. Participants also shared insights into their roles in friendships, sexual activity engagements, and coping with changes and transitions. This study contributes valuable insights for researchers, professionals, and policy makers, offering a foundation for targeted interventions to support individuals navigating the difficulties of parental divorce during their formative years.

*Keywords: divorce, qualitative, developmental outcomes, adolescence*

*Possible Journals: Journal of Divorce and Remarriage, Family Relations, Research in Human Development*



## **Review of Literature**

Current research has shown that although many children of divorce experience some consequences, the experience is different based on the age the children were at the time of the divorce (Loucks Greenwood, 2014). Most existing research that focuses on the outcomes of divorce on children are quantitative studies (e.g., Amato, 2010; Bhrolcháin et al., 2000; Fagan & Churchill, 2012). To date, few researchers have aimed to understand the perceptions of children of divorce through interviews or other qualitative measures, and those that do tend to focus on one specific outcome, such as their feelings regarding their parent's divorce or the child's views on their living arrangements after the divorce (Cui et al., 2011; Cunningham & Skillingstead, 2015; Lin et al., 2004). Previous research that has used qualitative methods suggests that future studies should examine various domains and associations (Cunningham & Skillingstead, 2015). The present study aimed to address this gap in the literature by conducting interviews with individuals who experienced divorce before the age of 18 regarding their mental health, sexual experiences, romantic relationship history and views, and personal relationships. Additionally, conducting interviews allowed the identification of emerging themes across individuals who have experienced divorce and provide implications for professionals and researchers who work in divorce-related areas. The findings from this study allowed for insight into participants' perceptions of their functioning as it relates to experiencing their parents' divorce (Cartwright, 2006).

Current literature that uses qualitative methods regarding divorce rarely addresses outcomes for adults who have experienced it during their childhood. Instead, existing research focuses on specific areas such as the impact on parent-child relationships, early

childhood, or the child's view regarding their parents' divorce (Gumina, 2009; Johnsen et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2004). Most research focuses on how children view their parents' divorce but not how it has impacted them throughout their adult life. The current study is unique in that it analyzed the perceptions of college-aged students who have experienced childhood divorce regarding their mental health, romantic and personal relationships, attachment styles, and sexual behaviors. This study was guided by The Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978) which provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of family relationships and their influence on individuals (Cohen, 2023). This theory views the family as an emotional unit, suggesting that any disruptions to the family unit, such as divorce, can trigger a chain reaction affecting other family members (i.e., offsprings). By utilizing the Family Systems Theory, we were able to gain a deeper understanding into the potential impacts of divorce on children.

### **Mental Health**

Adults who experienced divorce as children exhibit an increased risk for mental health disorders (Auersperg et al., 2019). Additionally, individuals who experienced parental divorce before the age of 12 are at a higher risk for developing emotional problems compared to those who experienced divorce at a later time (Tullius et al., 2022). Although the association between mental health disorders and experiencing parental divorce has been repeatedly found in research, it is essential to note that individual experiences differ. However, a recent meta-analysis conducted by Auersperg et al. (2019) found that parental divorce had an influence on later reports of depression and anxiety. A recent longitudinal study also highlighted this phenomenon (Tullius et al., 2022). This study followed over 1,500 participants for 11 years. Researchers found that emotional

problems in adolescents significantly increased post-parental divorce and continued to do so over time. The current study utilized interviews, which are necessary when exploring mental health outcomes as they provide insights into participants experiences and perception surrounding the impact parental divorce has had on their mental health that may not be found with quantitative approaches (Crowe et al., 2015)

### **Sexual Experiences**

Individuals who face adversity during their formative years, particularly in the context of parental divorce, tend to be more likely to engage in behaviors associated with increased risks of unintended consequences, such as unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (Alley & Diamond, 2021). Parental divorce is also related to a range of risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex, opting for casual relationships over committed partnerships, a higher number of sexual partners, and an early sexual debut (Ryan et al., 2015). For instance, experiencing parental divorce has been found to be significantly associated with higher levels of interest and engagement in short-term sexual relationships (Alley & Diamond, 2021). Despite the growing body of research highlighting the correlation between parental divorce and risky sexual behaviors, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the subjective perspectives of children of divorce regarding their own sexual activities and levels of engagement and whether they think divorce impacted this.

### **Romantic Relationships**

Experiencing parental divorce increases the risk for individuals to experience romantic distrust, relationship dissatisfaction, and lower romantic commitment (D'Ozario & Pilkington, 2021). Although numerous studies have examined the association between

parental divorce and romantic relationship outcomes using quantitative methods, only a few have done so utilizing qualitative methods. One existing qualitative study by Bulduc et al. (2007) consisted of interviews with college students whose parents divorced while they were in college and the concurrent impacts they experienced regarding participants' initial reaction to the divorce, the impact it had on their relationships within their family, and the impact it had on their views on marriage and dating. Specifically, results found that participants had a closer relationship with their mother post- divorce than their father, experienced difficulties around the holidays, and reported difficulties in their own intimate relationships following the divorce. Regardless of age at divorce, many participants mentioned that experiencing their parents' divorce led to issues with trust and commitment within their relationships during college. This study will build on current literature by exploring the perceptions of participants who experienced parental divorce at an early age and how it has impacted their romantic relationships up to adulthood. The use of qualitative methods will allow for a deeper understanding of their romantic relationship history, and their beliefs surrounding romantic relationships after facing parental divorce at a young age.

### **Attachment Styles**

Children of divorce often experience unique challenges in developing and forming attachment styles (Castleton, 2019). For children of divorce, the disruption of the family unit can impact their attachment styles (Ozen, 2004), which leads them to be more likely to report insecure attachment styles in adulthood (i.e., anxious, or fear of rejection; and avoidant, or fear of dependence) (D'Rozario & Pilkington, 2021). Individuals who display insecure attachment styles are often more likely to cling to their romantic

partners, make demands, stonewall, or avoid conflict, as they fear rejection (Domingue & Mollen, 2009). These actions can often lead to a lack of, or negative communication within romantic relationships, ultimately decreasing the quality of the relationship. Utilizing qualitative methods when exploring attachment styles allows participants to describe their relationships in greater detail. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of their roles and perspectives within these relationships, allowing for a richer and more comprehensive exploration of this topic.

### **Benefits of Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative methods are essential in understanding individual outcomes as they provide the opportunity to go in-depth and reveal the lived experiences of involved individuals (Watkins, 2012). The purpose of an interview in research is to explore participants' views, experiences, beliefs, and motivations on specific content areas (Gill et al., 2008). However, qualitative interviews can also result in greater expression of distress and more focus on negative experiences (Cartwright, 2006). Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative methods provide an enhanced understanding of shared phenomena (Gill et al., 2008). The current study hopes to expand quantitative findings and present the "words behind the numbers."

Face-to-face qualitative interviews are beneficial in building rapport and allowing participants to freely discuss their experiences with the interviewer (Knox & Burkard, 2008). During interviews, beginning with more straightforward questions is essential to put respondents at ease, build their confidence, and then proceed to more sensitive topics (Gill et al., 2008). Research interviews allow participants a space for sharing stories and can be therapeutic for individuals (Rossetto, 2014). Rossetto (2014) used post-interview

responses to assess the therapeutic ability of qualitative interviews. Findings revealed that most participants felt that the interviews gave them an outlet to reflect on experiences and share their feelings and experiences with an unbiased, attentive party. Previous studies that have focused on the impact of parental divorce on offspring outcomes suggest using qualitative methods to enhance the understanding of children's experiences and feelings (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

### **Present Study**

The current study aimed to build on the current literature's understanding of the adverse outcomes of experiencing parental divorce by utilizing qualitative methods. Through one-on-one interviews with participants, the current study explored how this experience has impacted various aspects of individuals' lives, specifically regarding mental health, personal relationships, and views and experiences surrounding sexual activity. Throughout these interviews, we sought to identify common themes and gain a better understanding of the shared and unique experiences of those who have faced their parents' divorce during their formative years. The purpose of these interviews extends beyond understanding participants' personal experiences and perceptions of their development, but also provides implications for professionals working with children and families of divorce. Overall, this study aims to address the gap in the literature by exploring the impacts of early-life divorce through the perception of the children in early adulthood. Findings from this study will help to better understand how individuals perceive their own development following their parents' divorce.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

#### ***Eligibility Criteria***

Participants were eligible if they: (1) were at least 18 years old, (2) experienced parental divorce before or at 17 years of age, (3) could speak and understand English, and (4) were a current student at a respective university in the northeast region of the USA. This study received approval by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

#### **Recruitment**

Participants ( $N=9$ ) were recruited through (1) fliers posted to faculty course pages using the university's platform, (2) in-class announcements in the Human Development and Family Science (HDF) department, and (3) an email sent to all HDF undergraduate students.

#### ***Feasibility***

The university where data were collected has an estimated 13,000 students over the age of 18, represented by 46 states in the country. According to the National Center for Family and Marriage Research (NCFMR, 2022) the current divorce rate in the United States is 14 divorces per 1,000 people. With this rate, it was assumed that at least 182 students have experienced parental divorce during childhood. Therefore, it was anticipated that recruiting at least 15 individuals for interviews was attainable.

#### ***Analysis Sample***

Twenty-eight students indicated interest in participating in the phone interview. Of these, seven students were not eligible to participate because their parents got divorced after they turned 18, five did not respond to follow-up emails, and seven students

responded after incentive funds had been used and other participants were paid. The final interview sample consisted of 9 participants. The majority of the sample was White (89%) and all females. On average, participants were 21 years old at the time of the interview. Five participants reported being in a relationship at the time of the interview. The average age of participants when their parents divorced was 9 years old (see Table 8).

Phone interviews were audio recorded and transcribed word-for-word and saved on a password protected computer. Interviewees were read the consent form prior to audio recording, and the researcher obtained verbal consent from participants. Interviewees were assured their participation in this study would be kept confidential and that any quotes used in this study would be de-identified to ensure individual anonymity. Participants received a \$10 Amazon gift card for participating in the phone interview.

### **Plan of Analysis**

This study aimed to understand the perceptions of children who have experienced divorce regarding romantic relationships, sexual risk-taking behaviors, mental health, and attachment styles. A thematic analysis was utilized based on a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach that seeks to understand and describe the universal essence of a phenomenon (Bliss, 2016). This approach studies lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how people understand those experiences (Qutoshi, 2018). Specifically, phenomenology focuses explicitly on describing and explaining an event from the perspective of those who experienced it (Tenny, Brannan, & Branna, 2017). Phenomenology is a powerful approach when understanding the subjective experience (Cleland, 2017), such as experiencing parental divorce. Therefore,



this approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the possible adverse outcomes someone may have endured due to experiencing parental divorce in childhood.

An interview guide was developed based on existing literature examining the impact of divorce on children and the differences between intact and divorced families (see Appendix A). Qualitative interviews were used to gain a deeper understanding of these experiences. Some of the questions asked in the phone interview included “Could you describe how you found out your parents were getting a divorce?”, “How would you describe yourself as a friend/partner?”, “How has experiencing your parents’ divorce impacted the way in which you view your own romantic relationships?”, and “In what ways do you feel your parent’s divorce has contributed to your development in the areas mentioned?”

Audio-recordings were transcribed using the “transcribe” feature in Microsoft Word and double-checked for accuracy. To analyze the transcripts, two researchers initially reviewed the first three transcripts to identify key themes. After comparing codes, discussing the process, and achieving acceptable agreement (77%) (Landis & Koch, 1977), transcripts were systematically coded based on the key themes. O’Connor and Joffe (2020) state that there is no universally accepted threshold for what indicates acceptable reliability, but Landis and Koch (1977) are often cited based on their recommendation that values between 0.61 and 0.80 are substantial for intercoder reliability. Once all key themes, codes, and sub-codes were finalized, transcripts were entered into NVivo to continue the coding process. This study specifically examined how participants’ experience with parental divorce contributed to their development in later

life, including mental health, romantic and personal relationships, and sexual behaviors.

After reviewing responses, seven key themes were identified.

## Results

Throughout the qualitative interviews, participants mentioned various ways in which they believed experiencing their parents' divorce contributed to their development as they grew up, with the key themes and number of interviews that mentioned each theme highlighted in Table 9. The themes included impact of parent's divorce on family dynamics and structure, roles in friendships and relationships, long-term effects on romantic relationships, sexual activity engagement, mental health, and coping with changes and transitions. Participants also commonly mentioned the way in which the divorce was explained to them impacted their understanding of the event (communication and information sharing).

### Family Dynamics and Structure

Throughout interviews, one of the most commonly mentioned topics was the way in which the divorce changed their family dynamic and structure of their family. Changes in family dynamic include role changes within family members and relationships with parents and siblings. Participants who are the oldest siblings in their families expressed a shift in their roles from being just siblings to adopting more parental responsibilities. Following the divorce, the oldest children felt as though their family obligations increased, such as caring for younger siblings or acting as mediators between parents. For example, one participant stated:

*“One of the biggest things, just kind of like what I remember, was being the caretaker for everyone. I was kind of that person that was making sure everyone felt OK.”-Female, 21*

Many participants noted that if their parents did not explicitly inform them of the divorce, they could sense it due to the change in the home environment. Participants

described that they noticed more arguments between their parents and less positive interactions. Small changes in their normal routines, such as their parents not asking each other how their day was, or not saying “good-bye” when they left for work, served as cues that led them to assume their parent’s relationship was not going well.

After the divorce, a number of participants mentioned that their relationship with each parent changed, causing a shift in their overall family structure. Most notably, the majority of participants revealed that the divorce led them to become distant to one parent and closer to the other. These relationship changes often stemmed from feeling as though one parent was at “fault” for their parents’ divorce. Participants expressed they felt a responsibility to show loyalty to the parent who was hurt the most as a result of the divorce. For instance, one participant highlighted:

*“Prior to the divorce, I feel like it [relationship with parents] was pretty normal. But after that, I was definitely a lot more distant with my dad, because of the information I knew.”-Female, 19*

### **Role in Friendships/Relationships**

During the interview, participants were asked to describe themselves as a friend or partner to identify common personality traits within offspring of divorce and gain a deeper understanding of how participants perceived themselves in their personal relationships. Three common traits were revealed throughout the interviews.

First, many participants described themselves as loyal. Participants mentioned that they felt comfortable having their friends rely on them for advice, or simply being there when they needed them. Secondly, participants described themselves as good listeners. They often felt as though they are the person their friends confided in if they were facing hardships. Additionally, participants described themselves as being an overall

generous person. Some indicated that experiencing their parent's divorce at such a young age has led them to be more thoughtful and present within their own relationships.

Participants stated they tend to go above and beyond for the people in their life that they love. As one participant mentioned:

*"I'm always there so, if someone needs to vent to me about something, they can always count on me."*-Female, 27

Lastly, we asked participants to share how they think others would describe them as a friend or partner to explore any differences in responses. All participants felt their friends would describe them in a positive manner. The most common traits participants felt their friends would use to describe them were reliable, energetic, decision-maker, and the mature friend. In one interview, a participant expressed:

*"My friends would describe me as reliable. I'm a supportive friend, I'm always there for them."*-Female, 19

### **Long-Term Effects on Relationships**

As expected, based on current literature, one of the most lasting impacts experiencing parental divorce has had on participants can be seen in their own romantic relationships. Some participants mentioned feeling less hopeful that they would have successful relationships in the future. Being a child of divorce, participants felt they were destined for the same result in their own romantic relationships. Participants experienced feelings of hopelessness after their parent's divorce. Their parent's divorce influenced their outlook on love and relationships, with some participants mentioning they are afraid to get married in the future. One participant mentioned:

*"I would say my perception of love and relationships is not as happy or optimistic as it should be."*-Female, 19

Other participants mentioned how they tend to be more careful when choosing partners because they are afraid to go through what their parents did. After experiencing their parent's divorce, participants are motivated to pick a partner they are compatible with in order to decrease the likelihood they will separate in the future. Additionally, participants mentioned an increased attentiveness toward the character traits of potential future partners. This heightened awareness is used to avoid partners who may display the same negative traits their parents did in their marriage. For example, one participant expressed:

*"I worry in the fact that when I do get into a committed relationship, how will I be? Will my parent's issues come down to me and I put it on my partner? It motivates me to pick the right partner and find someone I'm more compatible with."* -Female, 21

Participants also consistently mentioned having issues with trust or trust being an important factor in relationships they have now. Many participants expressed difficulties trusting others in all their personal relationships but found it to be more prominent within their romantic relationships. This was especially true for participants who knew infidelity was the cause for their parents' divorce. In one instance, a participant stated:

*"I think I'm more careful in choosing partners and less trustful, and also just always kind of have my guard up and overanalyze it and everything."* -Female, 19

Several participants consistently highlighted other aspects of their relationships that they felt were impacted by the divorce. They shared struggles with feeling insecure, avoiding conflict, and attachment issues. Growing up, participants lacked a positive model for romantic relationships, which they believe has subconsciously shaped their communication style, conflict resolution approach, and interactions with their romantic partners. As one participant noted:

*“I struggle with insecurities and jealousy a little bit more than other people. I do believe that some of that has to do with not growing up with and not knowing a stable relationship.” -Female, 19*

One participant was able to discuss both the negative and positive impacts their parents’ divorce has had on their romantic relationships:

*“In terms of dating, I like the idea of being in a romantic relationship, but I always have that looming fear of marriage, or what happens if it gets too serious. But at the same time, I kind of want to see how I am and want to push the boundaries of my parents and prove to myself that I can be in a committed relationship. You just have to choose the right partner, and I think that’s where my parents went wrong. So, it’s both for me. I have that fear of it [divorce] but at the same time want to prove that I can learn from it.” -Female, 21*

### **Sexual Activity Engagement**

Another important aspect we wanted to explore throughout these interviews was participants’ views and engagement regarding sexual activity. Although much of the current literature suggested that individuals who come from divorced homes have an earlier sexual debut and engage with more partners, our sample was found to have started engaging in sexual activity either later or around the same times as their peers. Certain participants mentioned that sexual activity was more sacred to them and not something they engaged in casually. However, we did ask participants to share their views on engaging in sexual activity with someone who they were not in a committed relationship with to gain deeper understanding of their perspectives. Most participants stated they would have to be in a committed relationship to engage in sexual activity with another person or had to feel comfortable with the other person. For one participant they mentioned:

*“As long as you have a relationship or friendship with them, that’s all that matters. Just having that trust and being comfortable around the person. I think that’s more important than actually being in a committed relationship with them. And as long as both of you are on the same page as each other.” -Female, 19*

## **Mental Impact of Divorce**

Mental health, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms were frequent topics of discussion within interviews. All 16 of participants mentioned that their emotional responses were impacted due to the divorce. Some participants noted they became more emotionally closed off because of the divorce. In relation to their issues with trust, participants felt more wary to form close connections to others following their parent's separation. Despite their increased emotional guard, participants mentioned they tend to be more sensitive and upset easily when faced with negative situations. One participant stated:

*“The way conflict was modeled to me was pretty terrible. I would say I’m a lot more intense and more prone to getting upset. I feel I get frustrated with things easier than a normal person. My reaction to conflict is not the best it could be.” - Female, 20*

Anxiety and depression were another significant impact the divorce had on participants' mental health. Some individuals experienced immediate feelings of anxiety and depression either during or after their parents' divorce, while for others, these reactions were prolonged until they matured and could understand the circumstances surrounding the divorce. One participant expressed:

*“Honestly, it was when I was like 12 to 14. I don't know if that was just when I was kind of connecting the dots more with my parents' divorce or just I was older and I could kind of understand more about it.” -Female, 19*

On the other hand, some participants believed the divorce helped them to build resilience and control their emotions. They felt that navigating through this experience allowed them to mature emotionally. Participants viewed their parents' divorce as a



valuable lesson, preparing them for future hardships they might encounter. To illustrate, a participant mentioned:

*“Now I'm just more like ‘this is who I am, take it or leave it’, and if you leave It that's perfectly fine.”* -Female, 21

Overall, the majority of participants mentioned experiencing at least one mental health issue in their teenage or adult years, whether it was a direct result of the divorce or not.

### **Coping with Changes and Transitions**

Although this was not an initial focus of our interview, many participants mentioned the idea of struggling when it came to experiencing changes and transitions throughout their life. Some of these changes have been a direct result of the divorce. When their parents initially separated, they experienced change not only between their parent’s relationship, but within their definition of “home”. The idea of moving between homes was overwhelming for many. Participants mentioned they did not enjoy the act of packing a bag and going back and forth between homes as it led to feelings of instability within their life. For instance, a participant noted:

*“I remember there was a lot of chaos. Being moved between houses and switching houses was a lot.”* -Female, 19

These feelings of chaos and instability carried over for some participants into adulthood. Participants said that they have trouble when it comes to any change in their life, possibly due to the significant changes they had to endure as a child. Significant changes that were mentioned included growing up and the changes that come with it, such as friends, different schools, and responsibilities. Specifically, the idea of moving

causes feelings of anxiety within these individuals. To exemplify, one participant highlighted:

*“I think my junior year was the absolute worst time. With COVID and virtual school, everything was changing.”-Female, 19*

### **Communication and Information Sharing**

Lastly, the way in which participants found out about their parents divorced also played a role in how they developed as adults. If parents were not open about the divorce, participants mentioned feeling as if they did not have a say in the matter, regardless of how it was going to affect them. These individuals experienced feelings of isolation and confusion. They expressed that the lack of communication from their parents impacted the way they communicate as adults, often times avoiding tough conversations. For example, a participant mentioned:

*“They never sat us down and said, ‘oh, this is what we're going to do’, it was just a situation where my mom did all the stuff with the court and he just had to sign the papers.” -Female, 21*

On the other hand, participants whose parents had a conversation with them about the divorce, remembered being upset by the situation. Those participants whose parents discussed the situation with them, vividly remembered the day it happened. Feelings of sadness arose as they began to realize what this meant for their family and their childhood. Participants mentioned that although at the initial time of divorce they were upset or confused, as they became older, they started to understand why it happened. Over time, participants were able to understand that the divorce was essential for their personal development, recognizing that circumstances may have worsened if their parents had stayed together. As one participant noted:

*“I think the older I get, I kind of view the divorce as like a positive thing that happened.”-Female, 21*

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how experiencing parental divorce before the age of 18 has impacted offspring in various aspects of their development. Using qualitative methods, we identified several common themes among participants, allowing us to understand the phenomenon better.

The impact of divorce on family dynamics and structure was consistently highlighted throughout the interviews. Participants mentioned noticing shifts in the roles of family members and how their relationships with their parents changed due to the divorce. Many individuals mentioned that observable behaviors, such as the lack of communication and increased conflict between parents, led them to recognize the change in dynamics. The changes in parent-child relationships after the divorce varied among participants, with some becoming closer to their mothers while distancing themselves from their fathers and vice versa. These findings align with existing literature that has found parental divorce to have an impact on parent-child relationships (Lee, 2019; Roper et al., 2020).

Mental health also emerged as a repeated theme in interviews. Participants frequently agreed that the divorce had a substantial impact on their emotional responses, coping mechanisms, and overall mental well-being. Although the majority mentioned becoming more prone to emotional distress, others were able to recognize the positive outcomes on their mental well-being, such as increased resilience and control over their emotions. Additionally, many participants reported experiencing anxiety and depression, which was often a direct result of the divorce. These findings emphasize existing

literature that has found children of divorce to be more susceptible to adverse mental health outcomes (Auersperg et al., 2019; Tebeka et al., 2016; Schaan et al., 2019).

Communication and sharing information regarding the details of the divorce were crucial factors that influenced participants. Those who felt excluded from the process, whether from a lack of involvement or information, expressed feelings of resentment and helplessness. From interviews, those whose parents did discuss the divorce with them could make sense of it over time, even if they were initially distraught by the situation. Existing literature has found that parents often avoid the topic due to feelings of embarrassment (Oren & Hadomi, 2020). This avoidance can lead to family members feeling alone, even though they are all undergoing the same process. These findings highlight the importance of parents and children's positive communication regarding the divorce. Further, these findings emphasize recent research that has found positive family communication to be related to lower levels of anxiety and depression in children (Herrero et al., 2020).

Although anticipated based on existing literature that examines the impact of divorce on offspring's romantic relationship outcomes (Braithwaite et al., 2016; Collardeau & Ehrenberg, 2016; Shimkowski et al., 2018), participants in this study revealed the lasting effects experiencing divorce has had on their romantic relationships. However, while some individuals expressed a more negative view of romantic relationships and a fear of commitment, others were able to recognize the importance of partner selection and trust within romantic relationships as a result of the divorce. This finding is in line with previous research that states that although parental divorce often leads to adverse outcomes on offspring's later romantic relationships, some may use their

parents' divorce as motivation to succeed in their committed relationships (Roper et al., 2020). Issues related to trust, conflict avoidance, and attachment also emerged, indicating the long-term impact of experiencing divorce on relationship dynamics. These findings also allude to participants displaying an anxious-avoidant attachment style, which is commonly described as having difficulty trusting others, and conflict avoidant (Stevens, 2014).

Contrary to existing literature that has found children of divorce tend to struggle with social interaction and relationships with peers (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019), participants positively described themselves. Participants described themselves as loyal, compassionate, and good listeners. Further, participants indicated that others would agree with their self-perception. These results suggest a consistent and positive self-image among participants, which contradicts previous findings that children of divorce often have lower levels of empathy, trouble getting along with friends, and poorer peer relationships overall (Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2019).

Participants in this study further contradicted previous research that suggests individuals from divorced families have an earlier sexual debut and are more likely to engage in casual sex (Anderson, 2017; Ryan et al., 2015). In this study, the majority of participants felt as though they engaged around the same time or even later in sexual activity compared to same-aged peers. A number of participants in this study mentioned being in long-term committed relationships, which may be the cause of differences in our findings. Additionally, individuals emphasized the importance of a committed relationship or feeling comfortable with their partner when engaging in sexual activity.

Lastly, the interviews revealed a central theme around the challenges participants face when it comes to coping with changes and transitions. Many recalled negative feelings towards traveling between their parent's homes and adapting to new family dynamics, which in turn increased feelings of anxiety. A few participants even expressed struggling when it comes to facing changes in adulthood, implying the lasting impact the divorce may have on their ability to adapt to life changes. The emergence of this theme adds to our understanding of the long-term adverse impacts of parental divorce on children who experience it.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are a few limitations of this study that should be noted. First, the sample size was all female. Existing literature has found gender differences concerning the impacts of divorce on children. Specifically, current research suggests that males do not adapt as well as females to their parents' divorce (Brown & Portes, 2006), which may explain why some of our findings contradict existing literature. Future research should aim to include the same number of males and females in their samples. Secondly, there is the potential for response bias surrounding sexual activity engagement due to the sensitive nature behind this topic. Participants may be hesitant to share their sexual interactions due to social desirability, particularly with an instructor at their university, which can further contribute to our contradicting findings. Additionally, most of our sample was White, which may result in issues of generalizability among other races and ethnicities. Our participant recruitment was also limited to one university in the northeast of the USA. Future studies should aim to recruit more diverse samples in gender, location, and race/ethnicity. Additionally, the sample was limited to the HDF department

at the university. Therefore, all participants were affiliates with the researcher's department. Future research should explore other majors to generalize findings.

Future research should also aim to include peers and partners of participants in order to further confirm their perceptions of themselves as a partner or friend. Furthermore, there is a need for future research to gain a deeper understanding of specific risky sexual behaviors that participants may engage in. Research using qualitative methods should aim to gain a more nuanced understanding into participants sexual activity, such as use of contraceptives, number of persons they have engaged in sexual relations with, and how frequently they engage with multiple persons.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study provide insight into the various ways in which parental divorce may impact the development of individuals. The identified themes, family dynamics and structure, mental health impact, communication and information sharing, long-term effect on romantic relationships, roles in friendships, sexual activity engagement, and coping with changes and transitions, contribute to the existing literature by exploring the impacts of early-life divorce through the perception of the children in early adulthood. Findings from this study may help professionals and researchers who work with families to better understand how individuals perceive their development following their parents' divorce.



## General Conclusion

Recognizing the impact of parental divorce on offspring's attachment styles, mental health, romantic relationships, and sexual behaviors is essential for accurate policy development, support services, and future research. The current dissertation utilized a mixed-methods approach to further explore the adverse outcomes for children of divorce in adulthood.

First, I aimed to explore how individuals from divorced families fare compared to those from intact families (**Study 1**). Findings revealed that individuals from divorced families are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles, experience issues with mental health, have lower romantic relationship satisfaction, and engage in certain sexual risk-taking behaviors. To build on these findings, I further explored the adverse outcomes children of divorce experience through one-on-one interviews with participants (**Study 2**). Participants explained the lasting impact divorce has had on their lives, explicitly addressing their family dynamic and structure, impact on mental health, long-term effects on romantic relationships, communication and information sharing, their roles in friendships, levels of sexual activity engagement, and coping with changes and transitions.

Both studies investigate the impact of early life divorce on outcomes in adulthood but have notable limitations. Study 1 relies on self-report surveys which introduces the possibility of response and social desirability bias. Additionally, the lack of information on marital status across all waves limits the identification of different household types. Further, the predominantly White sample raises concerns about generalizability to other racial and ethnic groups. In study 2 limitations include an entirely female sample,

potentially impacting gender-related findings. Secondly, a predominantly White sample from one northeastern university also limits the generalizability of the study's findings. Overall, this dissertation stresses the need for cautious interpretation and suggests future research to address these limitations.

Despite these limitations, the overall findings from this mixed-methods dissertation offers valuable insight into the challenges and adversity faced by individuals from divorced families. Not only do the results contribute to current literatures' understanding of the impacts divorce may have on offspring, but serve as a guide for future research, policy making, interventions, and professionals who work with families navigating the complexities of divorce. Lastly, this dissertation identifies the specific areas of concern for children who come from divorced families, allowing for a more effective approach when supporting those who are facing the various challenges that come from experiencing parental divorce. Specifically, this dissertation emphasizes the need for targeted interventions surrounding romantic relationships, mental health, and attachment styles for those who come from divorced families.

**Table 1**

*Demographic comparisons between those who did and did not experience parental divorce (N=411)*

Variable	No Divorce (n=247) % (n)	Divorce (n=164) % (n)	Total % (n)	Chi-square value
<b>TC Gender</b>				.28
Male	51.4 (107)	48.6 (67)	50.3 (174)	
Female	48.6 (101)	51.4 (71)	49.7 (172)	
<b>TC Race</b>				28.8***
White	95.2 (198) <sup>a</sup>	75.9 (104) <sup>b</sup>	87.5 (302)	
Black	3.8 (8) <sup>a</sup>	21.9 (30) <sup>b</sup>	11.0 (38)	
Other	1.0 (2)	2.2 (3)	1.4 (5)	
<b>Go out as couple</b>				5.48
Seldom	10.9 (15) <sup>a</sup>	18.9 (17) <sup>b</sup>	14.1 (32)	
Sometimes	47.4 (65) <sup>a</sup>	33.3 (30) <sup>b</sup>	41.9 (95)	
Usually	41.6 (57)	47.8 (43)	44.1 (100)	
<b>Serious commitment to partner</b>				.08
No	5.8 (8)	6.7 (6)	6.1 (14)	
Yes	94.2 (131)	93.3 (84)	93.9 (215)	
<b>Chances of marriage in future</b>				15.38**
Very low	0.5 (1) <sup>a</sup>	7.1 (10) <sup>b</sup>	3.0 (11)	
Low	5.0 (11)	5.0 (7)	5.0 (18)	
About half	17.2 (38)	21.4 (30)	18.8 (68)	
High	23.1 (51)	22.9 (32)	23.0 (83)	
Very High	54.3 (120) <sup>a</sup>	43.6 (61) <sup>b</sup>	50.1 (181)	
<b>Ever diagnosed with STI</b>				.34
No	92.0 (184)	90.2 (119)	91.3 (303)	
Yes	8.0 (16)	9.8 (13)	8.7 (29)	
<b>Condom use during sexual intercourse in past year</b>				4.27
Never	50.6 (91)	52.2 (59)	51.2 (150)	
Sometimes	25.0 (45)	27.4 (31)	25.9 (76)	
About half	5.6 (10)	1.8 (2)	4.1 (12)	
Most times	10.6 (19)	7.1 (8)	9.2 (27)	
Every time	8.3 (15)	11.5 (13)	9.6 (28)	

<b>No. of sexual partners</b>				28.51***
0	5.1 (10)	1.6 (2)	3.7 (12)	
1-2	28.9 (57) <sup>a</sup>	15.1 (19) <sup>b</sup>	23.5 (76)	
3-5	22.3 (44)	20.6 (26)	21.7 (70)	
6-10	11.7 (23) <sup>a</sup>	23.8 (30) <sup>b</sup>	16.4 (53)	
11-15	10.2 (20)	11.9 (15)	10.8 (35)	
16-20	5.6 (11) <sup>a</sup>	13.5 (17) <sup>b</sup>	8.7 (28)	
21-50	12.2 (24) <sup>a</sup>	5.6 (7) <sup>b</sup>	9.6 (31)	
51-100	3.6 (7)	7.9 (10)	5.3 (17)	
100+	0.5 (1)	0.0 (0)	0.3 (1)	
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>t value</i>
<b>Parent's Yearly Income</b>	45.9 (12.3)	35.8 (11.9)	41.9 (13.1)	8.18***
<b>Fearful Attachment Style</b>	2.3 (.96)	2.7 (.93)	2.4 (.97)	-3.60***
<b>Preoccupied Attachment Style</b>	1.9 (.84)	2.3 (.95)	2.1 (.90)	-3.58***
<b>Romantic Relationship Quality</b>	5.9 (.41)	5.7 (.81)	5.8 (61)	3.24***
<b>Interpersonal Jealousy Scale</b>	4.4 (1.3)	4.4 (1.5)	4.4 (1.4)	.17
<b>No. of times been/gotten someone pregnant</b>	.56 (.83)	1.3 (1.8)	.86 (1.3)	-4.45***
<b>Anxiety/Depression Scale</b>	6.8 (5.7)	8.6 (6.6)	7.5 (6.1)	-2.57**
<b>Thought Problems Scale</b>	.22 (.55)	.35 (.83)	.27 (68)	-1.58

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

**Table 2***Bivariate correlations between predictors, outcomes and covariates (N=411)*

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
1. Gender	-															
2. Race	.05	-														
3. Parent's Income	-.02	-.35***	-													
4. Experienced Divorce	.03	.26***	-.38***	-												
5. Sexual Partners	-.14*	.05	.02	.13*	-											
6. Pregnancies	.21***	.21***	-.25***	.27***	.05	-										
7. STI	.10	.03	-.04	.03	.31***	.16**	-									
8. Condom Use	-.08	.00	.07	-.01	.20***	-.12*	.12*	-								
9. RRS	.01	-.22***	.15**	-.18***	-.07	-.05	-.11	.04	-							
10. Go out as couple	-.05	.03	.09	-.01	-.02	-.23***	-.09	-.02	.13	-						
11. Serious Commitment	.17*	-.09	.18**	-.02	-.24***	.10	.02	-.15*	.15*	-.07	-					
12. Future marriage	.12*	-.15**	.07	-.16**	-.01	.01	-.13*	-.15*	.16**	.03	.15*	-				
13. IJS	.09	-.06	-.00	-.01	-.05	-.01	-.05	-.03	-.17***	.03	.08	-.04	-			
14. Anxiety/Depression	.15**	-.06	-.04	.14**	.06	.03	.03	-.03	-.23***	-.09	.05	-.18***	.25***	-		
15. Thought Problems	-.22***	-.08	-.06	.09	.20***	-.01	-.01	.02	-.16**	.05	-.13	-.12*	.04	.35***	-	
16. Fearful	.04	.15*	-.19***	.19***	.16**	.08	.20***	-.01	-.20***	-.003	-.14*	-.24***	.16**	.55***	.27***	-
17. Preoccupied	.02	.05	-.06	.19***	-.9	-.01	.05	.01	-.16**	.02	-.04	-.14*	.17**	.55***	.17**	.67***

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

**Table 3**

*Logistic regression between experiencing parental divorce and having ever contracted an STI (n=320)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Adjusted OR (95% CI)</b>	<b>p Value</b>
Divorce (vs No Divorce)	1.21 (.56-2.61)	.63

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

**Table 4**

*Logistic regression between experiencing parental divorce and serious commitment to partner controlling for significant demographics (n=217)*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Adjusted OR (95% CI)</b>	<b>p Value</b>
Gender (vs Female)	4.53 (1.19-17.35)	.03*
Parent's Yearly Income	1.08 (1.02-1.14)	.01*
Divorce (vs No Divorce)	2.17 (.55-8.53)	.27

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

**Table 5**

*Multiple Group Analysis, No Divorce vs Divorce: Standardized parameter estimates and*

*R<sup>2</sup> for sexual risk-taking behaviors*

	Number of Sexual Partners		Number of Pregnancies	
	<i>B</i>	(SE)	<i>B</i>	(SE)
<b>No Divorce (n=237)</b>				
Fearful	.53*	(.20)	-.14	(.09)
Preoccupied	-.08	(.22)	.03	(.10)
R <sup>2</sup>				
Number of Sexual Partners	.10			
Number of Pregnancies	.06			
<b>Divorce (n=162)</b>				
Fearful	.07	.23	.52*	.22
Preoccupied	-.07	.21	-.35	.20
R <sup>2</sup>				
Number of Sexual Partners	.01			
Number of Pregnancies	.17			

*Note.* Coefficients in bold were statistically significant across groups.

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



**Table 6**

*Multiple Group Analysis, No Divorce vs Divorce: Standardized parameter estimates and*

*R<sup>2</sup> for romantic relationship outcomes*

	<b>Romantic Relationship Satisfaction</b>		<b>Marriage in Future</b>	
	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b>(SE)</b>	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b>(SE)</b>
<b>No Divorce (n=247)</b>				
Fearful	-.11**	.04	-.36***	.09
Preoccupied	-.03	.04	.08	.11
R <sup>2</sup>				
Romantic Relationship Satisfaction	.14			
Marriage in Future	.14			
	<b>Romantic Relationship Satisfaction</b>		<b>Marriage in Future</b>	
	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b>(SE)</b>	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b>(SE)</b>
<b>Divorce (n=164)</b>				
Fearful	-.01	.09	-.12	.15
Preoccupied	-.04	.09	.01	.15
R <sup>2</sup>				
Romantic Relationship Satisfaction	.03			
Marriage in Future	.04			

*Note.* Coefficients in bold were statistically significant across groups.

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

**Table 7**

*Multiple Group Analysis, No Divorce vs Divorce: Standardized parameter estimates and*

*R<sup>2</sup> for mental health outcomes*

	Anxiety/ Depression		Thought Problems	
	<i>B</i>	(SE)	<i>B</i>	(SE)
<b>No Divorce (n=247)</b>				
Fearful	2.2***	.46	.11*	.05
Preoccupied	<b>1.6***</b>	<b>.53</b>	.09	.06
R <sup>2</sup>				
Anxiety/Depression	.34			
Thought Problems	.13			
<b>Divorce (n=164)</b>				
Fearful	1.6**	.60	.30**	.09
Preoccupied	<b>3.1***</b>	<b>.59</b>	-.13	.09
R <sup>2</sup>				
Anxiety/Depression	.40			
Thought Problems	.20			

*Note.* Coefficients in bold were statistically significant across groups.

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

**Table 8***Descriptive statistics of Interview Participants (N=9)*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>% (n) or Mean (SD)</i>
<b>Age</b>	20.88 (2.42)
<b>Age at Divorce</b>	8.78 (4.29)
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	100.0 (9)
<b>Race</b>	
White	88.9 (8)
African American	11.1 (1)

**Table 9**

*Key themes revealed through interviews and number of comments for each theme*

<b>Areas Mentioned</b>	<b># of Interviews Mentioned</b>	<b># of Comments</b>
Family Dynamics and Structure	9	18
Mental Impact of Divorce	9	19
Communication and Information Sharing	9	14
Long-term Effects on Relationships	9	18
Role in friendships/relationships	8	20
Sexual Activity Engagement	8	15
Coping with Changes and Transitions	6	8

**Supplemental Table 1**

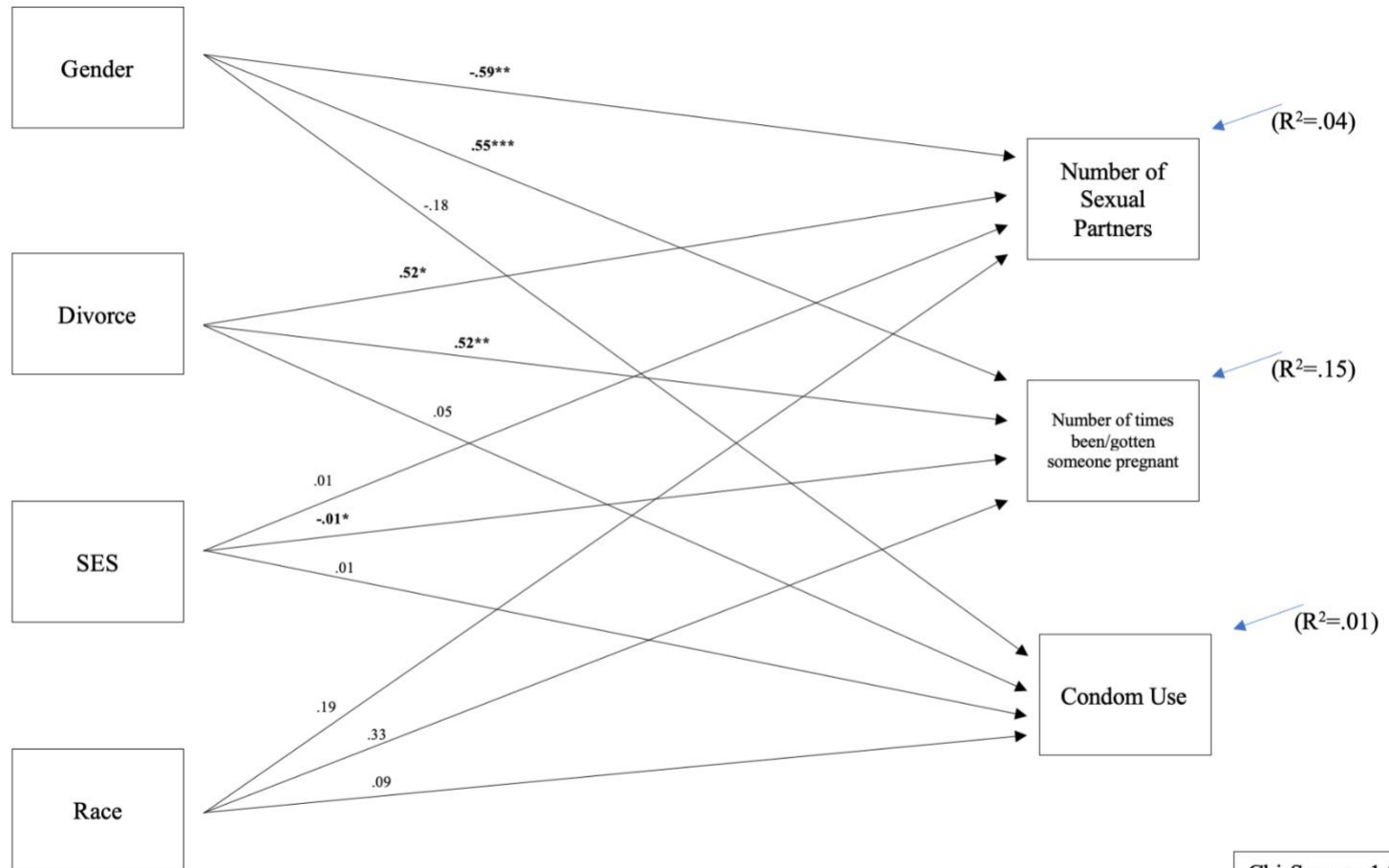
*Demographic comparison between analysis sample and excluded participants*

Variable	<u>Included</u> <u>N=411</u> % (n)	<u>Excluded</u> <u>N=134</u> % (n)	Chi-Square
<b>Gender</b> (n=436)			.002
Male	50.3 (174)	50.0 (45)	
Female	49.7 (172)	50.0 (45)	
<b>Race*</b> (n=435)			9.25*
White	87.5 (302) <sup>a</sup>	75.6 (68) <sup>b</sup>	
Black	11.0 (38) <sup>a</sup>	23.3 (21) <sup>b</sup>	
Other	1.4 (5)	1.1 (1)	
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>
<b>Parent's Average yearly Income***</b>	41.9 (13.1)	32.9 (14.8)	6.52

*Note.* Subscript letters denote column proportions that differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

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

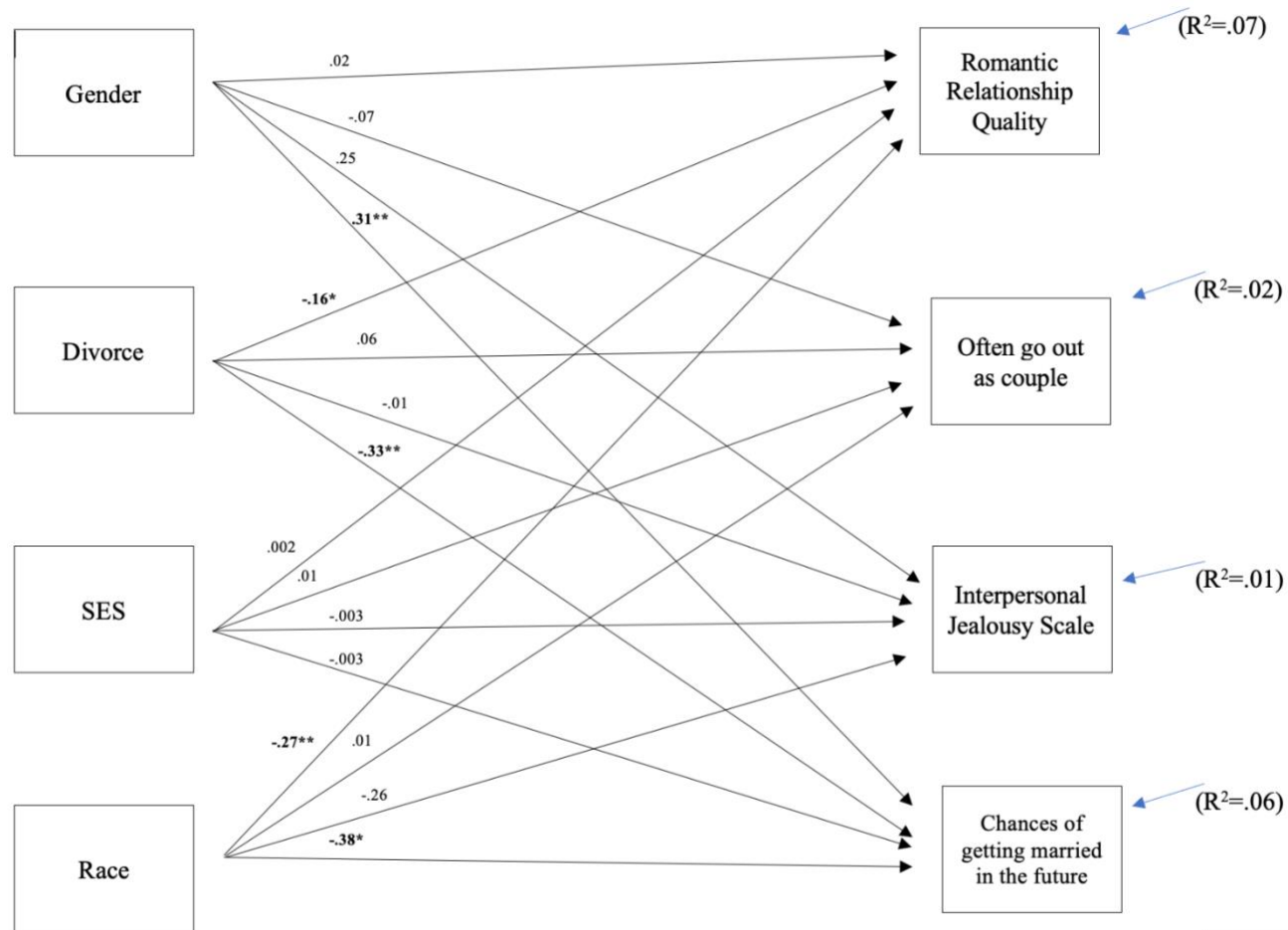
**Figure 1.**  
*Path Analysis of Associations Between Divorce and Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors (n= 399)*



*Note.* The path analysis shows association between parent's divorce and endogenous sexual risk-taking behaviors (number of sexual partners, number of times been or gotten someone pregnant, STI history, and condom use), controlling for demographics. Coefficients presented are standardized linear regression coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Chi-Square: 1.21  
 $p$ -value: .27  
 CFI: .99  
 RMSEA: .02  
 SRMR: .01

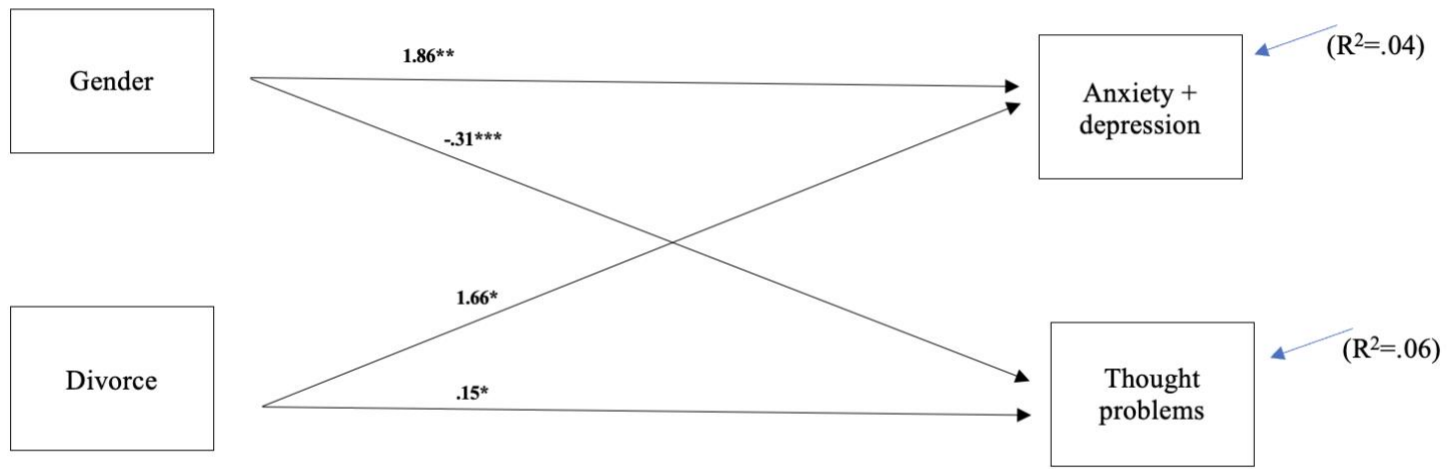
**Figure 2.**  
*Path Analysis of Associations Between Divorce and Romantic Relationship Outcomes (n= 396)*



*Note.* The path analysis shows association between parent's divorce and endogenous romantic relationship outcomes (overall quality, often go out as couple, interpersonal jealousy scale, and chances of getting married in the future), controlling for demographics. Coefficients presented are standardized linear regression coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .

Chi-Square: 0.0  
 p-value: 0.0  
 CFI: 1.0  
 RMSEA: .00  
 SRMR: .00

**Figure 3.**  
*Path Analysis of Associations Between Divorce and Mental Health Outcomes (n= 407)*

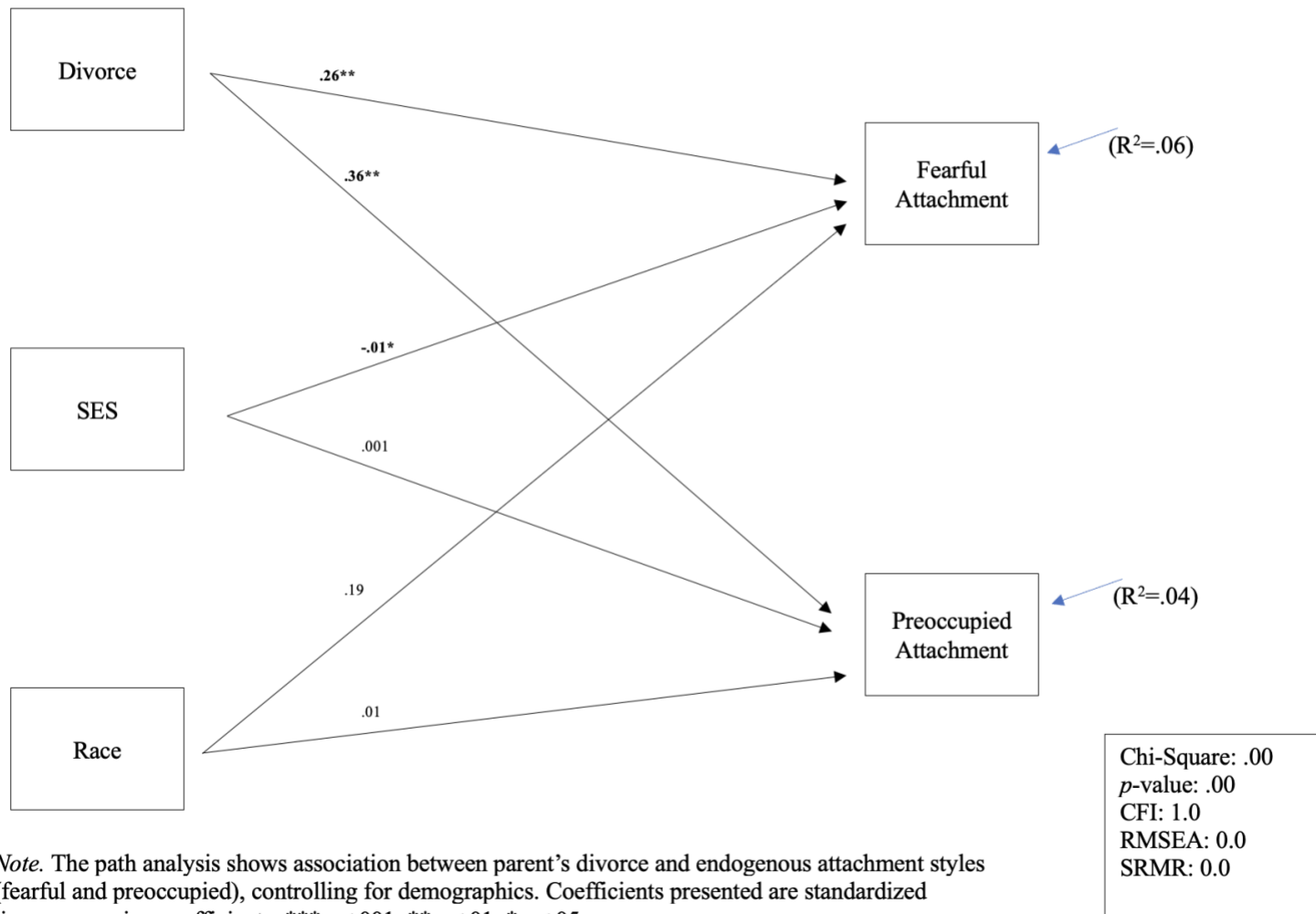


Chi-Square: 0.0  
 p-value: 0.0  
 CFI: 1.0  
 RMSEA: 0.0  
 SRMR: 0.0

*Note.* The path analysis shows association between parent’s divorce and endogenous mental health outcomes (anxiety/depression and thought problems), controlling for demographics. Coefficients presented are standardized linear regression coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ .



**Figure 4.**  
*Path Analysis of Associations Between Divorce and Attachment Styles (n= 405)*



## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

#### A. Intro questions:

1. How old are you?
2. Which best describe your race/ethnicity?
  - a. White
  - b. African American
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Other
3. Which best describes your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other
4. How old were you when your parents got divorced?
5. Do you remember how you found out?
  - a. Could you briefly describe it for me?
  - b. Or is there anything you remember about that time that stands out to you?

#### B. Attachment Styles:

1. How would you explain the dynamic of your relationship with your parents growing up?
  - a. Now?
2. How would you describe yourself as a friend or partner?
  - a. How do you think others would describe you as a friend or partner?

#### C. Romantic relationship questions:

1. Are you currently in a committed relationship?
  - a. If yes, how long?
  - b. If no, when was your last relationship and how long was it?
2. IF CURRENTLY IN RELATIONSHIP: Is this person someone you see yourself being in a committed relationship for a long time?
  - a. What are some of the reasons you do/don't see yourself with this person in the future?
3. IF NOT CURRENTLY IN RELATIONSHIP: Why did your last romantic relationship end?
4. How has experiencing your parents' divorce impact the way in which you view your own romantic relationships?
  - a. Less trusting?
  - b. Less hopeful?
  - c. More careful in choosing partners?

#### D. Sexual Experiences/Risk-taking behaviors:

1. How old were you when you first engaged in sexual activity?
2. Would you say you were involved in sexual activity earlier than your friends whose parents are not divorced?
3. What are your views on engaging in sexual activity with individuals who you are not in a committed relationship with?

#### E. Mental Health Outcomes:

1. Do you experience any mental health issues?
  - a. Diagnosed or undiagnosed?
2. How old were you when you first started experiencing these symptoms?
  - a. Can you tell me a little bit about that?
3. Is there a period of time in your life where you found it to be more prevalent than others?

**F. Conclusion**

1. Overall, do you feel as though your parent's divorce has contributed to the development, negatively or positively, in any of the areas we discussed today?

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