

## Impact of Guardian Relationships on Committed Relationships and College Students

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### Abstract

*Over the past couple of decades, America's divorce rate has sky rocketed to almost half of all marriages ending in divorce. This study investigated the attitudes of male and female college students from a Midwestern college towards committed relationships based on their parents'/guardians' marital status. It was hypothesized that college students' attitudes would be affected by their parents' marital status based on the Social Learning theory, which assumes that individuals often behave in ways that were modeled for them and that parents are some of the most powerful models. Survey data was analyzed using frequencies, cross-tabulations, and a reliability analysis. Results indicated that college students agreed that their parents' marital status affected their views on committed relationships. These findings were supported in the literature and supported the hypothesis. Implications for practitioners and future researchers include helping couples develop skills to maintain their marriages.*

Every year one million marriages end in divorce. During divorce, children are exposed to emotional and psychological stress due to having their families torn apart. Divorce conflict between parents can leave an everlasting impact on a child's view of the sanctity of marriage (Baker, 2005). A child's most influential role models are usually their parents. The child's own ability to form stable and healthy relationships can be affected by parental divorce or conflict (Sinclair & Nelson, 1998). Literature reviewed studied the impacts of parental divorce on college students and their attitudes towards committed relationships.

In order to research the effects of parents' relationships on young adults, the authors reviewed several studies conducted in the last ten years regarding the impact of parental divorce on college students. The literature focused on the impact parental divorce has on young adults. Some of the major impacts found in the literature were: lack of trust, low self esteem, divorce, levels of intimacy, love styles, and attachment. The authors did not find a study regarding the attitudes of college students towards committed relationships as it relates to the relationship their parents had (Hall, 2006; Baker, 2005; Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Sprecher, Cate & Levin, 1998).

Hall (2006) found that beliefs and values of marriage by young adults will most likely reflect the way they act towards marriage. This shows the impact parents' marital status has on children and young adults. This article also found that young adults may base their future relationships on past dating experiences, relationships with friends and their experience with family. These experiences may create negative or positive feelings towards committed relationships.

Baker (2005) found the effects of parental alienation on adult children resulted in low self-esteem, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, lack of trust, alienation by their own children,

and divorce. Each of these has an everlasting effect on children as they grow older. Because children learn how to love and treat others from examples set by their parents.

Sinclair and Nelson (1998) found that students from divorced families would not experience less intimacy than students from intact families. They also found that there was no significant difference in a person's ability to have intimacy in a relationship when comparing those participants from divorced intact families. Parental marital status is not a significant factor affecting a college student's intimate relationships. There are other factors that can lead to differences among the students such as the quality of the parent's relationships, family conflict, and the parent child relationship.

Sprecher, Care, and Levin (1998) researched the beliefs and attitudes about love and romantic relationships of college students from intact and divorced families. They found that parental divorce does not place children at a disadvantage in the development of love and relationships. If children grow up in an loving, caring environment even if their parents' divorce they will not be disadvantaged while developing love relationships. They did find that females from intact marriages had more secure attachment than those from divorced families.

The literature revealed that, among college students, there is no significant difference in the views they have on relationships depending on if they come from a divorced or non-divorced family. Previous research shows that there are other dimensions and factors affecting the views of college students on relationships. The authors will be filling a gap in research by comparing views college students have on committed relationships as well as if there is a relationship between these views and their parents' relationship status.

The theory used in this study was the Social Learning theory (Devault, Cohen, & Strong, 2005). This theory best describes human interaction and the way humans learn through set examples. Humans learn different behaviors from culture, society, and family. This theory assumes that individuals have the ability to change situations in their lives to what will best fit them and their beliefs. Children learn how to have relationships by observing their parents; this impacts the child's views on relationships later in life. Parents also influence the future decision-making process of their children through the decisions that they make in their marriage or in their divorce.

As applied to this study, this theory predicts that college students would pattern their committed relationships after their parents' relationship. For example, students with divorced parents would learn to assume that their marriages will end in divorce therefore may decide to not get married. However, this theory also indicates that choices can be made to change the outcome of relationships. Learning what did and did not work in a college student's parents' relationship gives students the opportunity to choose a different path for their future relationships.

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of college students on committed relationships coming from married and divorced families. The authors hope this information will inform others, such as marriage counselors, family social science educators, high school teachers, college students, the court system, marriage and family therapists, school counselors, advisors, policy makers, and the general public. As a result of this study, the authors hope to contribute to creating ways of stability in committed relationships, and understand the lasting effects divorce has on children as they grow older and how they view relationships. The central research question in this study is "What are the attitudes of college students about the effects that their parents' relationship has had on their own view of committed relationships?" The authors

surveyed college students from a Mid-Western state university. It was hypothesized that college student attitudes on committed relationships are affected by their parents' marital status. The authors hypothesize that if an individual's parents are divorced that they too will believe that they will get divorced some day. This also relates to the Social Learning theory in that college students will follow what their parents' relationship has modeled for them. The authors also hypothesize that there will be other factors affecting college students attitudes towards committed relationships, such as love being the basis of committed relationships, believing in cohabitation before marriage to get to know their partner, having negative feelings towards marriage if a student comes from a divorced family, and believing that marriage is an everlasting commitment.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The site of this study was at a Midwestern state university. The participants were 58 undergraduate students, 31 males and 27 females all from general education classes. There were 31 participants between the ages of 18-20, 17 between the ages of 21-23, two between the ages of 24-26, and the remaining eight of participants were 27 years old or older. Thirty-six of these participants' parents/guardians were married, 11 were divorced, and 11 were never married.

### *Research Design*

The authors wanted to see if there were similarities between the parent/guardian relationship structure and views that college students have on committed relationships. This study utilized a cross-sectional study design and collected data via self-administered questionnaires. The rationale for using this method was that it was the most efficient method to gather the data directly from campus while allowing for convenience, low cost, and the quick return of data. This study used a nonrandom-purposive sample design in order to gather information from male and female students. The authors contacted a professor of general education courses in order to sample both males and females. The authors used a nonrandomized purposive sampling design plan. The ethical protection of human subjects was provided by completing the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (IRB) training; this study has been approved by the IRB.

### *Data Collection Instrument*

In order to address college students' attitudes towards committed relationships influenced by their parents'/guardians' relationship, the authors developed a survey. The survey included a cover letter containing an explanation of implied consent, a description of the study, definitions of any terms not commonly known, potential risks and benefits, estimated time commitment, procedure for maintaining confidentiality, voluntary participation explanation, contact information of the research team and the supervisor, and instructions for completing the survey. The survey consisted of three demographic questions relating to gender, age, and biological parents'/guardians' marital status. The independent variable was based off of the college students' parent/guardian marital status. Participants were given seven, closed-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' attitudes ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). Questions were based on literature and theory about parental marital status, divorce, intimate relationships, and commitment.

The survey instrument used has both face validity and content validity. Because the questions and concepts addressed in the survey are literature and theory inspired, the authors feel there is adequate evidence of face validity. The authors believe each statement in the survey instrument provided content covering a wide variety of opinions for respondents to relate to.

### *Procedure*

Data for this study was collected by emailing a general education professors and asking for their permission to survey their class. After receiving permission, the authors arrived at the classroom and the professor introduced them. He also stressed the importance of research and taking the survey seriously. The authors then passed out each of the surveys, read the implied consent, and asked participants to follow along. Participants were instructed to detach the consent page to keep for themselves, and then the authors informed each participant their participation was completely voluntary and they would not experience any adverse consequences if they chose not to participate in this survey. The authors also warned the participants that if they chose to withdraw participation at a later date, there would be no way to identify which survey belonged to them because the surveys were anonymous. To preserve confidentiality, the authors and the professor stepped out of the room while the participants completed the survey. When the participants completed the survey, they were instructed to place the survey in an envelope located at the front of the room. Data was stored in a secure location until analysis.

### *Data Analysis Plan*

The data was first cleaned and checked for any missing data. The cleaned surveys were then coded using acronyms for each variable. The first three questions on the survey were demographic variables: gender, age, parents'/guardians' marital status. The only independent variable was parents'/guardians' marital status, which was coded as *PMS*. Each survey statement was a dependent variable and given an acronym name (as seen in Table 1). The individual was used as the level of analysis. Data analysis included frequencies, cross-tabulations, mean comparisons, and a reliability analysis.

## **Results**

A frequency analysis indicated that there was no data missing from the surveys. A reliability analysis was run to indicate if the variables were a reliable index to measure the major concept: college students' attitudes towards committed relationships that were influenced by parents'/guardians' relationship. A Chronbach's Alpha of .46 indicates that the survey items overall reliable, but weak; however, if the variable *CBM* was removed from the survey, Cronbach's Alpha would increase to .59.

Table 1

### *Percent Responses by Parent/Guardian Marital Status*

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(MSV) = I believe my parents'/guardians' marital status has affected my view on committed relationships

| PMS | SD | D | U | A | SA |
|-----|----|---|---|---|----|
|-----|----|---|---|---|----|

|               |      |       |       |       |       |
|---------------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Married       | 2.8% | 5.6%  | 8.3%  | 27.8% | 55.6% |
| Divorced      | 0.0% | 18.2% | 9.1%  | 27.3% | 45.5% |
| Never Married | 9.1% | 0.0%  | 27.3% | 54.5% | 9.1%  |

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(MEC) = I think marriage is an everlasting commitment

|               |      |      |      |       |       |
|---------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| PMS           | SD   | D    | U    | A     | SA    |
| Married       | 2.8% | 2.8% | 0.0% | 25.0% | 69.4% |
| Divorced      | 0.0% | 9.1% | 0.0% | 63.6% | 27.3% |
| Never Married | 0.0% | 9.1% | 9.1% | 54.5% | 27.3% |

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(LBR) = Love should be the basis of a committed relationship

|               |      |      |      |       |       |
|---------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| PMS           | SD   | D    | U    | A     | SA    |
| Married       | 0.0% | 2.8% | 5.6% | 30.6% | 61.1% |
| Divorced      | 0.0% | 9.1% | 0.0% | 27.3% | 63.6% |
| Never Married | 9.1% | 9.1% | 9.1% | 45.5% | 27.3% |

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(PGM) = I plan to get married

|               |      |      |       |       |       |
|---------------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| PMS           | SD   | D    | U     | A     | SA    |
| Married       | 0.0% | 0.0% | 11.1% | 27.8% | 61.1% |
| Divorced      | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.1%  | 45.5% | 45.5% |
| Never Married | 0.0% | 0.0% | 27.3% | 18.2% | 54.5% |

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(CBM) = I plan to cohabit before I get married to get to know the person first

|         |      |      |       |       |       |
|---------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| PMS     | SD   | D    | U     | A     | SA    |
| Married | 8.3% | 5.6% | 19.4% | 33.3% | 33.3% |

|               |      |      |       |       |       |
|---------------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|
| Divorced      | 0.0% | 9.1% | 0.0%  | 27.3% | 66.6  |
| Never Married | 0.0% | 0.0% | 27.3% | 45.5% | 27.3% |

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(DNF) = Students from a divorced family will have negative feelings towards marriage

| PMS           | SD    | D     | U     | A     | SA   |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Married       | 2.8%  | 27.8% | 55.6% | 11.1% | 2.8% |
| Divorced      | 45.5% | 36.4% | 18.2% | 0.0%  | 0.0% |
| Never Married | 36.4% | 27.3% | 27.3% | 9.1%  | 0.0% |

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(FCR) = The media's focus on cohabitation relationships has impacted how I view committed relationships.

| PMS           | SD    | D     | U     | A     | SA   |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------|
| Married       | 33.3% | 25.0% | 25.0% | 8.3%  | 8.3% |
| Divorced      | 45.5% | 18.2% | 36.4% | 0.0%  | 0.0% |
| Never Married | 27.3% | 9.1%  | 18.2% | 45.5% | 0.0% |

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*Note.* (PMS) = Parents Marital Status; SD – Strongly Disagree, D – Disagree, U – Undecided, A – Agree, SA – Strongly Agree

## Discussion

Overall, the hypothesis that college students' attitudes towards committed relationships will be affected by their parents' marital status was supported by the results found from the survey. These findings are supported in the literature (Hall, 2006; Baker, 2005; Sinclair & Nelson, 1998; Sprecher, Cate, & Levin, 1998).

As the Social Learning theory (Strong, De Vault, & Cohen, 2005) predicted, respondents strongly agreed that their parents'/guardians' marital status had an impact on their views of what committed relationships should include. According to Sinclair & Nelson (1998) parental marital status is not a significant factor affecting college students' intimate relationships. This does not appear to be supported by the findings of this study.

College students strongly agreed that marriage is an everlasting commitment, regardless of their parents/guardians marital status. This result agreed with the literature. Hall (2006) found that students will base their opinions of marriage on their relationships, their peers' relationships and their family. If students' parents are still married, they too believe that their marriage will last, and if a student's parents are divorced, they may base their opinions of marriage on a peer or another family member who has a successful marriage. Students may develop negative or

positive feelings based off of their experiences with different relationships, which in turn can leave negative or positive everlasting effects on students.

College students agreed that love should be the basis of committed relationships; this finding is in agreement with the literature. Sprecher, Care, and Levin (1998) found divorce does not put students at a disadvantage when developing love relationships. This relates to the statement because students are not marrying or divorcing for other motives like money, but marrying because they are in love or divorcing because they have fallen out of love with their partner.

According to Hall (2006), it was found that beliefs and values about marriage in young adults will most likely reflect the way they act towards marriage. These findings show college students, regardless of their parents/guardians marital status, agreed with the statement: I plan to get married. The authors were surprised to see so many college students have considered the thought of marriage considering a high number of the participants were underclass men.

The results from the next statement: I plan to cohabit before I get married to get to know the person first, agree with literature. Hall (2006) states that young adults may base their future relationships on past dating experiences, relationships with friends, and their experience with family. If students' parents cohabitated before marriage or if they have friends who are cohabitating, then they too may agree with cohabitating before marriage to get to know one another better.

The Social Learning theory (Strong, De Vault, & Cohen, 2005) best explains the results from the statement: Students from a divorced family will have negative feelings towards marriage. Students from married families were undecided whether or not divorce would impact students negatively. Interestingly, none of students from divorced families agreed with this statement. The Social Learning theory would suggest that students coming divorced families make the choice to see marriage as an everlasting commitment rather than following in the footsteps of their divorced parents. Lastly, students from never married families mainly disagree or strongly disagree that students from divorced families will have negative views of marriage. The authors think this result could result from believing in the best possible outcome of marriage even though their parents did not model a good marriage for them. Regardless of their parents'/guardians' marital status, students ultimately have the ability to decide for themselves what committed relationships mean to them.

The last statement was: The media's focus on cohabiting relationships has impacted how I view committed relationships. Students from married and divorced families both disagreed that the media impacts how they view committed relationships. These findings are best explained by the Social Learning Theory (Strong, De Vault, & Cohen, 2005). These opinions could be because students have their own parental models at home to impact their approach to relationships. Students whose parents/guardians were never married agree that the media's focus on cohabiting relationships has impacted how they view committed relationships. This may be due to them using media images such as traditional families represented in the media as role models to compare to their own life.

### *Limitations*

One limitation is that this sample size was small and therefore the authors were not able to generalize to a population beyond the characteristics of this sample. Another limitation was the lack of cultural diversity within the sample.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

These results show that college students still believe that love and marriage are everlasting commitments regardless of if they are from a married, divorced, or never married family. Practitioners should consider, while working with clients, people desire everlasting relationships but something is preventing them from attaining the everlasting relationships they desire. When working with clients, practitioners should focus on relationship strengthening activities, helping clients become better aware of ways to work through conflict, and on better communication skills. These techniques will provide clients with better knowledge to work through conflict when it arises in relationships and thus contribute to relationship stability.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The authors recommend that future research use a larger, random, and more culturally diverse sample to generalize to college students' attitudes across the country. If this study were to be replicated, the authors suggest rewording or discarding one of our statements (CBM): I plan to cohabit before marriage to get to know the person first. According to reliability statistics, the Cronbach's Alpha would increase from .46 to .59 if the statement (CBM) were taken out of the survey. The authors speculate that this statement does not flow with the other statements and may have been misinterpreted by the respondents. This may be due to that fact that many respondents were young and may have not considered their future living with a partner or they did not know the definition of cohabit (cohabitate).

## **Conclusion**

In spite of the continuing high divorce rate in this country and cohabitation outpacing marriage, the authors found that college students still believe in love and everlasting committed relationships, including marriage. Given these two opposing forces, the authors speculate that most people in society wish to have everlasting relationships but something is preventing them from doing so. The authors hope that these findings will help marriage counselors, family social science educators, teachers, marriage and family therapists, the court system, policymakers and the general public to recognize and work on building skills to maintain stable and healthy committed relationships.

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