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Abstract

Parental separation can impact multiple aspects of an individual's life, including romantic relationship satisfaction (Amato, 2010). Albert Bandura's social learning theory suggests that children model their behavior based on their parents' example, which means those whose parents separate may adopt similar relationship practices that lead to their eventual separation with their romantic partner— this could contribute to the pattern of divorce being more common in those whose parents' divorced (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Bandura, 1977; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). It is important to interrupt this pattern to prevent the cycle of negative impacts of parental divorce on children being continued from generation to generation (Markman, 1981). One way to interrupt this cycle could be to focus on the impacts of parental separation on romantic relationship quality. This study aims to address the gap in the literature regarding the impacts of divorce on adolescents and emerging adults by investigating the connections between parental separation and relationship quality using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) data. Data from a 2,205 participant subsample from Add Health were used in linear regressions to understand the relationship between parental separation and relationship quality, and gender was introduced into the regressions in the second step of the analysis. Similar to existing literature, a significant association was found between parental separation and lower relationship quality levels, however, in contrast to existing studies, the interaction between parental separation and gender was not significant. Further research is needed to solidify these findings.

Keywords: Parental separation, adolescence, romantic relationship quality, emerging adulthood

**Associations Between Parental Separation in Adolescence and Romantic Relationship
Quality in Emerging Adulthood**

Chloe F Ludden

B.A., University of Connecticut, 2021

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in
Human Development and Family Science

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
Theory.....	3
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Differences in Relationship and Dating Patterns.....	5
Differences in Attitudes and Beliefs.....	6
Differences in Relationship Behaviors.....	7
Differences in Relationship Quality Between Divorced and Intact Families.....	7
Gender Differences.....	8
AIMS AND HYPOTHESES.....	9
Gaps in the Literature.....	9
Research Questions and Hypotheses.....	11
METHOD.....	12
Participants.....	12
Variables.....	13
Procedure.....	15
RESULTS.....	16
Commitment.....	17
Satisfaction.....	17
Emotional Intimacy.....	18
DISCUSSION.....	19
Implications.....	21
Limitations.....	22

Future Directions.....	25
CONCLUSION.....	26
REFERENCES.....	27
VITA.....	34

List of Illustrative Materials

Figure 1. Aims of the Current Study.....	11
Table 1. Relationship Quality Descriptives.....	16
Table 2. Step 1 and 2 Linear Regression Results.....	19

Introduction

Experiencing the divorce or separation of their parents can impact multiple domains of an individual's life, including academic, social, behavioral, and emotional well-being (Amato, 2010). Divorce and parental separation are assumed to have very similar impacts on families, as a marriage is typically viewed as having ended when a couple separates as opposed to the action of legally divorcing (Morgan, 1988). These negative impacts of parental separation and divorce can occur in childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood as well, suggesting the gravity of the effects of the separation on more than just the couple whose marriage it is ending (Amato, 2010). The age at which an individual experiences the separation of their parents can impact their outcomes from the separation, making it important to investigate these impacts at multiple different developmental stages in an individual's life (Sorosky, 1977). For example, adolescence (ages 13 to 18) is a particularly vulnerable time for an individual to experience the separation of their parents, as this is an essential time for developing a sense of identity and self, as well as becoming experienced with balancing aspects of relationships (Elam et al., 2016; Erikson, 1968; Kalter, 1987; & Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). The consequences of an individual's parents separating can also differ as the individual develops and grows older—of particular interest in this study are the consequences of parental separation that occurred earlier in life during the time period termed “emerging adolescence,” which includes individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 (Konstam, 2010; Sorosky, 1977).

Recent literature and observational studies have suggested that experiencing the separation of one's parents can have a multitude of impacts on romantic relationships. Compared to those from intact families, individuals whose parents divorced may show differences in dating and relationship patterns, beliefs and attitudes towards marriage and divorce, behaviors within

their relationships, and differences in aspects of relationship satisfaction and quality (Amato, 1988; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, & Chen, 1985; Mustonen et al., 2011). An interaction between the impacts of parental separation on relationship quality based on gender has also been suggested in the existing literature (Mustonen et al., 2011; Cui & Finchman, 2010; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). This finding is not surprising, considering that gender differences in adjustment after parental separation have been found in multiple domains, including behavioral, socioemotional, and academic adjustment (Guidabaldi & Perry, 1984; Kaye, 1989).

Continued investigation into the issue of how parental separation may impact emerging adults' own romantic relationships is important because of the pattern of intergenerational transmission of divorce: adults with separated parents are more likely to get divorced than those from intact families (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). This also means that the negative impacts that separation can have on children of divorce, as mentioned earlier, continue to be a problem for families— not only is divorce “passed on” from one generation to the next, so too can the harmful effects of divorce on many aspects of childrens' lives. By learning more about how parental separation can impact emerging adults' romantic relationships, it may be possible to target specific areas couples can work on in order to avoid eventual separation, thus avoiding the negative impacts of separation on the children in the family (Markman, 1981). It is necessary to focus specifically on relationship quality and how it is impacted by parental separation because the current literature is limited when investigating this specific construct. Relationship quality often includes levels of commitment, emotional intimacy, and satisfaction with the relationship (Joyner, Manning, & Prince, 2019), and is an essential construct to consider when investigating romantic relationships due to its correlation with an individual's overall well-

being (Argyle, 2001). This provides another reason behind the importance of this study—continued investigation into this topic could provide an understanding for how to improve relationship quality and thus an individual’s overall well-being. The current study will investigate the impacts parental separation that occurred during the adolescent time period can have on relationship quality in emerging adults’ romantic relationships, as well as taking a look at how this may differ as a function of gender.

Theory

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory provides an appropriate lens with which to examine the issue of impacts of parental divorce on relationship quality. Social learning theory posits that children observe the behavior of important models in their lives and learn behaviors based on these observations—parents act as one of the most important models for children’s learned behaviors about relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Children of divorce may observe the problematic behaviors and issues that occur between their parents before the divorce, making it more likely that they go on to develop these same problematic behaviors that can lead to issues in their own relationships in adulthood. For example, studies have demonstrated a connection between those who report their parents experienced a problematic marriage and higher levels of relationship problems in these same individuals’ own marriages (Belsky & Isabella, 1985; Booth & Edwards, 1990). Similarly, Caspi and Elder (1988) found that conflict in the parental relationship was related to behavioral issues in children, who demonstrated problematic interpersonal behaviors as adults, which negatively impacted their relationship quality. Not only can parental divorce provide a model for negative interpersonal behaviors, it can also create a lack of positive models that would lead to healthy relationship behaviors. Children may not be exposed to positive models of healthy communicative style, compromising

skills, and supportive behaviors that help maintain healthy relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001).

A combination of theories can be used to provide rationale for gender differences in relationship outcomes as a result of divorce. First, sociocultural theory states that women have traditionally been assigned more subordinate tasks, such as bearing and raising children, while men have been assigned tasks with higher levels of power (Eagly & Wood, 1999; Wood & Eagly, 2012). This traditional division of labor contributes to psychological differences between men and women because they must adapt and morph their actions and thoughts to fit the opportunities and challenges that they are presented with as a result of their gender. Sociocultural theory therefore assumes that women's traditional, socialized role of raising children leads to psychological qualities that would facilitate and sustain relationships, whereas men are socialized to possess qualities better suited for leading or being in a position of power. This difference in psychological qualities could explain why there may be differences in the outcomes for men and women after their parents' separation; if women are socialized to possess more relationship-centered qualities, then they may be more negatively impacted by a failure in a relationship than men as these qualities and their impacts are more salient to them. Similarly to sociocultural theory, the Different Cultures Thesis (DCT) posits that the focus of men and women's social lives is different, with men trending towards being task-oriented and women trending towards relationship-oriented foci (Gray, 2009; Kunkel & Burlison, 1998; Mortenson, 2002; Romano, 1994; Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002; Wood, 2009). Again, because relationship-oriented foci, qualities, and behaviors are more salient to women, experiencing the separation of their parents and thus a disruption in a relationship may be more impactful for women than for men.

In more recent years, cognitive components have been incorporated into Bandura's original social learning theory— these cognitive components can help provide an explanation as to why gender differences may exist in regards to relationship outcomes being impacted by parental divorce. Social learning theory suggests that external reinforcements and punishments shape behavior, but the cognitive aspects of internalized standards and self- regulation can also contribute to how an individual learns to act (Hyde, 2014). Children observe their parents and other models' behavior and how they act in their relationships, they internalize what they are seeing as normal, then they model their own behavior after what they have observed. Children may internalize norms around how they have learned that women or men are supposed to act in a relationship, or the specific tasks they engage in to maintain the relationship, so it makes sense that gender differences may exist regarding relationships and how they may be impacted by parental separation.

Literature Review

There is considerable research that supports the idea raised by social learning theory that romantic relationships in emerging adulthood may be influenced in multiple ways by parental separation.

Differences in Relationship and Dating Patterns

Individuals from divorced families often show different dating and relationship patterns than those from intact families. Those whose parents divorced cohabit more often and marry at younger ages than those whose parents are together (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Thornton, 1991). Adults with divorced parents are also more likely to get divorced and remarried (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). More specifically, Mustonen et al. (2011) found that adults whose parents were divorced were more likely to be

separated or divorced from their partners at age 32 than those whose parents remained married. Lastly, Kalter et al. (1985) found it was more common among women with divorced parents to date at later ages than those whose parents were married; they also found that women with divorced parents dated more frequently, especially if the conflict between the divorced parents or between the parents and child continued after the divorce. Clearly, there are differences regarding dating and relationship patterns between adults with married or divorced parents.

Differences in Attitudes and Beliefs

Differences exist in the attitudes and beliefs surrounding marriage and divorce for those with separated versus intact families (Amato, 1988; Amato & Booth, 1991; Greenberg & Nay, 1982; Kapinus, 2005; Rauch, 2013). In terms of attitudes toward divorce, Kapinus (2005) found that women with divorced parents have more negative views of divorce than those with married parents. Other studies suggest that those with divorced parents have a more accepting view of divorce (Amato, 1988; Amato & Booth, 1991; Greenberg & Nay, 1982). Rauch (2013) extends upon these ideas of negative but accepting beliefs toward divorce with the finding that adults with divorced parents are more likely to believe that divorce is an acceptable option for them to end a relationship, even though they view divorce more negatively than those with married parents. Differences also exist in beliefs and attitudes regarding marriage. Rauch (2013) found that experiencing the divorce of one's parents was correlated with more negative attitudes towards marriage, especially if the divorce occurred while the individual was a young adult. For example, adults with divorced parents may be afraid of being unsuccessful in their marriage and have more anxiety surrounding being a good spouse (Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1991). Amato and Deboer (2001) also found that adults with divorced parents have a weaker commitment to the concept of marriage than those whose parents remain together. All in all, adults with

divorced parents seem to show more negative views and attitudes regarding the concepts of divorce and marriage as compared to adults from intact families.

Differences in Relationship Behaviors

Differences also emerge in the behaviors of adults from intact or divorced families in the context of their romantic relationships. Communicative behaviors in romantic relationships are often more problematic among partners whose parents are divorced than those whose parents remained together; similarly, partners whose parents separated show more difficulty restraining criticisms of their partner (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999). Partners with divorced parents also demonstrate higher levels of conflict and trouble resolving said conflict (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Interpersonal behaviors with problematic consequences, such as infidelity, jealousy, and anger are also more frequently demonstrated by partners from divorced families (Amato, 1996).

Differences in Relationship Quality Between Divorced and Intact Families

Experiencing the separation of one's parents can also impact aspects of relationship quality between those with married parents and those with divorced parents. Cui and Finchman (2010) suggest a connection between the difference in marital attitudes that exist for individuals with divorced parents and those from intact families and relationship quality: divorce was connected with less positive attitudes towards marriage, which were in turn connected with weaker relationship commitment levels and therefore lower relationship quality for those with divorced parents when compared with those with intact families. In other words, attitudes toward marriage and divorce and the commitment to one's current relationship act as mediators between parental divorce and romantic relationship quality (Cui and Finchman, 2010). Other literature in this area notes that differences in relationship satisfaction or quality between those with divorced

and married parents are stronger among women with divorced parents compared with women with married parents. For example, Jacquet and Surra (2001) suggest that women report less trust and satisfaction with their romantic relationships when their parents got divorced than do women with married parents. This study also suggests that the ambivalence, difficulties with trust, and higher levels of conflict that are more common among partners with separated families contribute to the lower levels of relationship satisfaction that are also observed among these partners, in comparison to those from intact families (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Additionally, partners with divorced parents show lower levels of optimism, commitment, and trust in their romantic relationships— this is especially evident among women with divorced parents (Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Similarly, Mustonen et al. (2011) found that women from divorced families demonstrated lower relationship quality in their intimate relationships than those from intact families.

Gender Differences

While there are considerable differences between individuals with separated and married parents, it is also important to note the differences that exist in the associations between separation and relationship patterns, beliefs and attitudes towards marriage and divorce, behaviors within their relationships, and relationship quality based on gender (Kapinus, 2005; Mustonen et al., 2011; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Jacquet and Surra's (2001) research noted various differences in the interaction between separation and relationship outcomes based on gender: for example, women with divorced parents were found to have less trust, optimism, commitment, and satisfaction levels in their relationships than men with divorced parents. This study also found that the parental marital status of the man's partner influenced how they perceived their relationships in terms of trust, optimism, commitment, and satisfaction (Jacquet & Surra, 2001).

Differences also exist in the interaction between separation and relationship attitudes and behaviors based on gender: women with divorced parents show more negative attitudes toward divorce and demonstrate more negative couple communication than men with separated parents (Kapinus, 2005; Sanders et al., 1999). Mustonen et al. (2011) found that experiencing their parents' divorce produced more profound impacts on intimate relationship quality at age 32 for women than for men. Due to the examples in the literature of the differences in association between parental separation and relationship outcomes based on gender, this study will examine gender as a moderating factor.

Aims & Hypotheses

Gaps in the Literature

While the literature has started to examine the connections between parental divorce and its impacts on romantic relationships, additional research is still needed especially in regards to relationship quality and studying the relationship between parental separation and outcomes in adolescence and emerging adulthood specifically. Few studies have examined relationship quality as it has been impacted by parental divorce, and the studies that have often use different definitions for the construct. Most studies that investigate relationship quality acknowledge that the definition involves aspects of satisfaction and commitment (Levinger, 1979; Rusbult, 1980). Emotional intimacy, however, is another important dimension of relationship quality, involving feeling and expressing warmth, caring, love, and acceptance for one's partner (Prager, 2000). Some studies incorporate a broader definition of relationship quality, mentioning the additional components of happiness, comfort, trust, passion, and reward (Cui & Finchman, 2010; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The ambiguity of the definition for relationship quality has resulted in a lack of research that looks at parental separation and relationship quality as specifically

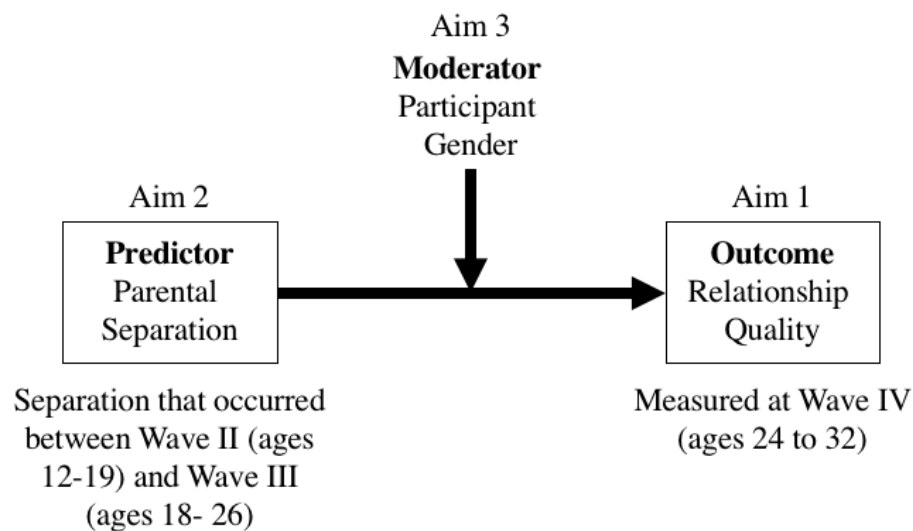
defined by consisting of emotional intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction. Another gap to address is the lack of research that looks at these components of relationship quality within the Add Health data. The first aim of my study is to expand on the existing literature by investigating relationship quality as clearly defined with the specific subcomponents of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy within the Add Health dataset, as well as contributing to the limited existing research on how these constructs are impacted by parental separation.

The current research also fails to thoroughly investigate parental separation's impacts on adolescents and emerging adults. Most studies that investigate the impacts of divorce look at children under the age of 13, rather than at adolescents (Kalter, 1987; Sorosky, 1977). Much of the research that does look at adolescents specifically is from many years ago, and may not be generalizable to adolescents and families today (Sorosky, 1977; Adams, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974). Similarly, the literature investigating impacts of parental separation on those who are in emerging adulthood is also lacking (Konstam, 2010). The age and developmental stage of an individual when their parents separate is a factor in their outcomes from the separation— for example, adolescence is an important and vulnerable time in the development of a sense of identity and in relationships with others (Elam et al., 2016; Erikson, 1968; Osborne & McLanahan, 2007; Sorosky, 1977). It is therefore essential to gain a better understanding of how parental separation that occurs during adolescence can impact outcomes later in life in emerging adulthood, as research surrounding both of these age groups is limited. This study will address this gap and aim to expand the knowledge on the relationship between parental separation in adolescents and subsequent effects of the separation on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood.

The last aim of my study is to solidify the understanding of how gender interacts with impacts of parental separation on relationship quality. This aim is in response to the gap in the literature surrounding gender differences in relationship quality as impacted by parental separation. While the literature does suggest that there are differences between men and women regarding the impacts of parental separation on levels of relationship quality, the studies suggesting this are limited in number and in explanations for why these differences may occur (Mustonen et al., 2011; Jacquet & Surra, 2001). Figure 1 represents the aims of this study.

Figure 1

Aims of the Current Study



Research Questions and Hypotheses

In order to address the gaps in the current literature, I will investigate the following questions: does relationship quality differ for those whose parents separate and those whose parents are married? Does relationship quality differ for men and women whose parents separate? I predict that individuals whose parents separated will have lower levels of relationship quality overall, and will have lower levels of commitment, emotional intimacy, and satisfaction

when compared with individuals whose parents did not separate. I also predict that relationship quality and all three subcategories (commitment, emotional intimacy, and satisfaction) will be lower for women whose parents separated when compared with men whose parents separated.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) data set. Add Health is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of middle and high school students from around the United States (Scott, Booth, King, & Johnson, 2007). The data for Addhealth was collected in five main waves between the years of 1994 and 2018, and was gathered through in- person home interviews; both the participants themselves and their parents were interviewed (Fan, Jeng, & Tang, 2022; Scott et al., 2007; Joyner et al., 2019). At Wave I, participants were between the ages of 11 to 19; at Wave II, participants were between 12 and 19 years old; by Wave III, participants were between ages 18 to 26; Wave IV participants were between ages 24 to 32; and Wave V participants were between ages 33 to 43.

In this study, I utilized the public sample, which involved approximately 6,604 participants. The participants for this study were restricted to those in Add Health who had the necessary information about whether or not their parents separated between Waves II and III, whose parents were both still alive, and who responded to survey questions regarding a current or most recent partner at Wave IV. Of the total 6,604 participants, 2,205 participants had the necessary information on the parental separation and relationship quality variables and were included in the analysis. The first reason behind the large decrease in total participants in Add Health to the participants included in the sample was the exclusionary criteria. Only individuals whose parents were still alive at Wave III, and who responded to questions about their current or

most recent partner were included. Many participants may have been dropped from the sample whose parents were already separated at Wave II, whose parents were not both alive at either Wave II or III, and who did not have a relationship on which they could respond. Additionally, Wave II included fewer participants than the Wave I total, as participants who were seniors in Wave I were not included in Wave II. Typical attrition rates could have also contributed to the fewer number of participants who were included in the sample when compared with the overall total of all participants in Add Health.

Of the 2,205 participants included in the sample, 44.2% were male and 55.8% were female, and the average age of participants was 15.9 years old (SD= 1.7). 69.9% of the sample identified as white, 13.9% identified as black, 10.6% identified as Latine, 3.2% identified as Asian, and 2.4% identified as other. There are multiple strengths to utilizing the Add Health data set for this study, including its longitudinal nature, representativeness, and large sample size.

Variables

Parental Separation

Parental separation acted as the predictor variable. The occurrence of parental separation was determined using an item from Wave III, which referenced an item from Wave II. The item from Wave III asked participants, “Do <PROMTX2> and <PRPOPTX2> still live together in the same household?”. This asked participants whether the residential mother and father they had previously indicated lived together at Wave II were still living together at Wave III. Participants who answered “Yes” were considered to have not experienced parental separation, as their residential parents were still living together, and participants who responded “No” were considered to have experienced the act of parental separation between Waves II and Waves III of data collection. 10.6% of the sample reported parental separation had occurred. As mentioned

earlier, because marriage is usually viewed as having ended when a couple separates, as opposed to legally divorcing, it is acceptable to assume the act of parental separation will have similar impacts to the act of divorce (Morgan, 1988).

Relationship Quality

Relationship quality acted as the outcome variable. The Add Health dataset includes items that can be used to measure some of the constructs that characterize broader relationship quality, including emotional intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction. More specifically, emotional intimacy refers to the levels of warmth, caring, love, and acceptance that are felt and expressed between partners (Prager, 2000); commitment is the extent to which one wants to continue their relationship (Rusbult, 1980; Waite & Lillard, 1991); and satisfaction generally refers to the level of happiness with the relationship (Joyner et al., 2019). A study by Joyner et al. (2019) utilized these specific items from Wave IV of the Add Health data. Joyner et al. (2019) created three subscales with good reliability to measure these specific constructs of commitment ($\alpha = .845$), satisfaction ($\alpha = .803$), and emotional intimacy ($\alpha = .779$). Items for these scales were drawn from a series of questions that individuals were asked about their current or most recent romantic partner. Items that make up these subscales differed in their response options, and were rated on either a 3-, 4-, 5-, or 7- point Likert scale.

Commitment. Commitment is an important indicator for relationship quality because it is associated with processes that help maintain relationships. Joyner et al. (2019) grouped together 2 items to measure commitment levels. They used the items “How committed are you in your relationship with (initials)?” and “How likely is it that your relationship with (initials) will be permanent?”.

Satisfaction. Satisfaction was measured using the items, “we enjoy doing even ordinary day- to- day things together,” “I am satisfied with the way we handle our problems and disagreements,” “I am satisfied with our sex life,” and “how happy are you in your relationship?” (Joyner et al., 2019).

Emotional Intimacy. Emotional intimacy was assessed using items, “my partner listens to me when I need someone to talk to,” “my partner expresses love and affection to me,” “how much do you love (initials)?”, and “select the picture which best illustrates how close you feel to (initials)” (Joyner et al., 2019).

Procedure

Data from Waves I, III, and IV were combined into one data set. The predictor variable of parental separation from Wave III was recoded, with response 0 indicating the residential parents from Wave II still lived together, and response 1 indicating the residential parents from Wave II no longer lived together and thus separated. The variable indicating gender from Wave I was recoded, with 0 indicating male and 1 indicating female. All outcome variables from Wave IV were recoded. Due to the differences in the Likert scales for each item, all items were proportionally rescaled on a scale from 0 to 1, with items being reverse coded if necessary so that a higher value indicated higher relationship quality, as consistent with Joyner et al. (2019). The item that existed in Add Health on a 3- point Likert scale was recoded into values 0, .5, and 1. The 4- point Likert scale items were recoded into values 0, .33, .66, and 1. The 5- point Likert scale items were recoded into values 0, .25, .5, .75, and 1. Lastly, the 7- point Likert scale item was recoded into values 0, .167, .334, .5, .667, .834, and 1.

Consistent with Joyner et al. (2019), the items for the outcome variable were combined into three subscales to measure levels of commitment, emotional intimacy, and satisfaction. The

commitment subscale consisted of 2 items, the satisfaction subscale consisted of 4 items , and the emotional intimacy subscale consisted of 4 items. All three subscales were found to have good reliability scores (commitment $\alpha=.868$, satisfaction $\alpha=.823$, and emotional intimacy $\alpha=.814$).

In the first step of the analysis, 3 linear regressions were run in SPSS using the predictor variable for parental separation and each of the subscales for relationship quality, commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy as the outcome variables. Race and age were controlled for in these regressions, with the age variable being centered ($M= 15.9$) and people who identified as white being the reference group. In the second step of the analysis, gender was introduced as a moderator in each of the regressions, with race and age being entered as controls.

Results

Table 1 displays the average scores on the three subscales of relationship quality for males, females, those with parents still living together at Wave III and those whose parents separated.

Table 1

Relationship Quality Descriptives

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Commitment				
Male	0	2	1.57	.58
Female	0	2	1.67	.52
Parents Together	0	2	1.67	.52
Parents Separated	0	2	1.54	.61
Satisfaction				
Male	0	4	3.15	.83
Female	0	4	3.20	.88
Parents Together	0	4	3.23	.82
Parents Separated	0	4	3.06	.94
Emotional Intimacy				
Male	0	4	3.28	.80
Female	0	4	3.30	.82
Parents Together	0	4	3.35	.77
Parents Separated	0	4	3.18	.87

Commitment

Linear regression was used to test if parental separation significantly predicted relationship commitment levels after controlling for age and race. In the first step of the analysis, the effect of separation on commitment was significant and the model explained 4% of the variance in commitment ($R^2=.040$, $F(6, 2198)= 15.089$, $p< .000$). Parental separation significantly predicted lower relationship commitment levels for those whose parents separated, with parental separation associated with .126 units lower scores on commitment (comparable to .24 SD) ($\beta= .126$, $p< .000$).

In the second step of the analysis, an interaction of parental separation by gender was added into the model. This step explained 4.6% of the variance in commitment ($R^2=.046$), however the interaction of gender and parental separation was not significant ($F(8, 2196)= 13.249$, $p=.052$). Although this interaction was not significant, there was a significant main effect of gender ($\beta= .089$, $p< .000$), meaning women typically responded with answers that were .089 units higher than male participants' answers on the commitment outcome items (see Table 1).

Satisfaction

Linear regression was also used to test if parental separation significantly predicted relationship satisfaction levels after controlling for age and race. The first step of the analysis explained 2.5% of the variance in satisfaction and demonstrated a significant effect of parental separation on satisfaction levels ($R^2=.025$, $F(6, 2198)= 9.528$, $p< .003$). Parental separation significantly predicted lower relationship satisfaction levels, with those with separated parents demonstrating .171 units lower satisfaction than those with parents still living together (comparable to .20 SD) ($\beta= .171$, $p< .003$).

When the interaction of parental separation by gender was introduced in the second step of the model, 2.7% of the variance in satisfaction was explained, but the interaction between gender and separation was not significant ($R^2=.027$, $F(8, 2196)= 7.487$, $p=.183$). Additionally, there was not a significant main effect of gender on participants' satisfaction scores ($\beta= .060$, $p=.110$) (see Table 1).

Emotional Intimacy

The third linear regression was used to test if parental separation significantly predicted levels of emotional intimacy after controlling for age and race. The first step in the analysis explained 2% of the variance in emotional intimacy, and demonstrated a significant relationship between parental separation and lower intimacy levels for those whose parents separated ($R^2=.020$, $F(6, 2198)= 7.575$, $p< .001$). Parental separation predicted a .168 units lower score for individuals with separated parents (comparable to .22 SD) ($\beta= .168$, $p< .001$).

The introduction of the interaction of parental separation by gender into the second step of the model resulted in explaining 2.1% of the variance in emotional intimacy, with no significant interaction found between gender and separation ($R^2=.021$, $F(8, 2196)= 5.791$, $p=.090$) There was also not a significant main effect of gender on participants' emotional intimacy scores ($\beta= .031$, $p= .375$). Table 1 provides the results from steps 1 and 2 of each linear regression model.

Table 2

Step 1 and 2 Linear Regression Results

	Commitment		Satisfaction		Emotional Intimacy	
	β	Std. Error	β	Std. Error	β	Std. Error
Step 1						
Constant	1.72***	0.01	3.28***	0.02	3.40***	0.02
Separation	-0.13***	0.04	-0.17**	0.06	-0.17***	0.05
Age	0.003	0.01	-0.03	0.01	-0.03	0.01
Black	-0.27	0.03	-0.30	0.05	-0.24	0.05
Latine	-0.07	.04	0.08	0.10	-0.03	0.54
Asian	-0.01	.06	-0.10	0.12	-0.09	0.41
Other						
Step 2						
Constant	1.68***	0.02	3.24***	0.03	3.38***	0.03
Separation	-0.103	0.05	-0.11	0.09	-0.13	0.08
Age	0.01	0.01	-0.03	0.01	-0.03	0.01
Black	-0.27	0.03	-0.30	0.05	-0.24	0.05
Latine	-0.07	0.04	-0.001	0.06	-0.03	0.09
Asian	-0.02	0.06	0.07	0.10	0.04	0.11
Other	0.19	0.07	-0.10	0.12	-0.09	0.04
Gender	0.09***	0.02	0.060	0.04	0.031	0.04
Interaction	-0.04	0.07	-0.10	0.12	-0.065	0.11

Note. β = unstandardized coefficients.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether relationship quality differs for individuals whose parents separated during adolescence and individuals whose parents remained together, as well as to investigate if the association between parental separation and relationship quality differs for men and women. The occurrence of parental separation significantly predicted lower scores on all three subscales of relationship quality, providing support for the first hypothesis that individuals whose parents separated would have lower levels of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy, as compared to individuals whose parents did not separate. These findings are in line with previous research that has noted lower levels of commitment, satisfaction, and overall relationship quality in individuals who experienced the separation of their parents, thus providing additional support to the existing literature that relationship quality levels are likely to be lower for individuals from separated families (Cui & Finchman, 2010; Jacquet & Surra, 2001; Mustonen et al., 2011). The findings from this study extend upon existing

research by demonstrating that differences also exist between those from intact and separated families for the specific construct of emotional intimacy, which prior research has not focused on as in depth as the constructs of satisfaction and commitment.

The second hypothesis of this study, that relationship quality levels would be lower for women than for men with separated parents, was not supported by the findings. There was not a significant difference between men and women in the associations between parental separation and commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy, and the only significant difference between men and women was on the level of commitment scores. This finding is not in line with the results from Jacquet and Surra (2001) and Mustonen et al. (2011), who found more noticeable differences in levels of trust, satisfaction, and overall relationship quality for women than for men with divorced parents. However, the disagreement in results could be explained by the slight difference in constructs that was used in this study, as compared with those used by Jacquet and Surra (2001) and Mustonen et al. (2011). Differences in how relationship commitment and satisfaction were defined and measured in each study could have resulted in differences in participants' responses and outcomes. With that said, the finding that there was no significant difference in the association between parental separation and relationship quality for men and women extends upon the findings from Jacquet and Surra (2001) and Mustonen et al. (2011) by suggesting that there are significant impacts on relationship quality for both men and women with separated parents, as compared to those from intact families. In other words, this study suggests that men are impacted similarly by parental separation to women in terms of relationship quality. Additional research is necessary in order to solidify whether there are significant differences in relationship quality between men and women with separated parents, and to solidify the constructs for which these differences may exist.

Implications

There are multiple implications for the findings of this study and the existing research that differences exist in relationship quality for those from intact versus separated families. First, knowledge that relationship commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy may be lower in individuals who have experienced the separation of their parents could be helpful for professionals who provide counseling or therapy. The knowledge of this difference could help professionals determine the best treatment or therapy options for their clients who have experienced parental separation, and these options may look different for these clients than for those who come from intact families. Similarly, these findings could inform interventions or support groups that are implemented in a school setting. Because this study investigated separation that occurred during the adolescent years specifically, the knowledge of eventual relationship quality outcomes for individuals whose parents separated during adolescence may be helpful for school counselors or psychologists who work with students going through the separation of their parents. Knowing that relationship quality may be impacted for these individuals when they enter emerging adulthood and engage in romantic relationships could impact the resources these professionals provide to their students, or could impact the topics that are discussed in support groups, for example. Not only could the knowledge of these findings be incorporated into existing therapies, support groups, and treatment options, these findings could also be used to create new, unique interventions for adolescents whose parents separate in order to lower the chances that they experience negative impacts to the quality of their romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. For example, new intervention programs designed for use with adolescents may focus on educating them on the possible impacts the separation of their parents may have on them now and in the future, and focus on exercises and practices that can be

used to strengthen the constructs of commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy in their current and future romantic relationships with the overall goal of mitigating the impacts of the separation on their romantic relationships. The implications of the findings of this study are important because they could all help lower the chances of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. By lowering the chances that individuals experience lower relationship quality in their romantic relationships, this could increase the chances that the relationship lasts and does not result in eventual separation, thus interrupting the pattern of intergenerational transmission and avoiding the myriad of negative impacts that separation can have on the children of the relationship that is ending (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Ross & Mirowsky, 1999).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, due to the methodology of this study, causality cannot be assumed from the results– it cannot be stated that parental separation causes lower relationship quality for emerging adults. Also, while the findings do show a significant relationship between parental separation and lower scores on commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy, the effect sizes were small (all equivalent to around .2 SD difference between individuals with separated and non- separated parents), which does limit the practical significance of the findings.

Next, as is typical when utilizing secondary data, the wording of certain items that were used from the Add Health data limited how closely the items could measure the targeted constructs. For example, the wording of the predictor variable that measured parental separation was vague, leading to the possibility that participants could have answered based on factors other than their parents separating due to the end of a marriage. This item asked participants about the residential parents they had reported on at Wave II– the term “residential parents” presents the

possibility that some participants were responding about people other than their biological parents (step parents or other parental figures, for example). Whether or not the parents in question were the participants' biological parents, and if this would cause a difference in the impacts of their separation on the individual, was beyond the scope of this study. However, the possibility that participants may have been responding about biological parents, step parents, or other parental figures could introduce variance in answers that could not be controlled for, thus creating a limitation of this study. An additional example of an item with wording that could pose a limitation is that participants were instructed to answer the section in the Add Health survey that contained the items measuring relationship quality based on a current or most recent partner. For those participants who were not currently in a relationship at the time of the survey, they were expected to answer based on a previous relationship, which could have been many years ago. The retrospective nature of these participants' responses could introduce the possibility that their answers were not as accurate as they would have been had they been in a relationship at the time of the survey. They may have misremembered certain aspects of the relationship, for example, leading to answers that did not accurately reflect their relationship quality during the relationship.

Another limitation lies in the assumptions of the predictor variable that measured parental separation. The aim of this study was to measure impacts from parental separation as a result of a marriage ending. However, the predictor variable measured whether the residential parents who lived together at Wave II still lived together at Wave III, and there are other factors that could have led to this separation other than a marriage ending. For example, the other parent could have moved to a different residence as a result of a temporary job. This situation and other possibilities leading to parental separation other than a marriage ending are not equivalent to

what this study intended to measure, which means there is the possibility that some participants who answered “No” to this item and therefore indicated their parents separated did not actually experience the definition of parental separation as it was intended to be measured.

The possibility of other variables that could not be controlled for by this study impacting the outcome variable of relationship quality is another limitation. One such variable could be the personality of the partner the participants were responding to in the items that measured relationship quality. Similarly, the nature of the relationship could also have affected responses. Certain personality characteristics of the partner, such as how they express their emotions, could have impacted the participants' own responses to items that measured relationship quality. It is also possible that the nature of the relationship would impact responses to these items— for example, being in an abusive relationship, or a casual relationship versus a marriage, could have impacted participants' responses. There was no way to control for these factors in this study, which creates a limitation.

Lastly, the generalizability of findings from this study are limited. The findings from this study may not be generalizable to individuals whose parents were of the same sex, as the assumption of this study was that the parents who participants reported separating were male and female. Additionally, while Add Health is nationally representative when referring to the entire data set, the subsample of participants used in this study, in combination with attrition rates, may have resulted in a subsample that is no longer nationally representative. It is also important to keep in mind that the Add Health data was collected in waves between 1994 to 2018, meaning that the cohort of adolescence and emerging adults who were utilized in this study may be different than that of adolescence and emerging adults in more recent years, limiting the

generalizability of the findings from the cohort of participants within Add Health to today's adolescents and emerging adults.

Future Directions

There are multiple directions future research can take in order to address the remaining gaps in the literature and the limitations of the current study. First, future research should continue to investigate the possible differences in relationship quality between men and women with separated parents. The disagreement between the current study's findings and those in the existing literature means that a gap remains in the understanding of if and how gender interacts with the impacts of parental separation and relationship quality. Next, research should continue to investigate the items that address relationship quality within the Add Health data, as there are still few studies that utilize these items. Additional research could also focus on providing more evidence for the idea that relationship quality is lower in individuals whose parents separated, so as to provide a strong backing of evidence for creating and implementing new interventions that can be used to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Similarly, research that solidifies the understanding of how parental separation during adolescence can impact relationship quality will be important for helping professionals assess and meet individuals at their current standing, therefore helping to provide them with the best possible care and therapy or intervention options. By focusing on separation in adolescence, this may help school-based professionals specifically to have a better understanding for how the students they work with may be impacted by separation.

In addition, future studies could investigate adolescents and emerging adults who experienced the separation of their same-sex parents, as opposed to assuming that all parents who separated are a male and female. Future studies could also take a look into the impacts of

separation on relationship quality as a function of age at which the divorce or separation occurred—how are the impacts different based on the individual’s developmental stage at the time of separation?

Lastly, it is important to implement similar research in other countries and cultures around the world to understand if the differences in relationship quality between those with separated and intact families are similar in other cultures, or if cultural beliefs and practices may play a role in relationship outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study support prior research findings that there are differences between relationship quality for those from intact and separated families. This study found that commitment, satisfaction, and emotional intimacy levels, all of which are important subconstructs of overall relationship quality, were lower for individuals whose parents separated than for those whose parents remained together. This study did not find a difference between relationship quality for men and women with separated parents, which poses the need for additional research focusing on this area. The possible implications of the current study’s findings include informing therapy, support groups, and other treatment or intervention options for individuals who have experienced parental separation with the eventual goal of interrupting the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Additional research is needed in order to solidify the understanding of differences in relationship quality between individuals from separated and intact families, whether these differences are impacted by gender, and to continue to address the limitations of this study and the gaps in the existing literature.

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