D
ivorce has become a common occurrence in today's society, and many divorces result from marital conflict. There has been much concern about the effects of parental divorce on children's academic performance, conduct, self-esteem, social skills, and relationships with their parents. Research has demonstrated "that children from divorced families experience lower levels of well-being across these domains than do children from intact families" (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 26). For example, one study demonstrated that children whose parents were divorced displayed more behavior problems at school than did children whose parents were married (Pett, Wampold, Turner, & Vaughan-Cole, 1999). Compared to children living with two biological parents, children in single-parent families or step-families are also at increased risk for adjustment problems (hyperactivity, peer problems, conduct disorder, etc.; Dunn, Deater-Deckard, Pickering, & O'Connor, 1998). A lack of attachment to parents who are divorced may contribute to such problems (Dunn et al., 1998; Love, 2004). Research has suggested that a child's perceived level of attachment to his or her parents was a significant predictor of the child's well-being, and that children living in intact, biological families reported a more secure attachment to their parents than did children living with step-families (Love). This relationship between attachment and psychological well-being was found even when the researcher controlled family type (i.e., divorced vs. intact; Love).

In addition to measurable differences in behavior and attitude, people also tend to perceive children of divorced parents more negatively than children from intact families (Avila & Hoffman, 1998; Claxton-Oldfield & Voyer, 2001). These negative stereotypes seem to be prevalent in the general population (Amato, 1991). Additionally, researchers have observed such stereotyping among young children (Avila & Hoffman, 1998). Amato (1991) found that bias against children of divorce occurred regardless of the observer's conscious attitude toward such children. Thus, children whose parents are divorced must cope with the influence of an environment full of "pervasive negative expectancy" (Avila & Hoffman, p. 77), as well as the confusing and intimidating transitions involved.

Author Note. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Julie Woosley, c/o Department of Psychology, Samford University, Birmingham, AL 35229. E-mail: jayonts@samford.edu

*Faculty sponsor

Perceived Psychological Well-Being of Children From Divorced and Nondivorced Families

Julie Woosley
Cara Dennis
Katie Robertson
Jackie Goldstein*
Samford University

There is conflicting evidence about the effects of parental conflict versus divorce on child well-being, as well as evidence for the existence of stereotypes about children of divorce. This study examined perceptions of child well-being based on parental marital status and conflict level. Thirty-one students taking social science courses at a southern Christian university each read 1 of 4 scenarios and evaluated the well-being of the children in the scenario. Conflict level had a greater impact on perceived well-being of children in intact families than those in divorced families, F(1,27) = 5.06, p = .03, η² = .16. In general, perceived well-being was lower in the presence of parental conflict, F(1,27) = 22.09, p < .01, η² = .45, but there was no significant difference, F(1,27) = 3.19, p = .09, η² = .11, based on marital status. Participants' perceptions regarding children's well-being were consistent with findings regarding the actual effects of parental conflict versus divorce.
with the divorce itself. These negative expectations may further diminish a child's level of well-being.

Despite problems attributed specifically attributed to divorce, there is evidence that it is the conflict between the parents, rather than the divorce itself, that has detrimental effects on children. In one study, "children in intact high-conflict families scored significantly lower in conduct, psychological adjustment, and self-concept" (Amato & Keith, 1991, p. 28) compared to children from intact low-conflict families. Moreover, children in low-conflict divorced families demonstrated higher levels of well-being than did children in high-conflict intact families (Amato & Keith). Additional research demonstrated that, although marital discord between a child's parents negatively affected three separate measures of a child's well-being, family structure (e.g., whether parents were divorced) did not have a significant influence on the child's well-being (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998).

Other research indicates that, individually, both divorce and discord play a key role in a child's well-being (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Forehand, Neighbors, Devine, & Armistead, 1994; Hanson, 1999; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). One study found that, though individuals who were young when their parents divorced were more apt to report a relatively low level of well-being in adulthood, growing up in an environment with a great deal of conflict is equally as detrimental as divorce (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Similarly, other research indicated that, although divorce is harmful to children regardless of how much the child's parents quarreled prior to the divorce, it is even more deleterious for the parents to remain married when there is a high level of conflict between them (Amato et al., 1995; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

However, as Hanson (1999) indicated, there are more factors involved in the effects of divorce on children than marital conflict alone. For most children, the divorce of their parents results in decreased income, residential mobility, alterations in networks of friends, less contact with the nonresident parent and other relatives, and changes in relationships with resident parents. In Hanson's study, statistical analysis revealed that when a child's parents get divorced, parental discord accounts for approximately 15% of the effects of the divorce on well-being, indicating that conflict and divorce have independent negative consequences for a child's well-being.

In light of conflicting evidence about the effects of divorce versus the effects of conflict on child well-being, as well as evidence for the existence of stereotypes about children of divorce, the purpose of the present research was to study observer perceptions about the well-being of children based on the observer's knowledge of both the marital status of the children's parents and the level of conflict between the parents. We predicted a main effect for each of these two variables; participants will perceive children whose parents are divorced as having a lower level of well-being than children whose parents are not divorced, and participants will perceive children whose parents are experiencing conflict as having a lower level of well-being than children whose parents are not experiencing conflict.

Furthermore, based on the opinions we had heard our peers express in the past, we predicted that participants would find conflict in an intact family to be more unexpected, and thus, we hypothesized an interaction such that the level of conflict will have a greater impact on perceived well-being of children in intact families than for children of divorced parents.

Method

Participants

Informed consent was obtained from 31 participants, 4 men and 27 women, ranging from 19 to 22 years of age. Participants were students taking social sciences courses at a southern Christian university. Professors for these courses offered extra credit to students for participating in the experiment; to comply with American Psychological Association ethical guidelines, the professors also provided students with alternative opportunities to earn extra credit. Therefore, participants were self-selected.

Materials

Each participant received a packet of information that contained an informed consent form, instructions, and one of four possible descriptions of a couple with two children: (a) the couple's marriage is intact and there currently is no conflict in their relationship, (b) the couple's marriage is intact and there currently is conflict in their present relationship, (c) the couple is divorced and there currently is no conflict in their present relationship, and (d) the couple is divorced and there currently is conflict in their present relationship. Therefore, these descriptions involved the manipulation of two independent variables (IVs): the marital status of the couple, and the presence or absence of conflict. To prevent extraneous variables from influencing the participants' evaluation of the children's well-being, we developed scenarios with as many control variables as possible; that is, in order to isolate the two independent variables—marital status and marital conflict—an effort was made to create a marital couple with no other variables that might be perceived as affecting family dynamics. In each of the scenarios, the couples were married for the same
length of time, the couples were the same age, and the children were the same age. Also, neither spouse received blame in the situations in which there were conflicts or divorce.

In addition to the scenario, the packet contained four questions and a post-hoc questionnaire. The four questions included the dependent variable target question (“Evaluate the psychological well-being of the children in this situation on the following scale...”), and three filler questions (“How well do you think you could remember the details from this scenario if asked later on?,” “How would you rate the quality of Peter and Barbara’s relationship?,” and “How would you rate the quality of Peter and Barbara as parents?”). Participants responded to these questions using a Likert scale, from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). Responses to the post-hoc questionnaire provided participants’ demographic information, family history, political views, and religious views. The purpose of this questionnaire was to aid experimenters in detecting any possible biases the participants may have had.

**Procedure**

As the participants entered the classroom that served as the experiment site, they chose their own seat. After all participants were seated, we explained that the purpose of the experiment was to examine family relationships. Then, the experimental packets were distributed to participants in groups of four such that, the first person in a row received scenario one, the second person in the row received scenario two, the third person in the row received scenario three, the first person in the next row received scenario four, the second person in that row received scenario one, and so on. They were asked to return the packet to the experimenters once they had completed it and to remain in the room until all of the participants were finished. At that time, we debriefed the participants and gave them the opportunity to ask questions.

**Results**

To test hypotheses regarding public perceptions of children’s psychological well-being, we utilized a 2 x 2 (marital status x parental conflict level) ANOVA. As expected, there was a significant interaction between the two IVs. The level of parental conflict had a significantly greater impact on the perceived well-being of the children in intact families than those in divorced families, F(1, 27) = 5.06, p = .03, η² = .16. As shown in Figure 1, the perceived well-being of the children was highest when the parents were married and experiencing no conflict. However, when the parents were divorced, differences in parental conflict had no significant effect on perceptions of children’s well-being.

Post-hoc analyses using a Tukey HSD test (HSD = 1.03 at α = .05) indicated that the perceived well-being of children whose families were intact and whose parents had no conflict (M = 4.38, SD = .74) was significantly different from that of children in the other three conditions. There were no significant differences between the perceptions of children from intact families with a high level of parental conflict (M = 2.50, SD = .76), children from divorced families with no parental conflict (M = 3.29, SD = .76), and children from divorced families with a high degree of parental conflict (M = 2.62, SD = .74).

Also, as expected, children’s well-being was perceived as being significantly lower when parental conflict was present than when it was absent, F(1, 27) = 22.09, p < .01, η² = .45 (see Figure 2). Although there was a significant main effect for level of parental conflict, there was no significant difference in children’s perceived well-being based on parental marital status, F(1, 27) = 3.19, p = .09, η² = .11. However, with p = .09, there was marginal significance, and these differences are illustrated in Figure 3.

Although the target question (i.e., primary dependent variable) concerned the perceived quality of the children’s well-being, we also included filler questions in the survey to create a mild deception regarding the purpose of the experiment. We analyzed these questions to determine how participants viewed the marriage itself, as well as the couple’s parenting skills.

A two-way MANOVA using these filler questions indicated that marital status and level of conflict had significant effects on the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara’s relationship. The repeated measures MANOVA on the post-hoc questionnaire provided participants’ demographic information, family history, political views, and religious views. The purpose of this questionnaire was to aid experimenters in detecting any possible biases the participants may have had.

![FIGURE 1](image)

Mean perceived psychological well-being of children (+/- SD) based on parents’ marital status and parents’ level of conflict.

There was a significant interaction between the two independent variables (p = .03).
Barbara’s relationship. Marital status had a significantly greater effect on the perceived relationship quality when conflict was absent, $F(1, 27) = 10.16, p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .27$; that is, participants perceived the relationship quality to be the highest when there was no conflict and Peter and Barbara were married. Additionally, participants perceived the quality of Peter and Barbara’s relationship more favorably when they were married than when they were divorced, $F(1, 27) = 14.36, p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$, and when conflict was absent rather than present, $F(1, 27) = 127.31, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .83$.

The same two-way MANOVA also revealed that marital status and level of conflict had significant effects on the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara as parents. Participants perceived their quality as parents to be significantly higher when they were married than when they were divorced, $F(1, 27) = 7.62, p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .22$, and when they were experiencing no conflict, $F(1, 27) = 23.68, p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .47$. There was no significant interaction between marital status and level of conflict on the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara as parents, $F(1, 27) = 3.30, p = .08$, $\eta^2 = .27$.

In light of findings from the filler questions, we used Pearson correlations to analyze the strength of the relation between perceived child well-being and the quality of the parents’ relationship, as well as the strength of the relation between perceived child well-being and the quality of the couple’s parenting skills. Firstly there was a positive correlation between the perceived well-being of the children and the perceived quality of the Peter and Barbara’s relationship, $r(29) = .72, p = .01$. There was also a significant positive correlation between the perceived well-being of the children and the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara as parents, $r(29) = .65, p = .01$.

**Discussion**

We had predicted that participants would perceive children whose parents are divorced as having a lower level of well-being than children whose parents are not divorced, that participants would perceive children whose parents are experiencing conflict as having a lower level of well-being than children whose parents are not experiencing conflict, and that the level of conflict would have a greater impact on perceived well-being of children in intact families than for children of divorced parents. Findings were consistent with the latter two, but not the first hypothesis, that is, parental marital status alone did not have a significant effect on the perceived well-being of children in the family.

There was a significant interaction such that the children’s perceived well-being was more strongly influenced by the level of parental conflict when their parents were married than when they were divorced.
The condition in which the children’s parents were married and experiencing no conflict caused the children to have the highest degree of perceived well-being relative to the other three conditions. There was also a significant effect for marital conflict. Regardless of parental marital status, participants perceived the children as having a higher level of well-being when their parents were not experiencing conflict than when their parents were experiencing conflict. Interestingly enough, and despite stereotypes regarding children of divorce (Amato, 1991; Avila & Hoffman, 1998; Claxton-Oldfield & Voyer, 2001), parental marital status alone had no significant effect on the perceived level of children’s well-being.

The interaction and the main effect relative to marital conflict indicate that perceptions of a sample of college students are consistent with prior studies regarding the actual situation for children, that is, parental conflict has more harmful effects on children than does divorce (Amato et al., 1995; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Morrison & Coiro, 1999). Amato and Keith (1991) found that children in low-conflict divorced families demonstrated higher levels of well-being than did children in high-conflict intact families. Additionally, the fact that participants perceived children whose parents were divorced and experiencing conflict as having a similar level of well-being as those whose parents were divorced and experiencing no conflict is congruent with research indicating that conflict accounts for a small proportion of the effects of divorce on the psychological well-being of children (Hanson, 1999).

Other factors resulting from divorce may also influence child well-being, such as reduced income, modifications in social networks, and changes in relationships with resident and nonresident parents (Hanson, 1999). But this is not reflected in this research, in that the perceived well-being of children with divorced parents was not significantly different than that of children with married parents. However, there was marginal significance favoring intact versus divorced families in the perceived well-being of children in these two groups. Previous research in this field has found that children of divorce do have lower psychological well-being than do children of intact families (Dunn et al., 1998; Pett et al., 1999), and that people tend to have negative stereotypes about children of divorce (Amato, 1991; Avila & Hoffman, 1998; Claxton-Oldfield & Voyer, 2001). Based on marginally significant differences in perception in this study, it is possible that, as divorce has become more common, society has become more accepting of this alternative and is thus less likely to hold biases against children of divorce. Furthermore, participants may have felt that it is wrong to be biased against children of divorce, so they may have answered in a way they thought was “politically correct” rather than basing their answers on their personal opinions.

It would be useful to do further research to investigate the perceived and actual well-being of children who experience parental conflict firsthand versus those whose parents’ conceal their conflict from them. Parents may attempt to shelter their children from their marital discord, and these children may not be fully aware of the conflict between their parents. However, it is possible that there may be a high level of tension between the parents as a result of the conflict, and the children may be able to sense this tension. In that case, the children may inform others about conflict in the home, or the children’s peers may also notice the conflict when they visit the children’s home. Because of the lower perceived well-being of such children, parents may be hesitant to let their own children visit the homes of these families or associate with children who live in such a setting. Parents may be concerned that their child will also be negatively influenced by the discord, or that their child will learn negative attitudes and behaviors from children who are not well-adjusted as their own. This type of ostracizing may further impair the well-being of children in homes where there is parental conflict.

The relation between one’s perception of the effects of conflict on child well-being and their behavior as a parent and spouse may provide another opportunity for further research. For example, a long-term study of participants from the present study could reveal a correlation between their perception that conflict has harmful effects on children and the level of actual marital conflict, once they are married and have children. Parents who perceive parental conflict as harmful to their children may also be more hesitant to allow their children to visit the homes of playmates whose parents are known to have a highly conflictual relationship. The influence of parents’ perceptions about conflict on the various decisions they make and the actions they take in raising their children may be more significant than the perceptions of young unmarried adults.

Due to the limitations of this study, additional research could also investigate some of the areas that were not fully examined. For example, the scenarios in this study were unique and untested for content validity. Subsequent research would be well served by gathering data about the credibility of such scenarios. If young people assume a naïve and simplistic link between divorce and marital conflict, it is possible that college-age participants found the scenario in which the couple was divorced and experiencing no conflict to be implausible. This would explain the fact that, in this study, parental discord had less of an impact on perceived well-being of children when their par-
ents were divorced. Also, we did not address ethnic/cultural issues, which could play a large role on one’s perceptions (e.g., some ethnicities more frequently have single parents than others). Furthermore, the small sample size greatly limits statistical power. With a greater sample size, it is possible that there could have been a significant difference in children’s perceived well-being based on parental marital status. Additional limiting factors were the lack of male participants in the study, the lack of variation in age, and the fact that the sampling of participants was from a Christian college. Thus, it is impossible to determine whether men have the same perceptions as women, whether different age groups would have similar perceptions of these issues, and whether the views of the general population would differ from those of students at a Christian institution.

The finding that marital status and level of conflict had significant effects on the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara’s relationship as well as their perceived quality as parents was also of interest, as these were only intended to create a deception to protect against demand characteristics. However, these effects provided a manipulation check of sorts. Because the manipulation of the marital status and the level of conflict (the only two factors that were not held constant) in the scenario was sufficiently sensitive to have significant effects on responses to the filler questions, one can infer the IVs were also sensitive enough to influence the target dependent variable.

Although we anticipated the strong correlation between Peter and Barbara’s perceived quality as parents and the perceived well-being of their children, the even stronger correlation between the perceived quality of Peter and Barbara’s relationship and the perceived well-being of their children is remarkable. The scenarios lacked a discussion of the quality of the relationship between the parents and their children, yet participants may have assumed that parents who had a poor relationship with one another would be likely to have a poor relationship with others members of the family, including the children. Therefore, participants’ rating of the children’s well-being could have been influenced by the perceived quality of the children’s relationship with their parents, which may have been inferred by rating the quality of the parents’ relationship. If this is the case, the fact that the scenarios failed to include information indicating the strength of the relationship between the children and their parents could be confounding. It would be beneficial to further investigate this correlation, between the perceived quality of the parents’ relationship and the perceived well-being of children, in an effort to explain it and perhaps, establish a causal link.

The results of this study indicate that participants’ perceptions were consistent with previous research indicating that parental conflict is more harmful to children than divorce itself. However, they are not in agreement with studies that indicate a stereotype against children of divorce. Subsequent research should explore the relation between the perceived and actual well-being of children in situations similar to the ones used in this study, as well as the relation between the perceptions of child well-being held by idealistic young adults versus more realistic married adults with children. Such research would be beneficial in providing useful insight about the evolution people’s perspectives regarding family dynamics.

References


