



# The Impact of Parental Divorce and Post-Divorce Adjustment Patterns: An Analysis of Romantic Relationship Expectations and Processes

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## Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between Hetherington & Kelly (2002) post-divorce adjustment patterns and romantic relationship experiences and expectations. Specifically examined was relationship satisfaction and expectations of trust in close relationships. Factors related to post-divorce adjustment patterns included social support during the divorce, level of parental conflict, parentification, and life transitions such as moving schools and housing, financial changes, and alterations in peer and familial relationships.

## Background Information

Many Americans hold the traditional belief that in order for successful development and socialization to occur, children must be part of a two-parent, first-married family. This deeply held belief system has manifested a host of myths and stereotypes surrounding divorce and family disruption. In their comprehensive book examining divorce outcomes, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered*, Hetherington and Kelly (2002) debunk many of the myths surrounding divorce and its impacts. They outline five post-divorce adjustment patterns in children that are important to understand. These include competent-opportunist, competent-caring, competent-at-a-cost, good enoughts, and aggressive-insecure.

### Competent-Opportunist

The competent-opportunist is one of two well-adjusted groups. These children get along well with peers and are mature and self-regulated. They also are oriented towards people who were in a position to help them, whether a parent, coach, teacher, or a high-status peer. Competent-opportunists are commonly raised in high conflict homes and learn early how to manage people (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They often have one neglectful or rejecting parent and a close, supportive parent with whom they would ally to get their wishes and demands fulfilled. Overall, these individuals are remarkably well adjusted, high achieving, and popular. Their manipulateness was an unfortunate but minor flaw that is associated with what other people want and perceptions of how to please them. In the long run, as young adults these individuals have great social skills and often rise rapidly on the professional ladder (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### Competent-Caring

The second major adjustment pattern that results in positive adjustment is the competent-caring type. Just like the competent-opportunists, these individuals are curious, socially skilled, assertive, and self-sufficient; however, they are not manipulative (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They are responsive to the feelings and needs of others and have a propensity to help vulnerable people (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They often are female and had a loving and supportive mother, but through necessity, had to assume responsibility for caring for others at an early age (usually younger siblings). The loving and working mother was not always available, but encouraged mature, independent behavior in her children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

### Competent-at-a-cost

A third type of adjustment pattern is the competent-at-a-cost group. Others view this group of individuals as remarkably able, successful, and likable, however, these individuals have lurking anxieties and feel a sense of inadequacy. (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) Competent-at-a-cost individuals differ from competent-caring individuals in two ways: (1) level of parentification experienced (Parentification occurs when a parent seeks emotional and financial support

## Background Information

or solace from their child in a way that the child feels as though they need to be the parent) and (2) high levels of anxiety felt by the child before the divorce.

### Good Enoughts

About half of the children in Hetherington & Kelly's (2002) study were considered the good-enoughts group. These children fall in the middle of almost everything ranging from academic performance, peer relations, psychological functioning, and protective factors.

### Aggressive-Insecure

The final and most troubling adjustment pattern that Hetherington & Kelly (2002) proposed is the aggressive-insecure group. These children often come from homes where authoritative parenting was rare but conflict, rejection, and neglect were common (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Their parents were quick to anger and often had problems in their marriage resulting in or related to drug abuse, alcoholism, and depression.

### Romantic Expectations and Processes

This study aimed to test if post-divorce adjustment patterns influence relationship satisfaction and expectations of trust in romantic relationships.

**Relationship Satisfaction** can be defined as love, sexual attitudes, self-disclosure, commitment, and investment in a relationship (Hendrick, 1988).

**Expectations of Trust** were measured using the *Trust in Close Relationships Scale* (Rempel, Holmes, Zanna, 1985). This scale measured predictability, dependability, and faith in romantic relationships.

## Research Questions

To date, no one has assessed how these adjustment patterns influence later relational experiences. Therefore, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of how post-divorce adjustment patterns in children affect romantic relationships. Most studies focusing on children's post-divorce experiences tend to focus on tangible outcomes (such as school achievement, economic outcomes, likelihood of marriage/childbearing/divorce), but lack a specific focus on processes in relationships these children later form with romantic partners. This study aimed to examine if these patterns of adjustment influence subsequent couple relationships with regards to relationship satisfaction and trust expectations. Listed below are a few questions that this study intended to explore:

- How do patterns of adjustment post-parental divorce impact likelihood to form romantic relationships?
- How do patterns of adjustment influence current romantic relationship satisfaction?
  - I. Do competent-at-a cost young adults have lowered relationship satisfaction?
  - II. Do Good-Enoughts have average or lowered relationship satisfaction?
- Do expectations of trust differ by each post-divorce adjustment pattern?
- Which factors (conflict frequency, conflict management, parentification, type and amount of social support, etc) related to adjustment patterns have a greater influence on current relationship satisfaction and expectations?

## Methods

### Participants

- University of Connecticut students (Storrs and regional campuses)
- 18-28 years of age
- Experienced parental divorce within the past 8-10 years

### Sampling Procedure

- Participants were recruited from the University of Connecticut graduate and undergraduate population
- Referral sampling was utilized to recruit participants
- Students became aware of the study through flyer postings, social media postings, and announcements in classes on-campus

### Data Collection

- Quantitative data analysis
- Surveys were completed through Qualtrics, an online and secure questionnaire program
- Data was analyzed using SPSS, a software package used for statistical analysis

### Measures

#### Demographic

- Current relationship status as well as specific information about their romantic partner such as age, sex, and distance from one another
- Respondent's parental divorce timeline and experience including parent's conflict levels before and after the divorce in addition to their parents' repartnering behaviors
- Sources of social support (parent, sibling, friend, family) during divorce.
- Change in frequency of parental contact following divorce

#### Relationship Assessment Scale

- 7-item scale designed to measure general relationship satisfaction. Respondents answer each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). The higher the score, the more satisfied the respondent is with his/her relationship

#### The Relationship Efficacy Measure

- Presents respondents with four negative partner behaviors that have been found to occur in virtually all relationships and asks them to rate their agreement, on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 6 (agree strongly)

#### Trust in Close Relationships Scale

- 17-item measure designed to gauge levels of trust in one's relationship partner. Each item is answered based on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)

#### Family Conflict Resolution Scale (FCRS)

- Assesses conflict resolution in the family. 18 items deemed appropriate measures of family conflict resolution. Of those, 14 items are answered using a true/false response format. An example of such an item includes "In my family, when we have an argument we usually work it out."
- Items 15, 16, and 17 are answered using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from one "never" to seven "always."

#### The Parent Adult-Child Relationship Questionnaire

- 26-item questionnaire measuring relationship between parent and adult child, from the adult child's point of view.

#### The Parentification Inventory

- Retrospective, 22-item, self-report measure that captured caregiving roles and responsibilities and the perceived benefits of performing caregiving roles in the family of origin. Participants responded to 22 items on the PI using a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never true) to 5 (always true).

## Results

Data collection is currently underway and sample size is inadequate to begin classifying participants into categories or test relationships with dependent variables. However, please refer to Tables 1 and 2 for preliminary correlations between variables.

## Discussion

One of the primary challenges of this study was the operationalization and measurement of proposed theoretical patterns of adjustment. A second challenge of measurement is attempting to quantify previous experiences as well as tangible outcomes. Below we have outlined the criteria by which using to classify participants into each adjustment pattern.

### Competent-Opportunist

- Low levels of conflict resolution (FCRS)
- Low levels of parentification (PI)
- High levels of conflict in family of origin
- One close supportive parent (PACRQ)
- High levels of social support
- High levels of interpersonal efficacy (REM)

### Competent-Caring

- High levels of conflict resolution (FCRS)
- High levels of sibling-focused parentification (PI)
- Low levels of conflict in family of origin
- Loving and supportive mother (PACRQ)
- High levels of social support
- High levels of interpersonal efficacy (REM)

### Competent-at-a-cost

- Moderate to high levels of conflict resolution (FCRS)
- High levels of parent-focused parentification (PI)
- Low levels of conflict in family of origin
- One parent responsible for high levels of parentification
- Moderate levels of social support
- Moderate levels of interpersonal efficacy (REM)

### Good Enoughts

- Average scores across all indicators

### Aggressive Insecure

- Low levels of conflict resolution (FCRS)
- Low levels of parentification (PI)
- High levels of conflict in family of origin
- Two neglectful parents
- Almost no social support
- Low levels of interpersonal efficacy (REM)

We examined each pattern of adjustment defined by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) and we predict that with a larger sample size we could attempt to delineate each pattern using the following pre-existing measures.

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