ADULT CHILDREN’S ACCOUNTS OF PARENTAL INFIDELITY AND DIVORCE:
ASSOCIATIONS WITH OWN INFIDELITY, RISKY BEHAVIORS, AND
ATTACHMENT

by

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Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Elizabeth Allen, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Although there is a great deal of research that examines the effect that divorce has on children, there are very few studies that explore the impact that parental infidelity may have on this population. In this study, we examined undergraduates who reported information about parental infidelity and divorce and measured their own infidelity behaviors, attachment, and risk-taking. We hypothesized that participants with parents who were known to have committed infidelity and were divorced would have the highest rates of their own infidelity, more risk-taking behavior, and more insecure attachment styles. Data was analyzed using ANOVAs and regression. Results partially supported the initial hypotheses. Specifically, participants whose parents engaged in infidelity and remained married had the highest rates of their own infidelity. Additionally, participants with divorced parents had the highest rates of risk-taking. Parental infidelity may serve as a model promoting children to also engage in this behavior in their own relationships. However, more work needs to be conducted in this area in order to establish causal connections.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Divorce may have significant impacts on the adults involved in the divorce, as well as important intergenerational effects on the parents’ offspring. Related to this, parental infidelity, which may or may not end in divorce, may have important additional impacts on children. There are major gaps in the literature on this topic, however, but some noteworthy results have still been found. This paper will seek to discuss and integrate research findings regarding important intergenerational effects of divorce on children, factors that may influence these effects, and intergenerational impacts of infidelity.

Impacts of Divorce

Divorce is extremely prevalent in the United States today, and it is estimated that 50% of children in America will experience parental divorce (Lansford, 2009). This overwhelming statistic may have far-reaching implications, as marital dissolution may impact children in a variety of ways. Some researchers have hypothesized that divorce may have important psychosocial effects on children, resulting in insecure attachment styles, behavioral problems, health-compromising behaviors, cognitive and social deficits, psychological distress, poor academic achievement, and poor self-concepts (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009; Huure, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006; Lansford, 2009; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Divorce may also impact children throughout adulthood, and may lead to higher divorce rates among adult children whose parents have divorced.
A variety of studies throughout the years have provided empirical support for the idea that divorce has a variety of impacts on children (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & Mcloughlin, 1983; Lansford, 2009; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). These studies have also found that the impacts that children face are not always readily apparent. Children may appear quite resilient to the impacts of divorce, but may be suffering major emotional problems beneath the surface (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) also provided evidence that the distress felt by children from divorced families may be considerable decades later; some children even speculated that they might be a different person today if their parents had not divorced. Some caution needs to be used in interpreting these findings, however, as Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, and Booth (2000) hypothesized that parental variables (i.e. income, depression, education, ethnicity, and childrearing beliefs) may mediate the effects between divorce and the consequences felt by children.

Other studies that have examined the impacts of divorce on children failed to find any significant results (Baydar, 1988; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). These findings raise noteworthy concerns regarding the divorce literature; some of the studies were overpowered with very large sample sizes, and, yet, few significant differences were found (Baydar, 1988). Further, the significant differences that were found between children from divorced and intact families had negligible effect sizes. Results from these studies also showed that neither recent nor early divorce had an impact on health outcomes (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989).

To examine these contradicting findings, Amato and Keith (1991a) performed a meta-analysis on over 13,000 children from preschool to college age. This technique
allowed Amato and Keith to look at effect sizes and account for differing design features of 92 studies. The meta-analysis revealed that children from divorced families generally experience lower academic achievement, poorer psychological adjustment, more behavioral problems, more negative self-concepts, increased social difficulties, and more relationship problems with their mothers and fathers (Amato & Keith, 1991a). These results were echoed in multiple reports by the National Center for Health Statistics (2002; 2008), that stated that children from single parent households do worse in terms of academic achievement, depression, and behavioral problems than children in two parent households.

Amato and Keith (1991b) carried out an additional second meta-analysis that analyzed over 80,000 adults to see if the impacts of divorce carry into adulthood. This analysis revealed that adult children who experienced parental divorce had more behavioral problems, less education, lower job status, impaired psychological well-being, a lower standard of living, lower marital satisfaction, a heightened risk of divorce, and worse physical health (Amato & Keith, 1991b). These findings illustrate major intergenerational implications, and it is interesting to note how children from divorced families are more likely to follow in their parents’ footsteps and have relationships that end in divorce as well. It is also worth noting that Amato (2001) followed up these meta-analyses a decade later and incorporated 67 studies conducted in the 1990s and found similar results. This study, as well as others (e.g. Lansford’s review (2009) that examined the effects of divorce in more recent years), helped demonstrate that impacts of divorce seem to be consistent and stable throughout time.
Amato (1994) urges not to be overly concerned with these findings, however, as the decline in functioning is small, and there is a great deal of overlap in well-being between children of divorced and intact families. Also, psychosocial impacts on children as a result of divorce seem to be the exception rather than the rule, as most children do not experience significant negative outcomes. Following this, another, more recent study, which followed individuals over 15 years after their parents divorced also found that divorce carried effects into adulthood (Ängarne-Lindberg & Wadsby, 2009). This study demonstrated that adult children of divorce experienced more negative life events, which resulted in difficult adjustment. However, these findings and effect sizes were small, with minimal between group differences. The small differences found in these studies are still important to note, nonetheless, so that clinicians know where to focus and can work to try to make differences between children from divorced and intact families as diminutive as possible.

Although Amato’s (1994) review gives hope to children of divorce (the overall difference in well-being between children whose parents have divorced and children from intact families is small), there may be other variables that show a stronger impact on children of divorce. Three particular variables of interest that have received attention in the divorce literature are health compromising and risky behaviors, attachment styles, and subsequent divorce of adult children, all of which seem to be impacted by parental divorce. Each variable will be reviewed below.

**Health-Compromising and Risky Behaviors and Divorce**

Health compromising and risky behaviors encompass a wide range of behaviors that may lead to many poor health outcomes and early morbidity and mortality.
Examples of these behaviors include smoking; heavy drinking; using illicit drugs; and engaging in risky sexual behaviors such as having unprotected sex, having sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or engaging in sexual activities with multiple partners; the psychosocial implications of all of these behaviors have been documented thoroughly in the literature. Currently, there have been a handful of studies conducted that have examined the link between parental divorce and children’s involvement in risky health behaviors.

Huure, Junkkari, and Aro (2006) conducted a 16-year longitudinal study that examined the impacts of divorce on a variety of outcomes, including health-compromising behaviors. The study examined 1,471 participants between the ages of 16 to 32 whose parents either divorced or did not. Results showed that daily smoking and hazardous alcohol consumption were more prevalent in the children from divorced families than those from intact families for both males and females. The findings of this study also help provide evidence for the long-standing impacts that divorce can have well into adulthood.

Another study conducted by Schwartz, Friedman, Tucker, and Tomlinson-Keasey (1995) looked at archival data in order to examine mortality differences between children from divorced and intact families. It was found that children from divorced families had decreased longevity, and, on average, died four years earlier than those from intact families; a finding that may be a result of increased engagement in health-compromising behaviors. Martin, Friedman, Clark, and Tucker (2005) followed up this study to assess potential mediators and moderators of the decreased longevity among children of divorce finding, and found that smoking was the strongest mediator of this relationship; a finding
that provides further evidence that children of divorce are at an increased likelihood of engaging in risky health behaviors.

Further evidence that children from divorced families engage in more risky health behaviors than children from intact families comes from the work of Spruijt and Duindam (2005). The authors used data gathered from the longitudinal study Utrecht Study of Adolescent Development, which is a representative random sample of adolescents and young adults (age range from 12-30) to examine differences between males and females from divorced and intact families. The results showed that males from divorced families engaged in more risky behaviors (defined as smoking, drinking, and using soft drugs), and had a higher number of sexual partners.

There are a variety of theories as to why children of divorce may engage in health-compromising and risky behaviors more so than children from intact families. One theory that attempts to explain the link between divorce and health-compromising behaviors focuses on the disparities between children from divorced and intact families as a result of parental divorce. It has been found that children from divorced families have lower education, higher unemployment, and higher prevalence of depression and minor psychiatric disturbance (Huure et al., 2006), all of which are predictive of health-compromising behaviors (Bachman, et al., 2008; Downing-Matibag & Geisinger, 2009; Schwinn, Schinke, & Trent, 2010). These findings suggest that divorce may increase an adult child’s propensity to engage in such behaviors through the mediating factors of lower education, unemployment, and impaired mental health status.

Another popular theory as to why children of divorce may engage in more risky health behaviors than their counterparts from intact families stems from a lack of parental
supervision and involvement. Children from divorce are often under the primary custody of one parent and do not receive as much parental regulation as children who have two parents to share the burden. Resources may also be strained after divorce, and adequate child-care services are not available. This lack of sufficient supervision may give children the opportunity to engage in risky behaviors and form bonds with peers who engage in these behaviors as well.

An additional theory states that children may engage in risky behaviors in order to cope with parental separation. Parental divorce creates a major shift in family dynamics, and children may feel quite distressed from the change. Children may engage in poor coping techniques, such as using drugs or engaging in risky sex, to deal with the loss and displace any depression they may feel. It has also been widely documented that adolescents may also engage in risky behaviors through acting out (Allison, & Furstenberg, 1989; Lansford, 2009; Zill et al., 1993); a behavior that may serve as another means to cope with parental separation.

**Attachment Styles and Divorce**

Attachment, broadly defined, is the way in which individuals cognitively conceptualize their internal working models of self and others in interpersonal relationships (Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009). Attachment theory was first conceptualized by Bowlby (1969) in the context of infant/caretaker relationships, and was based on the manner in which the infant interacted with and without his or her primary caretaker. Attachment theory has also been extended to adult intimate relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987) in order to assess how individuals function in and conceptualize their romantic relationships.
The concept of attachment flows from two continuum of anxiety and avoidance regarding interpersonal relationships. Anxiety is indicative of a desire for extreme closeness in relationships, as well as a reliance of self-worth that is completely maintained by others. At the same time, anxious attachment is colored with worries about abandonment (Allen & Baucom, 2004). Conversely, individuals with avoidant attachment are overly concerned with their autonomy and are uncomfortable with being dependent or too close to others (Allen & Baucom, 2004). Put another way, individuals with high anxiety are said to have a negative view of self, while individuals with high avoidance are said to have a negative view of others (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998).

Stemming from the two dimensions of anxiety and avoidance are four separate attachment categories that an individual can fall into. An individual that is high on the anxious continuum and low on the avoidant dimension is said to have a preoccupied attachment style, while an individual who is high on the avoidant continuum and low on the anxious continuum is said to have a dismissive attachment style (Brennan et al., 1998). Individuals who rank highly on both scales have a fearful attachment style; a style theoretically based on a negative view of both others and self, so that extreme closeness is desired but feared and avoided due to concerns regarding rejection (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). Finally, an individual who rates low on each scale is said to have a secure attachment style with a positive view of self and others.

The measurement of attachment has changed and improved throughout the years. Attachment has been measured in a variety of ways, including the use of observational and interview techniques. However, it has become a quite popular and accepted method to measure attachment from self-report scales (Brennan et al., 1998). Two of the
commonly used self-report measures in studies that assess attachment are the Relationship Styles Questionnaire (RSQ) and the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECRI; Fraley et al., 2000).

A myriad of studies have been conducted throughout the years that have assessed how attachment may impact various outcomes, ranging from high-risk drinking (Molnar, Sadava, DeCourville, & Perrier, 2010) to developing posttraumatic symptomatology after a traumatic event (Sandberg, Suess, & Heaton, 2010) to infidelity (Allen & Baucom, 2004). These studies have primarily found that insecure attachment styles (preoccupied, dismissive, and fearful) lead to poorer outcomes. Attachment styles that are developed in childhood are also thought to influence adult attachment, and are believed to be relatively stable throughout life. However, significant disruptions, changes, or events in an individual’s life may impact his or her attachment style and cause it to change (Hamilton, 2000). For this reason, many researchers have been interested in how divorce impacts children’s attachment styles, especially because it has been tied to many adverse outcomes. Further, it is easy to theorize how divorce may impact attachment styles by disrupting parent/child relationships, and by potentially causing children to view relationships with feelings of anxiety and avoidance.

Many studies have found that divorce may play an important role in affecting individuals’ attachment styles, with divorce leading to more insecure attachment styles among children (Beckwith, Cohen, & Hamilton, 1999; Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009; Lewis, Feiring, & Rosenthal, 2000). In a study of 202 couples consisting of 404 individuals between the ages of 19 and 35, Jacquet and Surra (2001) also found that women from divorced families had more distrust, dissatisfaction, and ambivalence in
their own relationships; all of which are characteristics of insecure attachment styles. Men did not seem to be as impacted, however, and only seemed to demonstrate more distrust and ambivalence if their partner’s parents were divorced; gender disparities of this study and other findings will be discussed later. It seems clear in the literature that the major shift in parental caretaking and family dynamics that characterize divorce is a phenomenon that readily impacts children’s attachment styles.

**Dissolution of Marriage among Adult Children of Divorce**

There are multiple theories that speculate why adult children from divorced families may be more likely to divorce themselves. One theory posits that modeling may offer the potential explanation (Crowell et al., 2009). Parents who divorce may illustrate maladaptive behaviors to maintain a committed marriage such as poor communication, negative emotion, and withdrawal from conflict resolution (Crowell et al., 2009). Subsequently, their children may model these behaviors in their own marriages, characteristics that are likely to lead to their own divorce.

Another hypothesis states that parents may convey, intentionally or unintentionally, positive beliefs about divorce and a shallow commitment to marriage (Crowell et al., 2009). Children may foster these beliefs, and see divorce as an acceptable alternative in their own lives. This hypothesis was supported in a large study of 2,033 married individuals by Amato and DeBoer (2001); they found that it was divorce itself that predicted the intergenerational risk of divorce, apart from any conflict in the parent’s relationship. The authors concluded that individuals from divorced families have a weaker commitment to the norm of lifetime marriage than children from intact families (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Children of divorce have also been shown to
understand that life goes on after divorce (Greenberg & Nay, 1982), are more accepting of alternatives to marriage (Amato, 1988), and they also hold less optimistic views of marriage (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990).

There is a plethora of research to support these hypotheses, and the intergenerational transmission of divorce has been widely documented (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Teachman, 2002; Wolfinger, 2000). The consequence of parental divorce also has a potent effect on the intergenerational transmission of divorce; Amato and DeBoer (2001) note that parental divorce doubles the chances that their adult children will also divorce. Multiple family disruptions may further exacerbate the problems, as children who undergo multiple parental divorces and transitions may be at an increased risk for divorce, behavioral problems, poor educational outcomes, and unstable relationships (Cavanagh, Crissey, & Raley, 2008; Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Ryan, Franzetta, Schelar, & Manlove, 2009; Wolfinger, 2000). Overall, it seems safe to conclude that parental divorce is a strong predictor of adult children’s own divorce.

Impacts of Infidelity

Infidelity, also known as extradyadic involvement (EDI), can be operationalized as having sexual encounters with an individual outside of one’s primary relationship in which monogamy is expected. EDI is a prevalent phenomenon in romantic relationships, and when discovered, can elicit a great deal of distress and conflict in both partners (Allen, Atkins, Baucom, Snyder, Gordon, & Glass, 2005). Infidelity is also a common precipitant of divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997), and it is important to hypothesize how EDI may have significant intergenerational impacts on children. However, there have been very few empirical studies that have examined the intergenerational impacts of
infidelity, and, therefore, it is important to utilize past research from a related topic. Drawing from the divorce literature, then, it would seem important to examine the impacts that infidelity has on a variety of outcomes, namely children’s risky behaviors, attachment styles, and own infidelity. Evidence for infidelity’s impact on each outcome, and theories of why these variables may be affected, will be considered in turn.

**Risky Behaviors and Infidelity**

There is currently no empirical evidence to support the link between parental infidelity and children’s risky behaviors. However, a variety of sources have speculated about infidelity’s impact in this area. Wallerstein and Kelly (1996) theorized that adolescents who find out about parental infidelity may regress and be extremely anxious in the wake of their sexual and aggressive impulses; effects that could potentially lead to acting out and serious behavior changes. Wallerstein and Kelly provided a case example of a girl named Jean. Jean became sexually active at the age of 14, which coincided with her discovery of her father’s affair. With her mother, Jean formed strategies for punishing her father and fantasized about his sexual involvements. After her parent’s divorce, she continually flirted with her older male teachers and soon began abusing alcohol and drugs.

Sori (2007) also commented on the idea that infidelity may impact children’s risky behaviors. She stated that older children may react to infidelity through externalizing behaviors, and, for adolescents or young adults, this may mean using alcohol, drugs, or sex to act out. Using sex as an outlet may especially be pronounced in older children as they have a heightened sense of their own sexuality; increased acting out, linked with insufficient parent/child communication about safe-sex practices as a
result of family disruption, may further lead to increased sexual risk behaviors such as not using condoms (Hadley et al., 2009). Further, a clinical case study illustrated by Lusterman (2005) illustrated the impact that infidelity had on a teenage girl. In the case, the girl found out about her father’s infidelity, but kept it a secret at his request. However, she began acting out and dressing provocatively; signs that she may be engaging in risky behavior. Caution must be given in interpreting this and other case examples, as generalizability may be limited; however, these case studies and speculations provide important direction and insight on how infidelity may impact children’s risky behaviors. Empirical studies are needed to see if these results generalize and are a common finding among children who experience parental infidelity.

There have been multiple theories developed to hypothesize why children may engage in risky behaviors following parental infidelity. One hypothesis states that infidelity causes a “shattered superego” in the child. The case study of Priscilla (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1996) illuminated this idea vividly with her statement, “The beliefs which gave me the ability to effectively deal with life were blown apart for me by my dad’s [infidelity]”. Parental infidelity may undermine many of the ideals that the child was taught by the parent, with the result that the child does not know what is right or wrong anymore. This may lead the child to engage in behaviors that were previously considered bad, such as drinking, smoking, doing drugs, or having sex.

Another hypothesis that links parental infidelity to risky behaviors in children states that an affair may destroy a child’s sense of security and trust, and they may no longer see the world as safe or predictable (Sori, 2007). This shattered trust may lead a child to seek security elsewhere in order to cope and feel safe. However, this search may
lead to risky behaviors such as drug use or sex. Additionally, adolescents may return this shattered sense of trust with anger and hostility towards the parent(s) (Sori, 2007; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1997). This may lead adolescents to engage in risky behaviors in order to cope or to lash out at parents.

One additional theory states that children may engage in risky behaviors, namely risky sexual behaviors, due to modeling. Children may believe that their parent(s) are engaging in unsafe sexual practices, and model this behavior in their own relationships. They may believe that this behavior is acceptable if their parent(s) do it and follows in their footsteps.

**Attachment and Infidelity**

Theories regarding the impact of infidelity on attachment are relatively straightforward. Generally, they state that infidelity may be a major disruption or shift in an individual’s life and can precipitate a change in the child’s attachment style; usually with the end result being an insecure attachment style. This may occur because infidelity may diminish an individual’s self-esteem and shatter trust and conceptions of intimacy (Sori, 2007). Following this, Lusterman (2005) points out that the daughter’s trust in boys was severely impacted by the discovery of her father’s infidelity, and all of her subsequent relationships were affected. Further, children may no longer hold the same beliefs about the importance of intimate relationships or the stability of partnerships (Sori, 2007). Therefore, seeing a parent’s infidelity may lead the child to develop insecure attachment for a couple of reasons. Anxious attachment may occur due to a desperate need for closeness, while maintaining an acute fear of abandonment. Conversely, parental infidelity may lead to avoidant attachment, as an individual may take on a
negative view of others and avoid closeness. Although the literature relating to the intergenerational impacts of infidelity is sparse, there have been two empirical studies conducted that have assessed parental infidelity’s impact on adult children’s attachment.

Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) conducted an advent study that examined the intergenerational impacts of infidelity. This study sought to examine if a child’s perceptions of parental divorce had an impact on his or her attachment style. Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) found that children who attributed their parents’ divorce to infidelity were significantly more likely to have an insecure attachment style, which may have important implications for their own intimate relationships later in life.

Another important study conducted by Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, and Wetchler (2008) examined if parental conflict and infidelity could serve as predictors for adult children’s attachment style and own infidelity. Platt et al. (2008) only found partial evidence that parental conflict predicted attachment style, and they found no evidence that parental infidelity predicted attachment. This seems to run contrary to Walker and Ehrenberg’s (1998) findings, but parental conflict may have been a confounding variable in Walker and Ehrenberg’s study. The two studies also used different measures to determine attachment style, which may explain the difference.

Both of the studies conducted by Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) and Platt et al. (2008) have important limitations that need to be noted. Both studies had relatively small sample sizes and the participants consisted only of undergraduate students. This means that smaller effects may not be able to be detected and that the samples may have been unrepresentative. Another major limitation of these studies is the failure to include participants whose parent(s) have committed infidelity, but remain married.
Parental Infidelity and Adult Children’s Own Infidelity

The intergenerational impact of parental EDI on adult children’s subsequent infidelity is theoretically tied to the intergenerational effects of divorce. Parental infidelity may lead children to develop positive views of infidelity and a shallow commitment to being faithful to their partner. Subsequently, children may believe that infidelity is not a big deal, and is a common and acceptable practice.

Other theories regarding the intergenerational transmission of infidelity are similar to the impacts of parental EDI on risky behaviors. This theoretical link may be tied to the idea that infidelity is a form of risky behavior. Thus, children may act out and engage in risky sexual practices, including having multiple partners or committing infidelity. The intergenerational transmission of infidelity may also be tied to theories of risky behavior through modeling. Children may observe parental infidelity and take on the belief that “if my parents do it, it must be ok.” Thus, children will see their parents engaging in EDI and follow in their parent’s footsteps and actions.

Although few empirical studies have been conducted, there has been some evidence concerning the intergenerational transmission of infidelity. Platt et al. (2008) found that children that know their father has had EDI are more likely to engage in infidelity themselves. When further examined, it was found that this relationship only remained significant for boys. This may illustrate a modeling effect where boys know of their fathers EDI, and subsequently find the behavior to be more acceptable. However, this link needs to be studied much further in depth before conclusions can be made.

The impacts of parental divorce and conflict on children have been well documented in a plethora of studies throughout the years. Research that focuses on the
impacts that infidelity has on children is in its infancy, however, and there is a paltry amount of literature on this issue. The studies conducted by Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) and Platt et al. (2008), as well as the case studies by Lusterman (2005) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1997) provide helpful directions to future researchers interested in exploring this new research topic. The findings regarding the intergenerational effects of divorce should also be utilized, and the child’s gender is important to include as a potential moderator on the impacts of infidelity. Studies of divorce have also pinpointed that children are generally affected in terms of risky behaviors, attachment, and subsequent divorce, and infidelity research should focus on these outcomes as well.

Further, the divorce literature seems to agree that the impacts of divorce carry well into adulthood, a finding that should be explored in the infidelity literature as well. A great deal of research needs to be conducted to fully explain the intergenerational impacts of infidelity, but with time and effort it can eventually be well understood.

A study that I propose to conduct would build off of the research already conducted regarding the intergenerational impacts of infidelity. Currently, there is a discrepancy in the research regarding the impacts of infidelity on attachment style, little investigation regarding an adult child’s subsequent infidelity with knowledge of parental infidelity, a gap in the literature regarding the intergenerational impacts of infidelity on children engaging in risky behaviors, and a lack of studies that use samples that include children whose parents committed infidelity but remain together. Therefore, I propose to conduct a study with four main purposes: (1) given the conflicting findings in the literature, to further investigate the impact of parental infidelity on an adult child’s attachment style, (2) to explore if parental infidelity results in higher rates of subsequent infidelity.
behaviors from adult children, (3) to examine whether or not parental infidelity leads to children engaging in more risky behaviors, and (4) to assess the potential moderating impact that the child’s gender has on these outcomes. For all these research questions, I will use the adult children’s self-report, thus, these links between parental infidelity and current functioning will only relate to parental infidelity which is known by the respondent.
CHAPTER II

METHODS

In order to conduct this study, I conducted secondary analyses using a data set collected by Dr. Elizabeth Allen. An undergraduate sample (described below) was used to test the hypotheses.

Participants

Participants in Dr. Allen’s study consisted of undergraduate students from a local university campus ($N = 484$). The undergraduate students were recruited from psychology courses, and were given the option to participate in the study for credit. The age of the students ranged between 18 to 67 years ($M = 21.53$). Males constituted 29% of the sample, while females composed the other 71%. The sample contained African Americans (5.9%, $N = 26$), American Indian or Alaskan Natives (.5%, $N = 2$), Pacific Islanders (.9%, $N = 4$), whites (65.8%, $N = 291$), Asians (15.9%, $N = 70$), and individuals who identify with another racial group (5.7%, $N = 25$) or more than one racial group (4.5%, $N = 22$). Further, 12.2% ($N = 55$) of the undergraduate sample identified as having a Hispanic ethnicity, seven of which identified as white Hispanic. There were 44 participants who did not select any race category.

In order to participate in the larger undergraduate study, students had to be over 18 years of age and a student in the given course. For the current study, participants’ data were not included in the study if their parents were never married, there was missing data regarding parental divorce or infidelity, or if it was determined that their responses to the survey were invalid. These inclusion and exclusion criteria left a total of 435 participants with data that could be analyzed.
Procedure

Participants were recruited from psychology courses from the Auraria campus. The participants’ instructor or the investigator announced the research opportunity to the class. Instructors either offered the opportunity to volunteers without any course incentives or in exchange for class credit; the instructor had the option of choosing which method to use for recruitment. Students were told that the survey was about experiences with infidelity or monogamy and contained personal and sensitive questions regarding sexual practices and drug use (see appendix A for full announcement for study participation). This was done to help minimize potential psychological risks for the students that were thinking about participating.

Individuals who decided to participate in the study were asked to review a consent form, complete a questionnaire, and then given a debriefing pamphlet. The informed consent form again clarified the nature of the questions in the survey, and that the participants could skip any questions they found too personal. Participants completed the questionnaires in a proctored on-campus location, which was usually a classroom. Several times were scheduled when participants were able to take the survey. Separate seating was enforced in order to protect participants’ answers from being read or seen by others. The debriefing forms addressed issues that may have been raised by the questionnaire, and listed personal and relationship counseling resources for those who needed it.

All questionnaires were kept confidential, and names were not attached to any survey. The questionnaires did contain demographic variables, but no identifying codes were assigned to the surveys. After completing the study, participants placed their
questionnaires in an envelope, sealed it, and returned it to the study coordinator. The first page that contained the demographic data was then removed and kept separate from the survey; this was done so that participants would not be able to be identified during data entry due to any unusual demographic combinations.

**Measures**

**Parental Infidelity and Divorce**

Parental divorce was measured by the question “If your parents were married, did they divorce (yes/no)”. Parental infidelity was assessed by asking the participants to check boxes indicating who they have known that have engaged in infidelity. The check boxes included “My father (biological, adoptive, step)”, “At least one of my mother’s boyfriends”, “My mother (biological, adoptive, step)”, “At least one of my father’s girlfriends”, “Other relatives (uncles, aunts, grandfather, grandmother, etc.)”, and “close friends”. The gender of the parent who committed infidelity was determined by the participant’s selection of “My father”, “My mother”, or both on the checklist.

**Attachment style**

The Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECRI; Hazan & Shaver, 1988) was used to measure the attachment of participants. The scale consists of two subscales – Avoidance and Anxiety – with each subscale containing 18 items. Individuals who score highly on the avoidant subscale are overly concerned with their autonomy, and are uncomfortable being dependent or too close to others. Those who score highly on the anxiety subscale are said to have a desire for extreme closeness in relationships, as well as a reliance of self-worth that is based on the approval of others. For the current sample, scores on the Avoidance Subscale averaged = 2.85 (SD = .97) out of a possible range of 1
to 7. The internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .92$). The current sample scored an average of 3.59 on the Anxiety Subscale ($SD = 1.11$) out of a possible range of 1 to 7. This scale also had excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$).

**Risky Behaviors.** A novel scale that contained items about various risky sexual behaviors, drinking, and drug use was used to assess participants’ risky behaviors. The scale consisted of five questions on a 0-5 Likert scale. This items included “In the past year, how often have you had sexual intercourse without using a condom (scale 0-5)”, “In the past year, how often were you under the influence of alcohol when having sex (scale 0-5)”, “Please estimate the number of sexual partners you have had in the past year (open-ended)”, “Over the last year, about how many alcoholic beverages do you drink a week (open-ended)”, and “Please estimate the number of times over the last year you have used recreational drugs (open-ended)”. Items on the 0-5 scale were presented as 1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = sometimes, 4 = almost always, 5 = always, and 0 = I have not had sexual intercourse in the past year. Open-ended questions were restricted to a 0-5 response in order to form the scale. The risky behavior scale had an average score of 1.77 ($SD = 1.12$), and demonstrated adequate internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$). The scale’s alpha only marginally increased to .76 if the question “In the past year, how often have you had sexual intercourse without using a condom” was removed, so all items were included.

Table II.1 Recoded values of open-ended item responses into 0 – 5 scale score

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Score</th>
<th>Please estimate the number of sexual partners you have had in the past year</th>
<th>Over the last year, about how many alcoholic beverages do you drink a week</th>
<th>Please estimate the number of times over the last year you have used recreational drugs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table II.1 (con’t.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>&lt;1</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 – 3.99</td>
<td>5 – 10</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4 – 9.99</td>
<td>11 – 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6+</td>
<td>10+</td>
<td>46+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Own Infidelity. One’s own infidelity behavior was measured by the participant’s response to “Total number of other people that you have had sexual contact with while in a serious and steady relationship”. The average number of encounters was .88 (SD = 1.40). Due to the skewed distribution of this variable (data range from 0 to 40 encounters), the responses were restricted to a 6-point scale. The restricted infidelity scale was recoded as follows: 0 on the scale meant that the individual had no infidelity encounters, 1 on the scale meant that the individual had one previous infidelity encounter, 2 on the scale meant that the individual had two previous infidelity encounters, 3 on the scale meant that the individual had three previous infidelity encounters, 4 on the scale meant that the individual had four or five previous infidelity encounters, 5 on the scale meant that the individual had six or more previous infidelity encounters.

Hypotheses

I hypothesized that individuals’ whose parents have committed infidelity would have more insecure attachment styles, engage in more risky behaviors, and would be more likely to have infidelity encounters themselves than those whose parents have not engaged in infidelity. Further, I hypothesized that divorce would compound these
psychosocial effects; therefore, individuals whose parents are both divorced and have committed infidelity would have the highest levels of insecure attachment, risky behavior, and own infidelity.

I also hypothesized that there would be an interaction between the gender of the parent who committed infidelity and the gender of the participant. Specifically, I predicted that males whose fathers have engaged in infidelity would have more extradyadic involvements than those whose mother has committed infidelity. Conversely, females whose mothers have engaged in infidelity would have more extradyadic involvements than females whose father has engaged in infidelity. Males and females who have parents that have both engaged in infidelity would have the highest rates of extradyadic involvements.

**Overview of Data Analytic Approach**

Using the questions described above, participants whose parents have not committed infidelity nor divorced were in the no infidelity/no divorce group (NI/ND, \(N = 267\)). Checking father or mother on the infidelity question without the parents being divorced placed the participant in the infidelity/no divorce group (I/ND, \(N = 35\)). Participants who answered yes to the divorce question, but whose parent(s) have not engaged in infidelity were placed in the divorce/no infidelity group (D/NI, \(N = 74\)). Finally, participants whose parent(s) have committed infidelity and divorced were in the infidelity/divorce group (I/D, \(N = 59\)). These were the four groups that served as the independent variable in a series of ANOVAs.

The dependent variable for the first ANOVA was Avoidance as measured by the ECRI. Anxiety was the dependent variable for the second ANOVA. The third ANOVA
had the risky behavior scale as the dependent variable. Finally, one’s own infidelity was the dependent variable for the fourth ANOVA. Post hoc analyses allowed for direct comparisons of each group or main effect regarding relative levels of insecure attachment styles, risky behaviors, and infidelity encounters.

In order to test the hypotheses about the interaction between the gender of the parent who committed infidelity and the gender of the participant, a 2 x 3 ANOVA was used with participant gender and gender of the parent who committed infidelity as the independent variables. Gender of the participant was male or female, and gender of the parent who committed infidelity was father only, mother only, or both parents. I predicted that there would be an interaction between gender of the participant and gender of the parent who committed infidelity such that participants whose same sex parent committed infidelity would have the highest levels of own infidelity, while opposite sex parental infidelity would result in lower levels of own infidelity.

During the proposal defense, committee members were interested in alternate ways to statistically test the findings in order to demonstrate competence in this area and to compare and contrast findings using different statistical procedures. Thus, as an additional major goal of this project, multiple analyses were run for each research question. Factorial ANOVAs and regressions were conducted to help illustrate any significant findings of the study. Any discrepancies between these analyses and the proposed analyses were evaluated and discussed.
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Parental Status and Own Infidelity

Initially, a One-Way ANOVA was run with parental status as the independent variable (NI/ND, I/ND, NI/D, and I/D) and the participant’s own infidelity encounters as the dependent variable. Results demonstrated that parental status was associated with one’s own infidelity, $F(3, 417) = 3.41, p < .05$. Post hoc analysis indicated that individuals whose parents remained married but had engaged in infidelity (I/ND) had the highest rates of own infidelity ($M = 1.47, SD = 1.83$). This group was significantly different from individuals whose parents remained married without infidelity (NI/ND; $M = .76, SD = 1.26$). However, there were no significant differences between the I/ND group and the NI/D group ($M = .90, SD = 1.39$) and the I/D group ($M = 1.12, SD = 1.45$).

Following up the initial ANOVA, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was run with parental divorce status and parental infidelity status as the independent variables. A significant main effect of the model was found for infidelity, $F(1, 416) = 7.22, p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Thus, the results demonstrated that individuals whose parent(s) had engaged in infidelity had significantly more infidelity encounters themselves. However, there were no other significant main effects or interactions in the model; neither parental divorce status nor the interaction between parental divorce and parental infidelity were significant.

Next, a regression was run with dummy coded parental status variables (NI/D, I/ND, and I/D) as the independent variables. The NI/ND group was used as the reference group for this analysis. Results demonstrated that the overall model predicted a
significant, yet small amount, of an individual’s own infidelity encounters, $F(3, 416) = 3.41, p < .05, R^2 = .02$. Consistent with the one way ANOVA results, the only significant predictor in the model was the I/ND group, Std. $\beta = .14, p < .05$. This demonstrated that the only group with significantly more infidelity encounters than participants in the NI/ND group was participants whose parent(s) had engaged in infidelity, but did not divorce.

Another regression was conducted with parental infidelity status (0 = no infidelity, 1 = infidelity) and parental divorce status (0 = no divorce, 1 = divorced) as predictors. The overall regression model was also significant, but had a small effect size, $F(2, 417) = 4.08, p < .05, R^2 = .02$. Consistent with the 2 X 2 ANOVA, parental infidelity status was the only significant predictor in the model, ($\beta = .14, p < .05$). This indicated that individuals whose parent(s) engaged in infidelity were more likely to have more infidelity encounters themselves.

Finally, due to the fact that the distribution of own infidelity encounters was significantly skewed, nonparametric tests were run on both the scaled infidelity encounters (responses confined to 0-5) and the nonscaled infidelity encounters (responses were used as given, 0 to 40 range). A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted with parental status group (NI/ND, I/ND, NI/D, and I/D) as the independent variable. The test demonstrated that for both the scaled and nonscaled infidelity encounters, parental status significantly impacted participants’ own infidelity (scaled $H(3) = 10.07, p < .05$; nonscaled $H(3) = 9.68, p < .05$). This provided further evidence that parental divorce and infidelity status affected participants’ infidelity behavior.
Mann-Whitney tests were used to further explore this finding on the scaled infidelity encounters to determine where the differences between groups occurred. Consistent with the one way ANOVA, it was found that children in the NI/ND group and children in the I/ND group significantly differed, with the I/ND group having more infidelity encounters, \( U = 3340.5, z = -2.55, p < .05, r = -.15 \). Additionally, children in the I/D group had significantly higher infidelity encounters than children in the NI/ND group, \( U = 6285.5, z = -2.31, p < .05, r = -.13 \).

In summary, the I/ND group had the highest rates of own infidelity. Following this was the I/D group, which had the second highest rates of infidelity. Next, the NI/D group had the third highest rates. Finally, the NI/ND group had the lowest rates. Thus, when comparing groups, it is found that the I/ND group is significantly higher than the NI/ND group. Additionally, interaction effects are not found. Rather, there is a main effect of infidelity when collapsing the groups across the levels of parental status (infidelity and divorce).

**Parental Status and Risky Behaviors**

Initially, a One-Way ANOVA was run with parental status as the independent variable (NI/ND, I/ND, NI/D, and I/D) and the participant’s risky behaviors as the dependent variable. Results demonstrated that parental status significantly affected risk-taking behavior, \( F(3, 429) = 3.34, p < .05 \). Specifically, individuals whose parents divorced and had not engaged in infidelity (NI/D) had the highest rates of risky behaviors \( (M = 2.08, SD = 1.18) \). This group was significantly different from individuals whose parents remained married without infidelity (NI/ND; \( M = 1.68, SD = 1.15 \)). However,
there were no significant differences between the NI/D group and the I/ND group ($M = 1.79, SD = 1.00$) and the I/D group ($M = 2.04, SD = .99$).

Exactly as had been done with the infidelity outcome variable, the same analyses were run with risky behaviors as an outcome variable. Following the first ANOVA, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was run with parental divorce status and parental infidelity status as the independent variables. A significant main effect of the model was found for divorce, $F(1, 429) = 5.08, p < .05$ partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Results suggested that individuals whose parents had divorced had significantly higher levels of risk-taking behavior than individuals whose parents did not divorce. There were no other significant main effects or interactions in the model; neither parental infidelity status nor the interaction between parental divorce and parental infidelity significantly impacted risky behaviors.

Next, a regression was run with dummy coded parental status variables (NI/D, I/ND, and I/D) as the independent variables. The NI/ND group was used as the reference group for this analysis. Results demonstrated that the overall model predicted a significant, yet small amount, of an individual’s risk-taking behaviors, $F(3, 429) = 3.34, p < .05, R^2 = .02$. There were two significant predictors in the model, the NI/D group, Std. $\beta = .13, p < .05$ and the I/D group, Std. $\beta = .11, p < .05$. This showed that individuals whose parents had divorced, with or without infidelity, had higher levels of risk-taking compared to individuals whose parents had neither divorced nor engaged in infidelity.

Another regression was conducted with parental infidelity status ($0 = no infidelity, 1 = infidelity$) and parental divorce status ($0 = no divorce, 1 = divorced$) as predictors. This overall model was also significant, but had a small effect size, $F(2, 430) = 4.88, p < .05, R^2 = .02$. Parental divorce status was the only significant predictor in the model, ($\beta$
This result demonstrated that parental divorce status significantly predicted one’s risk-taking behavior, as parental divorce was associated with an increase in risky behaviors.

**Parental Status and Attachment**

**Anxious attachment.** Initially, a One-Way ANOVA was run with parental status as the independent variable (NI/ND, I/ND, NI/D, and I/D) and the participant’s anxious attachment score as the dependent variable. Results demonstrated that parental status did not significantly affect anxious attachment, \( F(3, 410) = 1.74, p > .05 \). There were no differences between individuals in the NI/ND group (\( M = 3.51, SD = 1.07 \)), individuals in the NI/D group (\( M = 3.58, SD = 1.12 \)), individuals in the I/ND group (\( M = 3.84, SD = 1.10 \)), and individuals in the I/D group (\( M = 3.82, SD = 1.27 \)).

Exactly as had been done with the previous outcome variables, the same analyses were run with anxious attachment as an outcome variable. Following up the first ANOVA, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was run with parental divorce status and parental infidelity status as the independent variables. Neither of the groups significantly impacted anxious attachment. However, there was a trend for a main effect of infidelity, \( F(1, 410) = 3.83, p = .05 \). Individuals whose parent(s) engaged in infidelity tended to have more anxious attachment.

Next, a regression was run with dummy coded parental status variables (NI/D, I/ND, and I/D) as the independent variables. The NI/ND group was used as the reference group for this analysis. The overall model was not significant, \( F(3, 410) = 1.74, p > .05, R^2 = .01 \). However, the I/D dummy coded group showed a trend, \( \beta = .10, p = .06 \).
Another regression was conducted with parental infidelity status (0 = no infidelity, 1 = infidelity) and parental divorce status (0 = no divorce, 1 = divorced) as predictors. This model also did not achieve significance, $F(2, 411) = 2.57, p > .05, R^2 = .01$.

However, parental infidelity status demonstrated a trend towards significance, $\beta = .10, p = .05$. This result demonstrated a tendency for parental infidelity to be associated with higher levels of anxious attachment.

Thus, while there was a trend shown for a main effect of infidelity in both the ANOVA and the regression, when comparing the four groups there was not one single group that emerged as highest in anxious attachment.

**Avoidant attachment.** Initially, a One-Way ANOVA was run with parental status as the independent variable (NI/ND, I/ND, NI/D, and I/D) and the participant’s avoidant attachment score as the dependent variable. Results demonstrated that parental status did not significantly affect avoidant attachment, $F(3, 411) = 1.90, p > .05$. There were no differences between individuals in the NI/ND group ($M = 2.84, SD = 1.04$), individuals in the NI/D group ($M = 2.68, SD = .83$), individuals in the I/ND group ($M = 3.05, SD = .98$), and individuals in the I/D group ($M = 2.62, SD = .81$).

Exactly as had been done with the previous outcome variables, the same analyses were run with avoidant attachment as an outcome variable. Following up the first ANOVA, a 2 x 2 ANOVA was run with parental divorce status and parental infidelity status as the independent variables. A significant main effect of the model was found for divorce, $F(1, 411) = 5.31, p < .05$ partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Contrary to expectations, it was found that individuals whose parents had not divorced had significantly higher ratings of avoidant attachment. There were no other significant main effects or interactions in the
model; neither parental infidelity status nor the interaction between parental divorce and parental infidelity significantly impacted risky behaviors.

Next, a regression with dummy coded parental status variables (NI/D, I/ND, and I/D) as the independent variables was run. The NI/ND group was used as the reference group for this analysis. The overall model was not significant, $F(3, 411) = 1.90, p > .05, R^2 = .01$.

Another regression was conducted with parental infidelity status (0 = no infidelity, 1 = infidelity) and parental divorce status (0 = no divorce, 1 = divorced) as predictors. This model overall also did not achieve significance, $F(2, 412) = 2.22, p > .05, R^2 = .01$. However, parental divorce status was a significant predictor, $\beta = -.11, p < .05$. This result indicated that individuals whose parents never divorced had higher levels of avoidant attachment.

**Parental Infidelity and Gender Interactions**

In order to test the relationship between the gender of the parent who engaged in infidelity and the gender of the participant, a 2 x 3 ANOVA would be run with the gender of the participant (male or female) and gender of the parent who engaged in infidelity (father, mother, or both) as independent variables, and the participant’s own infidelity as the dependent variable. However, cell sizes for this analysis were quite small which would severely limit statistical conclusions to be made. Thus, the ANOVA was not run as the power of detecting an interaction for the model was only .24. However, see Figure 1 for an illustration of the group differences. The figure illustrates exactly what would have been expected to happen, as males with father infidelity had the highest rates of own
infidelity, and it appears that there is an interaction between the gender of the parent who engaged in infidelity and the gender of the participant.

Table III.1 Cell sizes for parent and participant genders regarding infidelity behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent who Committed</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Infidelity</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Only</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Parents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure III.1 Relationship between Gender of Parent and Child with Infidelity
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

Using a large undergraduate sample, the effects of parental infidelity and divorce were examined on adult children’s attachment styles, risky behaviors, and own infidelity. Results demonstrated that both divorce and parental infidelity may impact children in a variety of ways, even into adulthood. Namely, children whose parents were divorced had elevated levels of risk-taking behaviors relative to those whose parents remained together. Parental infidelity did not seem to contribute to higher risk-taking. Divorce may lead to higher rates of risky behaviors, as parental resources are generally lessened in single-parent homes; single parents cannot dedicate as many resources to supervising their children and checking in on what behaviors they are engaging in. Furthermore, single-parent families are often more strained in terms of financial resources compared to two-parent homes. This may lead to a lack of extracurricular opportunities for children that may be incompatible with, and, thus, prevent the engagement in, risky behaviors.

Another explanation as to why divorce may lead to risk-taking may be that the children of divorce are acting out their frustrations from the shift in family dynamics. Children of divorce may begin engaging in maladaptive coping techniques in order to deal with the loss of a parent, and these coping strategies may become habitual patterns of behavior throughout the individual’s development. Conversely, infidelity did not seem to impact the degree to which individuals engaged in risky behaviors. This study was the first quantitative attempt to examine the relationship between parental infidelity and risk-taking, and it does not appear to support the link speculated about in some case studies. The absence of this relationship may be due to the fact that children can see the damaging
effects that infidelity (a risky behavior in itself) can have, and choose not to engage in behaviors that may have similar consequences.

Another major finding of the current study was that individuals whose parents committed infidelity had higher rates of infidelity than individuals whose parents did not engage in infidelity. Furthermore, adult children whose parents remained married after infidelity had the highest rates of own infidelity. This may be a result of a modeling process in which children see their parents engage in infidelity, but remain married, and thus there may be greater perceptions that infidelity is an acceptable behavior for them to do as well, or they may simply have more prolonged exposure to the unfaithful parental model.

Hypotheses regarding the impact that parental divorce and infidelity would have on adult children’s attachment styles were generally not supported. Neither divorce nor infidelity significantly affected participants anxious attachment styles; however, individuals whose parents committed infidelity showed a trend towards having more anxious attachments. Even though this effect was quite small, individuals who see their parents engage in infidelity may develop a more anxious attachment towards their own significant others. They may desire to be extremely close to their romantic partner, but fear rejection (possibly through an infidelity encounter). It would be interesting to see if individuals whose parents committed infidelity were more afraid of their own partners engaging in infidelity than controls; however, more research needs to be conducted on this topic.

Few effects were found regarding parental divorce and infidelity status on avoidant attachment as well. One finding that did arise was that individuals whose
parents did not divorce had higher levels of avoidance. This finding was quite unexpected, and may suggest that individuals who have parents that remain married have an increased fear of getting close to others. One possible interpretation of this finding is that individuals at a young age may avoid getting too close to others if the relationship does not seem as strong as their parent’s. These individuals may avoid getting too close in relationships until they are sure that their partner is “the one”. However, this finding has not been established in previous literature, was a small effect, and in fact may be a spurious, Type I, effect.

The overall lack of findings regarding parental effects on attachment was surprising. It seems that children may not fear that their own relationships are bound to end up like their parents, and so they do not obtain insecure attachment styles due to parental behaviors. However, the time at which parents get divorced or engage in infidelity may have differential effects on their children. If children are younger during these events, they may experience stronger impacts in terms of attachment styles. Unfortunately, this study was not able to control for the age at which the infidelity or divorce occurred. Future research should focus on any age influences that may play a role.

The hypothesis regarding the interaction of the parent(s)’ gender who committed infidelity and the gender of the participant was partially supported. That is, it appeared that male participants whose father engaged in infidelity had higher rates of infidelity than if only the participants’ mother committed infidelity. Additionally, it appeared that females whose mother committed infidelity had higher rates of own infidelity than if only their fathers committed infidelity. These patterns suggest a modeling process in which
participants look to their same gendered parent for acceptable behaviors to engage in. Males who see their father engage in infidelity, or females who see their mother engage in infidelity, may model the same behavior later in life. It would be interesting to see if this link is upheld by the gender commonality between child and parent, or if it is more closely related to which parent the child feels closest to (which presumably occurs more often with same gender dyads). More research with larger sample sizes should be conducted in order to statistically examine this relationship.

It is also important to note that the effect sizes of the significant findings were very small, and accounted for a minimal amount of variance. Thus, although it seems that parental infidelity and divorce may play a role in shaping their adult children’s behaviors, there seem to be other factors that carry more weight. One variable that has consistently been found to carry stronger effects is relationship conflict between the parents. Parents who have a high conflict relationship and get divorced or engage in infidelity may have a stronger impact on their children. Thus, it would be important to look at the divorce or infidelity situations more closely, including factors such as parental conflict.

There were several limitations to the current study. First, the sample was comprised of only undergraduates from a local university. It is unclear how these results would generalize to the overall young adult population and to older community populations. Second, only known parental infidelity was assessed. Participants had to be aware of their parent(s) infidelity, and families in which the children know of an infidelity may have different characteristics than families with unknown parental
infidelity. It would interesting to see whether these results would remain consistent for families in which there is parental infidelity, but the children do not know about it.

Finally, it is unclear if it was the participants’ primary caretaker who engaged in infidelity based on how the question was asked. If participants endorsed mother or father infidelity, it could have been their biological, adoptive, or stepparent. Thus, a participant whose parents divorced when he or she was very young may have had a biological parent engage in infidelity, but most of his or her experiences were with the stepparent. This may impact some of the modeling conclusions that were developed; however, the amount of participants that this discrepancy would be applicable for would presumably be low. More research needs to be conducted in this area to strengthen the findings of the current study and address the limitations noted here.
REFERENCES


ANNOUNCEMENT FOR STUDY PARTICIPATION

We are inviting you to participate in a research study entitled “Relationships and Health” being conducted by Beth Allen, Ph.D., a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at the University of Colorado at Denver (Elizabeth.allen@cudenver.edu). This research has been reviewed and approved by the UCD Institutional Review Board.

The purpose of the research is to learn more about why and how people make decisions about monogamy. For your participation, you will be asked to complete a fairly lengthy questionnaire (it should take about 1 hour) which includes questions about some personal issues such as sexual behaviors, infidelity, drug and alcohol use, and sexually transmitted infections. Participation is open to all, regardless of experiences with these issues. Because these questions are so personal, we are taking several steps to keep your answers anonymous, so that no one can connect your answers to you specifically. Students are being recruited from several psychology classes, with a goal of recruiting a minimum of 400 participants.

If you participate for credit, the study coordinator will write down your name so we can tell your teacher you participated, but your name won’t be connected to your questionnaire. We think you might learn some interesting things about the research process from your participation, but also are aware that some people find the experience of answering personal questions very upsetting. We will let you know about free or low cost counseling options, and also who to talk to if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research experience.

If you are interested in participating, please contact the study coordinator, ____________. She will schedule a time with you to take the questionnaire.