

ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE: EXPLAINING ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIPS INTO ADULTHOOD

BY

COREY J. WASHBURN

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Approved By:

Marina Krcmar, PhD, Advisor

Jennifer Priem, PhD, Chair

Steven Gunkel, PhD

*This work is dedicated to my biological parents, who after 16 years of divorce, remarried each other in 2015. I am consistently grateful for examples of love and devotion in a marriage, but especially for commitment to parenting in divorce. After all, as you both have stated, “kids don’t choose divorce.” Thank you for your support of my research and for your story which sparked my interest in this topic.*

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### **Abstract**

Previous research has examined the mental, physical, and emotional effects of divorce on children of all ages. While there is some research that examines adult children of divorce (ACOD) (e.g., Dornak, 2013; Lambert-South, 2013), this group is still largely understudied. Building on previous research and framing the current study with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), this study examined adults 18 or older from divorced and married families and evaluated their perceptions of their own romantic relationships. Surveying these adults (N=266), allowed us to draw conclusions about ACOD's perceptions of their own romantic relationships in light of their parents' relationships, pinpoint connections between the age at the time of their parents' divorce and their commitment to their own relationships, and thus, better understand relationship decision-making processes in ACOD. In doing all the above, I contribute to the literature which aids children undergoing divorce.

*Keywords:* adult, children, divorce, relationships, family, cohabitation

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Families in America have changed considerably over the last several decades with the nuclear family becoming a statistical non-norm. In fact, blended families are more popular; over 50% of United States families are remarried or re-coupled (Stepfamily, 2017). Current statistics show that 40-50% of families will experience divorce, and the divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher (Kazdin, 2000). 75% of Americans will remarry and 66% of those living together or who remarry break up when children are involved (Stepfamily, 2017). Further research shows that cohabitation often helps relationships last longer (Aleccia, 2013) but becomes increasingly complicated when children are involved. One study found that over a three-year period, about 31% of children younger than six had experienced a major change in their family or household structure in the form of parental divorce, separation, marriage, cohabitation, or death (Horowitz, Parker, & Rohal, 2015). These break-ups – married or not – do not solely affect the couples who are going through divorce, but their children and stepchildren as well. Many research studies explore the effects of divorce or drastic home-life changes on children's psychological, physical, and emotional well-being (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2005; Alenhofen, Biringen, & Mergler, 2008; Martinez-Pampliega, Aguado, Corral, & Cormenzana, 2015; Elam, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2015). Other studies have found that when tracking two-biological parent households, children whose parents are divorced are in significantly worse mental health at initial interview than children whose parents are married (Strohschein, 2012). These types of studies are productive, but little research has examined the effect of divorce on children's own relationships in their adult lives.

This gap in family research provides opportunity for exploration of those whose lives are affected by divorce.

The studies that do exist involving divorced families typically focus on younger children (fifteen or younger) or on the parents themselves (Dornak, 2013; Lambert-South, 2013). For example, one study found that children of divorce feared rejection more so than children of intact families and that children of divorce also expressed a stronger need for attention and connection (Dornak, 2013). Other studies focus on the communication parents use when discussing their divorce with or in front of their children (Afifi, 2007; Afifi, Granger, Joseph, Denes, & Aldeis, 2015; Cohen, Leichtentrit, & Volpin, 2014) and later delve into the negative effects of those types of communication on children of divorce. This literature on younger children provides a starting point for understanding how divorce might impact adults, but still leaves a gap for further research on the children's development into their own long-term romantic relationships.

The limited research on adult children of divorce (ACOD) focuses on adult children of multiple parental divorces (e.g. South, 2013) or examines the adult child's perceptions of their parents' relationship status post-divorce (e.g. Cui & Fincham, 2010; Dornak, 2013). For example, one study examined the differences between adult children (ages 18 to 50) of divorced families, married families, or multiple-divorce families and found that people of multiple-divorce families tend to be "harder" on their romantic partners (South, 2013). Another study examined participants' perceptions of their parents' divorce and feelings about intimacy (Dornak, 2013). In this study, when asked about perceptions of love, sexuality, marriage, and divorce, there were several differences on perceptions of love and marriage, but also several similarities – most frequently in

perceptions of sexuality (Dornak, 2013) – such that sexuality is an intriguing component and may relate to some of our results in satisfaction levels. The researchers hoped this would open the door for future discussion about children of divorce into their adult relationships (Dornak, 2013; South, 2013) but recognized that there was a still a gap in the research.

Studies that examine effects of divorce on younger children and that study the communication methods parents use with their children are vital to our understanding of young children of divorce and their experiences. However, ACOD are in the midst of making important decisions about serious relationships (i.e., those that are perceived to eventually lead to marriage) and current studies fail to include this group in research. In understanding this age group and the effects of divorce in their adult lives, researchers can make better predictions about how those individuals will handle their relational decision-making processes. Based on the broad-based Social Exchange Theory, which construes all social behavior as the result of an exchange process (Homans & Blau, 1964; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), individuals in romantic relationships weigh the costs and benefits of their relationship when deciding whether to remain in or terminate that relationship. Research that has applied this theory to romantic relationships (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994; Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Burgess & Huston, 2013) has suggested further that when deciding to stay in or leave a relationship, people are guided by three factors: comparison levels, comparison level of alternatives (which in this paper will be referred to a *susceptibility to alternatives*), and commitment.

The results of our research may aid us in understanding ACOD's feelings regarding their own romantic relationships. For example, it might be that someone is

sensitive to small arguments in their romantic relationship because they remember their parents' small arguments leading to bigger arguments in their marriage before divorce. The perception of these small arguments and how they affect a relationship may cause variation in comparison levels, susceptibility to alternatives, or commitment. Thus, these three variables of focus will provide insight to a variety of perspectives within participants' romantic relationships, as well as guide our focus from three different angles. Other scholars have found that each of these variables are guided by factors both internal and external to the relationship, but my primary focus is the difference in people's family of origin because I suspect that parental marital status may have an overwhelming effect. Given the negative impact of divorce on children and the evidence that divorce also creates differences into adult lives (Stepfamily, 2017) it is likely that, aside the vast differences in home-life between ACOD and non-ACOD, levels of comparison, alternatives, and commitment will be different in children of divorce versus children of intact families. Understanding the differences in these constructs will aid us in the comprehension of how adult children of divorce choose to create and maintain a relationship with a romantic partner or spouse and how they determine to end it.

Therefore, in this study, a questionnaire was given to adults 18 or older who are in a romantic relationship. The questionnaire asked their original family makeup (e.g. divorced and non-divorced families) and measured their comparison levels, susceptibility to alternatives, and commitment<sup>1</sup> in their own relationships. In addition to our variable scales, the questionnaire asked the individuals' age at the time of parents' divorce and

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<sup>1</sup> Commitment, according to the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult & Agnew, 1998), involves three sub-constructs, which were also measured in our survey and are unpacked in the "commitment" section of this paper.

participants' perceptions of how contentious their own parents relationship is/was in order to control for that factor in examining any additional effects of those variables predicted by Social Exchange Theory. In developing this research, I will be able to help children as they experience household change and to better predict or prevent the conflict that may exist in their future relationships. Most importantly, this research will expand our understanding of any long-term effects of divorce on children's later relationships – the relationships that most often turn into marriages, cohabitation, or parenting relationships.

## Chapter 2 Rationale

### Social Exchange Theory

As mentioned earlier, Social Exchange Theory is a broad-based theory that construes all social behavior as the result of an exchange process (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) concerning the costs and benefits of social behaviors from stock market purchases, to in-store grocery purchases, to marriage decisions. When applied specifically to social relationships, Social Exchange Theory would suggest that individuals weigh the costs and benefits when deciding to remain in a relationship (Cherry, 2016). Research that has applied Social Exchange Theory to romantic relationships (Sedikides, Oliver, & Campbell, 1994; Bradbury & Karney, 2010; Burgess & Huston, 2013) has suggested further that when deciding to stay in or leave a relationship, people are guided by three factors: **comparison levels**, defined as the individual's perceived stability and satisfaction in a relationship compared to their *expectations* for stability and satisfaction in that relationship; our comparison level of alternatives (which in this paper will be referred to as **susceptibility to alternatives**), or the lowest level of outcome a person will accept from a relationship in light of available alternatives including other relationships or being alone; and finally, **commitment**, or the willingness of an individual to work for the continuation of their relationship – having considered their satisfaction in that relationship, the quality of alternatives, as well as investments.

Social Exchange Theory provides an appropriate framework for this study. Using this theory and focusing on the effects of divorce on comparison levels, susceptibility to alternatives, and commitment, I draw connections between adults' parents' divorce status

and individuals' own romantic relationship perceptions. Furthermore, this information will be a valuable addition to the discussion about which part of a child's life is most vulnerable or susceptible to change, emotional stress, or long-lasting habit. That is, determining when a child is most intently watching his/her parent and picking up on things to emulate or disregard in their own lives – especially into their *adult* lives.

### **Comparison Levels**

*Comparison levels*, as described by the Social Exchange Theory are defined as an individual's perceived stability and satisfaction in a current relationship compared to their past relational experiences and expectations for stability in their previous relationship (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Everyone comes to a relationship with some experience – whether through their own prior relationships or observations of others – with which they can compare their current relationship. The part of the theory which evaluates comparison levels further affirms that people in relationships compare the costs and benefits of their past relationships to the costs and benefits of their current relationships (Long-Crowell, 2016) which influences their decision of whether to stay in or leave that particular relationship. However, individuals might also utilize other sources of information when determining our comparison levels.

Weighing benefits in relationships, as explained by Cherry (2016), is contrasted with the costs of the relationship by establishing a comparison level that is often influenced by social expectations (Cherry, 2016). For example, if a previous romantic partner showered you with displays of affection, your comparison level for your next relationship would be quite high when it comes to level of affection (Cherry, 2016). In addition, one might use one's own parents as basis for comparison when subconsciously

determining comparison levels. In terms of an individual's parents' marriage, the majority of evidence suggests that parents' divorce in and of itself does not solely lead to these poorer long-term outcomes for their children; rather, and in part, divorce seems to influence offspring outcomes via parental conflict (Amato, 1993; Cui & Fincham, 2010). However, parental conflict does not explain all the variance in these outcomes. Some studies show that divorce continues to exert an incremental impact on outcomes even when controlling for marital conflict (Afifi & Cohe, 2007; Garber, 2015; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Stallman & Ohan, 2016; Turner & West, 2013).

Given that each individual comes to a relationship with a background of experiences in other relationships and knowledge concerning other relationships based upon observations (Sabatelli, 1984), and given that for ACOD, that experience and subsequent knowledge may be based on parental conflict and/or divorce, it is likely that their comparison levels would be influenced. For example, research finds that parent-child and parent-parent relationships are strained prior to divorce (O'Connor, DeFries, Caspi, & Plomin, 2000); therefore, it is likely that there will be a difference based on parental status of divorce in terms of comparison levels, such that ACOD will have higher relationship comparison levels than those whose parents did not divorce. In other words, being a child of a divorced family may make an ACOD more sensitive to comparing past and current relationships and the expectations for each.

With all this in mind, I used the Marital Comparison Level Index (MCLI) to measure comparison levels, which was developed and applied to Social Exchange Theory (Sabatelli, 1984). The goal in developing the MCLI was to construct an internally consistent, unidimensional construct reflecting an individual's perception of the degree to

which his or her marital relationship measures up to his or her expectations. Because both parent-child relationships and the relationship between the parents themselves are strained prior to parents' divorce (e.g., O'Connor, Caspi, DeFries, & Plomin, 2000), children who have witnessed parental conflict at any stage of life may begin to fear similar conflict in their own relationships, thus causing them to worry that their relationship will not "measure up" to their expectations. Additionally, "past experiences" for ACOD may include memories of divorce which drive ACOD to set higher standards for their own relationships in efforts to avoid a potential break-up. Based on the research that finds that divorce influences offspring (Morrison and Coiro, 1999; Dornak, 2013; South, 2013), I can assume that being an ACOD will affect comparison levels – even if marital conflict isn't explicitly conveyed to the child via verbal, emotional, economic, or physical methods. For our purposes, I used the questions from the MCLI that would apply to dating relationships as well as marital relationships and formulated the questions to fit our study sample: adults eighteen years or older.

H<sub>1</sub>: Adult children of divorce will have higher relationship comparison levels than people whose parents did not divorce.

### **Susceptibility to Alternatives**

*Comparison Level of Alternatives (Susceptibility to Alternatives)* within the Social Exchange Theory refers to an individual's perception of the likelihood of a better available alternative. Moreover, susceptibility to alternatives refers to the outcomes that people think they could get if they were to enter a different relationship. For example, someone with a high comparison level of alternatives is more likely to be *susceptible* to those alternatives and therefore make new friends and switch between romantic partners

(Long-Crowell, 2016) because they seek alternatives for their relationships and rarely settle. In contrast, someone with a low comparison level of alternatives is likely to be more introverted, be less *susceptible* to alternatives and to stay with one romantic partner for a long period of time (Long-Crowell, 2016). They may stay because they feel content in their current relationship either because of their happiness with their romantic partner or because they see no possibility of a better romantic option – which may be no romantic involvement at all. To build on the previous examples, people with low comparison levels *and* low susceptibility to alternatives tend to have a high level of dependency on their relationship and may feel unable to leave (Bradbury & Karney, 2010), thus causing them to stay with their current romantic partner regardless of the tension that may be straining their relationship. Susceptibility to alternatives, then, directly influences a person's choice to maintain or terminate a relationship.

Based on Social Exchange Theory, evaluation of alternatives is another part of the equation that helps an individual more intently consider the costs and benefits of their current relationship, and thus, whether they should stay or leave. Consideration of alternatives also includes the thought process associated with the consequences one might face for leaving his or her relationship – such as the loss of investments that have been put into the relationship, emotional ties to family members of the significant other, or social isolation as a result of leaving the relationship – all of which could cause people to feel unable to leave, no matter how much they might want to (Bradbury & Karney, 2010).

Children of divorce may have, at some point, considered alternative options for their own parents when they witnessed discontent in their parents' lives, and thus, may be more prone to consider it in their own relationships. Although some studies have

demonstrated that divorce's effects are case-by-case (e.g., Lambert, 2007; Gager, Yabiku, & Linver, 2015), other research underlines the finding that many children worry about their parents' well-being during or shortly after divorce (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977). Certainly, when worrying about parents and parents' well-being, children may consider what romantic option, if any, is best for either of his/her parents. This behavior may then be translated into their own romantic relationships into adulthood.

In addition, parents experiencing conflict in their marriage may be considering alternatives which may be consciously or subconsciously conveyed to a child in that divorced family. For example, one study examined fifty ACOD to determine whether their own parents' divorce affected those adults' perceptions of divorce (Lambert, 2007). This study mentions one mother who had been married for 26 years and states that her parents' divorces are the reason she had been married so long (Lambert, 2007). Her decision to stay so long may be a decision based on messages conveyed – either consciously or subconsciously – from her parents regarding marriage, divorce, or complications associated with split families. Contrary to this experience, another mother felt that her parents' divorces taught her that a person should not stay in a relationship that is not satisfying. Satisfaction, in this case, may have been conveyed through better alternatives outside her parents' marriage – i.e., attempts to find a better spouse, better father (step-father), or better friend. In each of these cases, the portrayal of divorce, consideration of alternatives, or decision to stay married seems to have been conveyed to children in some way, because both mothers “didn't want their [kids] to go through the same thing (Lambert, 2007). Consideration of how the parents' relationship was displayed is crucial because children's observation of anything in their homes could alter

their perception of what they want or don't want in their own relationship, thus, causing them to consider romantic partners for an extensive period of time as opposed to non-ACOD; or, at the very least, consider more qualities, characteristics, and habits about their romantic partners than their non-ACOD counterparts.

As mentioned earlier in Wallerstein and Kelly's book "Surviving the Breakup," the authors' study found that children are particularly interested in what will happen to their lives at the time of their parents' divorce. If children are so attentive to this detail, they may pick up on parental dissatisfaction, translate this fear of marital failure into their own relationships, and utilize that fear (either consciously or subconsciously) to drive their decision-making processes when selecting romantic partners – in part because they do not want their children to experience similar events. If this is the case, these ACOD will likely consider potential alternatives that meet their standards for family, financial stability, and their moral expectations – all to avoid a possible divorce.

Based on the research that finds that people consider alternatives when they are least satisfied in a relationship (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Miller, 1997; Rusbult & Agnew 1998) and that children are usually most concerned with what will happen to them at the time of their parents' divorce (i.e., whose house they will live in, where their clothes will go, if they will have to move, or if they will lose friends or family members)(Wallerstein & Kelley, 2008), I suspected that children of divorce have been influenced by their parents' susceptibility to alternatives and/or their own consideration of alternatives *for* their parents; therefore, are susceptible to alternatives in their own relationships as well.

H<sub>2</sub>: Adult children of divorce are more susceptible to alternatives than people whose parents did not divorce.

### **Commitment**

*Commitment*, as part of Social Exchange Theory applied to romantic relationships is defined as the intention to remain in a relationship (Bradbury & Karney, 2010) including long-term orientation toward the involvement as well as feelings of psychological attachment (Rusbult & Agnew 1998). As explained by the Investment Model Scale, commitment can further be seen as a product of satisfaction level, quality of alternatives available, and investment size which can lead an individual to a particular level of commitment (Rusbult & Agnew, 1998).<sup>2</sup> For example, if an individual has a low satisfaction level, sees the possibility of an available alternative, and has a low investment size, that person is likely to leave his or her relationship for the available alternative. Contrastingly, if a person has a moderate satisfaction level, sees no available alternative, and/or has a high investment size, that person is less likely to leave his or her relationship.

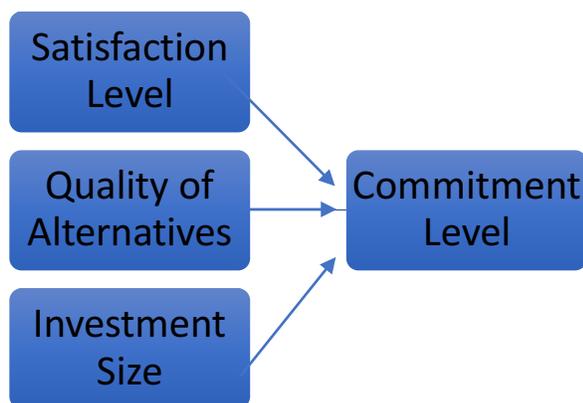


Figure 1

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<sup>2</sup> See Figure 1

Each of the constructs depicted above play a part in the overarching decision to commit to a relationship. Because the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) includes these constructs as part of commitment, I incorporated measures for each of them in our survey in order to fully understand commitment.

*Satisfaction level* refers to the positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship. Satisfaction is influenced by the extent to which a partner fulfills the individual's most important needs (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew 1998). For example, someone with a high satisfaction level in their relationship may be pleased with how their partner matches their intellectual thoughts, companionate habits, and sexual desires. Contrastingly, someone with a low satisfaction level may perceive their relationship as one where hardly any expectations are met. The definition of satisfaction as described by the Investment Model Scale was applied in the creation of and execution of our survey to measure satisfaction level in our respondents.

Based on the research that defines satisfaction level, I predicted that satisfaction levels in ACOD will be lower than non-ACOD, because they continually seek the most near-perfect option possible.

H<sub>3A</sub>: Adult children of divorce have lower satisfaction levels than children of intact families.

*Quality of alternatives* refers to the perceived desirability of the best available alternative to a relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew 1998) which is based on the extent to which the individual's most important needs could effectively be fulfilled "outside" of the current relationship – in a specific alternative involvement, by the broader field of eligible individuals, by friends and family members, or on one's own

(Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew 1998). For example, someone who experiences high satisfaction levels in their relationship (a majority or all expectations and needs are met) perceives their needs as unable to be better gratified elsewhere – therefore, quality of alternatives is low and commitment to current romantic partner is high.

Building on the belief that ACOD will continually seek the option most near-perfect, I also predicted that ACOD would have perceive a higher quality of alternatives than children of intact families because they are seeking their ideal partner before fully committing to one person romantically.

H<sub>3B</sub>: Adult children of divorce perceive themselves as having a higher quality of alternatives than people whose parents did not divorce.

*Investment size*, as outlined in the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew 1998), refers to the magnitude and importance of the resources that are attached to a relationship – resources that would decline in value or be lost if the relationship were to end. As a relationship develops, partners invest many resources directly into their relationship in the hope that doing so will improve it (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew 1998). For example, an individual may disclose private thoughts and feelings to his/her romantic partner and may put considerable time and effort into their relationship. This investment of time, effort, and personal privacy is likely an effort to demonstrate commitment in hopes that that commitment is reciprocated. Eventually, this investment of time and emotional efforts turns into mutual friends, personal identity, children, or shared material possessions that then become attached to this relationship. Now, the relationship has experienced enhanced commitment because of the costs now associated with ending that relationship (loss of material possessions, mutual friends, or altering of children's lives). I

tested similar scenarios in our survey based on sample questions from the Investment Model Scale.

Since investment size broadly encompasses physical, emotional, and material investments such as time, emotion, social circle, children, houses, cars, and financial investments – all of which vary individually – I suspected that being an ACOD would affect the types and quantities of investments put into a relationship, as well as the attitudes or feelings associated with each of them.

H<sub>3C</sub>: Adult children of divorce perceive themselves as having a higher investment size than people whose parents did not divorce.

*Commitment* is clearly broken in divorce, and ACOD may fear commitment as a result of having seen the consequences of breaking a commitment through their parents' divorce. For example, if a person remembers their parents' divorce as one full of anger, fighting, and as a divisive point in his/her family, that person may grow up with skepticisms of marriage, commitment, and relationships in general. Thus, they may fear that similar experiences may become reality for them if they do not commit to the right person or in the best way. Because of the possibilities of these fears in ACOD, commitment will be evaluated as a combination of satisfaction, investment size, and quality of alternatives, as explained above. While commitment can be considered as a product of these three constructs<sup>3</sup>, commitment is also often researched as the broader understanding of two different types: personal dedication and constraint commitment, which I also evaluated individually.

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<sup>3</sup> See Figure 1

*Personal dedication* refers to the desire of an individual to maintain or improve the quality of his or her relationship for the joint benefit of the participants (Givertz, Burke, Segrin, & Woszidlo, 2016; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Personal dedication not only requires desire to maintain the relationship, but also to improve it, make sacrifices for it, invest in it, link personal goals to it, and to seek the best interest for both parties in all circumstances (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Furthermore, personal dedication involves an individual's perceived value in the relationship beyond the pleasure it brings him/her, the value in remaining in a committed relationship, and the value in honoring one's commitments in general (Gordon, 2012). Based on the research that defines and measures personal dedication (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Gordon, 2012; Burke, Givertz, Segrin, & Woszidlo, 2016), I suspected that ACOD would have lower levels of personal dedication in dating relationships because they are hesitant to "settle" for less than their best option in a spouse.

*Constraint commitment*, contrastingly, comprises the facets of life that constrain individuals to maintain relationships regardless of their personal dedication to those relationships. These constraints may arise from either external or internal forces and often make termination of a relationship seem more economically, socially, personally, or psychologically costly (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Burke, Givertz, Segrin, & Woszidlo). Some studies have demonstrated validity for notions of commitment consistent with dedication (e.g., Murstein & MacDonald, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Rusbult & Agnew, 1998) and constraint (e.g., Udry, 1981, 1983). For example, Stanley and Markman (1992) found that dedication and constraint levels were very low in dating

subjects, while their satisfaction was moderate. Contrastingly, married subjects, whose satisfaction levels were low, had high levels of dedication and rising levels of constraint from engagement to marriage to married with children (Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Therefore, the research insinuates that people tend to make commitment decisions based on the things in their lives that they see as pressing constraints: children, material objects, and other social relationships. Based on this research, I presumed that ACOD will have higher levels of constraint commitment – even though I suspected they will have lower levels of personal dedication – because they do not want to put their children through situations that mirror their memories of their own parents’ divorce – such as constant arguing or disagreements, and living in two separate homes.

## Chapter 3 Method

### Overview

The goal of the present study was to gain a better understanding of the perceived comparison levels, susceptibility to alternatives, and commitment levels in adult children of divorce (ACOD). A survey<sup>4</sup> was given to adults eighteen years or older who are in a romantic relationship of any kind – from casually dating to married, divorced and remarried, or otherwise. The survey asked about demographics, patterns and habits in current relationships, perception of current relationship and consideration of other opportunities for relationships, happiness and stability in relationship, and beliefs about romantic relationships in general. The survey also asked participants to describe their parents' marital status, the age at which their parents divorced (if applicable) and a few questions about their perception of their parents' relationship (e.g., what their parents may have or haven't said about their relationships). Finally, the survey allowed a space for participants to elaborate on any of the survey's questions, and to comment on anything they felt necessary.

### Participants

Participants were chosen via convenience sampling according to the researchers' connections and later via snowball sampling ( $N = 266$ ). The survey link was emailed and spread via email and social media venues from then on. The majority of our participants described themselves as white ( $n = 206, 77.4\%$ ), and the majority were between 18-22 years old ( $n = 115, 43.2\%$ ). Of the participants, 15.8% were male ( $n = 42$ ) and 67.3% were female ( $n = 179$ ). The remaining 16.9% chose not to identify their sex. 18.8% of

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<sup>4</sup> An imported Word version of the survey can be found at the end of this paper, pg. 43.

participants had parents who were divorced ( $n = 50$ ), and 80.5% were children of intact families ( $n = 214$ ). The remaining 0.8% of respondents' parents were separated, indicated by the participant answering "other" ( $n = 2$ ). Other respondents were Black ( $n = 1$ , 0.4%), American Indian or Alaska Native ( $n = 1$ , 0.4%), Asian ( $n = 4$ , 1.5%), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 3$ , 1.1%), or identified themselves as "other" ( $n = 6$ , 2.3%). The remaining 16.9% of respondents ( $n = 45$ ) chose not to answer this question.

No compensation was given for this survey. Incomplete surveys were disregarded, as were surveys that did not meet the attention-check question requirements (ex: to participate in this study, you had to be in a romantic relationship. Answer choices for "What is your current relationship status?" included "single," therefore, those participants who chose "single," were eliminated from the data ( $n = 14$ )).

### **Procedure**

The link that was sent to friends, family, peers, coworkers, and other acquaintances via the researchers' connections prompted the respondent to read a consent form<sup>5</sup> before proceeding to the survey. After agreeing to participate, respondents were directed to the first page of the survey which asked for information regarding the participant's relationship status, the relationship status of their parents, and the sex of their partner. Participants' names and/or contact information was not recorded.

Following the introductory section of the survey, each participant was asked 33 questions that evaluated perceptions of their own romantic relationships according to our variables: comparison levels, susceptibility to alternatives, and commitment. For this

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<sup>5</sup> The consent form used for this study can be found at the end of this paper, pg. 43.

section, each question was presented on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*).

The third section asked about their parents' marital status in terms of communication surrounding their marriage or former marriage. Given that our research sample has a varying background of parental marital status, these questions varied based on the participants' answers to their parental status of divorce. For example, a person with parents who are married was presented a different set of questions than participants who said their parents are divorced.<sup>6</sup>

Following these questions were the demographics questions, asking age, gender, and race of both the participant and their parents. Then, the survey concluded. The final page of the survey thanked the participant for his/her answers and reminded the participant that their answers were confidential and the survey would remain confidential.

## Measures

**Relationship status.** The survey began with questions regarding the participants' relationship status, their parents' relationship status, asked about cohabitation, and then for their partner's sex. Table 1 depicts the frequencies and percentages of relationship status for participants. Of all the respondents ( $N = 266$ ), 56.8% selected "*in a relationship*" or "*in a serious relationship*" as a response ( $n = 151$ ), 10.2% were "*dating*" ( $n = 27$ ), 31.2% were "*engaged*" or "*married*" ( $n = 83$ ), and 1.1% were "*divorced and remarried*" ( $n = 3$ ).

[Place Table 1 Here]

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to the copy of the survey located at the end of this paper for more information about specific questions given to varying participants.

**Divorced or non-divorced parents.** The marital status of the respondents' parents was recorded in two questions: "What is your mom's relationship status?" and "What is your dad's relationship status?" Answer choices were: "*cohabiting*," "*dating – no prior marriage*," "*married*," "*divorced*," "*divorced and remarried*," and "*other*." As depicted in the tables<sup>7</sup>, the survey left a space beside "other" for the participant to elaborate on his/her choice of "other." Some responses were clarification of deceased parents or separated parents, and the remainder of the "other" responses I presume means the respondent either chose not to disclose that information or their parents have never been married or divorced.

Tables 2 and 3 depict the frequencies and percentages of relationship status of the moms and dads of participants, respectively. Having asked respondents their mother and father's relationship status separately, the research team went through responses to qualify the respondent as either a child of divorce or non-ACOD. The majority of our respondents qualified as adult children of intact families ( $n = 214$ , 80%), 18.8% were of divorced families ( $n = 50$ ), and 0.8% were of separated families ( $n = 2$ ).

[Place Table 2 Here]

[Place Table 3 Here]

Each response was examined and differences were accounted for in elaboration on choice of "other" to determine which respondents qualified for children of intact families, certain answer choices were coded as intact family, ACOD, and separated. Divorced, divorced and remarried, and "other" responses indicating a biological parental divorce were coded as "divorced." If a respondent indicated his/her parents were married

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<sup>7</sup> See Tables 2 and 3.

OR a respondent answered that their mother or father was “widowed” via the “other” response, they were coded as “non-divorced” – meaning ‘child of intact family.’ After calculating the “other” responses and accounting for divorced and non-divorced participants, I found that 50 of respondents were children of divorce (18.8%) and 214 were children of intact families (80.5%) (e.g., a person whose mother is deceased but was married to his/her father until her death would be considered as a child of an intact family). The remaining 0.8% indicated separated parents ( $n = 2$ ) via the “other” text box provided in the survey.

For additional clarification and for better understanding participants’ family dynamic, I asked about the timing of the divorce if applicable. Respondents were asked how old they were at the time of their parents’ divorce if a participant answered “*divorced*,” or “*divorced and remarried*” for either their mother or father’s relationship status. Frequencies for answers to these questions are depicted in Table 4.

[Place Table 4 Here]

Next, respondents were asked about the perceptions of the conflict in their parents’ marriage before divorce. The original scale included the following options: “*never*,” “*rarely*,” “*sometimes*,” “*frequently*,” “*about half the time*,” “*most of the time*,” and “*always*.” Due to a perceived problem with interpretation between these measures, I combined “*frequently*” and “*about half the time*,” resulting in a 6-point Likert scale. Current conflict observed by participants of intact families were lower ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) than conflict observed by participants prior to their parents’ divorce ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ), which was expected. Results for this quantity of conflict for children of divorce are depicted in Table 5.

[Place Table 5 Here]

Respondents whose parents were married were asked about current conflict observed in their parents' marriage. Table 6 depicts the frequencies of children of intact families' observation of conflict within their parents' marriage. Due to a perceived problem with interpretations between measures, "*frequently*," and "*about half the time*" were combined for non-ACOD as well, again, resulting in a 6-point scale.

[Place Table 6 Here]

**Commitment level.** To evaluate commitment level, I used the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult & Agnew, 1998) keeping in mind that there are two different types of commitment: dedication and constraint commitment, and that commitment, as outlined by IMS, is a product of satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size<sup>8</sup>. As previously mentioned, the scale has been validated and is appropriate for this study. For commitment level evaluation, sample items included "*I am committed to maintaining a relationship with my partner*" and "*I would not feel very upset if our relationship ended in the near future.*"<sup>9</sup> Items were evaluated using a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 as "*strongly agree*" and 7 as "*strongly disagree.*" Items were recoded so that higher numbers indicated more commitment and lower numbers indicated lower commitment levels.

Among all participants, the average commitment level within relationships was high ( $M = 6.20, SD = 1.00$ ). For ACOD, commitment level was about the same ( $M = 6.42, SD = 0.98$ ) as for adult children of intact families ( $M = 6.15, SD = 1.01$ ). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

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<sup>8</sup> See Figure 1.

<sup>9</sup> For complete list of commitment level question, refer to the exported Word survey on page 45.

**Satisfaction level.** The Investment Model Scale was also used to evaluate satisfaction level. Sample items for satisfaction level included “*my relationship is close to ideal*” and “*I feel satisfied with my relationship with my partner.*” The items were presented on a Likert scale with 1 as “*strongly agree*” and 7 as “*strongly disagree.*” Items were recoded for satisfaction as well so that higher numbers indicated higher levels of satisfaction and lower numbers indicated lower satisfaction in relationship. These sample questions were adapted from the Investment Model Scale and were appropriate for our study.

Among all participants, the average satisfaction level within relationships was also high ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). For ACOD, satisfaction level was about the same ( $M = 6.29$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) as for adult children of intact families ( $M = 6.18$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = 0.85$ )

**Quality of alternatives.** Items used to evaluate quality alternatives were also adopted from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult & Agnew, 1998), and included “*my alternatives are attractive to me*” and “*if I weren't dating my partner, I would be fine – I could easily find someone else.*” Respondents answers were recorded on a Likert scale with 1 as “*strongly agree*” and 7 as “*strongly disagree.*”

Among all respondents, participants' quality of alternatives were moderately high ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). For ACOD, quality of alternatives were about the same ( $M = 5.22$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) as adult children of intact families ( $M = 4.97$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .58$ )

**Investment size.** I evaluated investment size to determine differences in commitment levels, also from the Investment Model Scale. Samples included: “*I have put*

*a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if we were to break up,” “many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner,” and “I feel as though my financial investments in this relationship (house, kids, cars) are too much to forfeit.”* These items were evaluated using a Likert scale with 1 as “*strongly agree*” and 7 as “*strongly disagree*”.

Among all respondents, level of perceived investment size was high ( $M = 5.85$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). For ACOD, level of perceived investment size was about the same ( $M = 5.99$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) as adult children of intact families ( $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Comparison levels.** Comparison levels (susceptibility to alternatives) were evaluated using the Marital Comparison Level Index (MCLI) (Sabatelli, 1984). Keep in mind that the idea behind these measures are that the more content a person is in his/her romantic relationship, the less likely that person is to terminate that relationship. This scale was also validated and serves as an appropriate index for this study. Sample items included “*the amount of mutual respect I experience*” and “*the amount of companionship I experience.*” These items were ranked on a scale of importance, with 1 as “*not very important*” and 7 as “*extremely important.*”

Among all participants, average susceptibility to alternatives was moderate ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ). For ACOD, susceptibility to alternatives was about the same ( $M = 5.94$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) as adult children of intact families ( $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 0.52$ ). This scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

## Chapter 4 Results

### Preliminary Testing

Before engaging in statistical testing for our variables, I ran correlations on study variables, depicted in Table 7.

[Place Table 7 Here]

It is interesting to note in the correlation table that statistical significance does not exist between our primary groups (ACOD and non-ACOD), but that there are strong correlations elsewhere: current observed conflict and cohabitation ( $r = -0.30, p < .01$ ), such that the more observed conflict, the less likely couples are to live together; commitment and cohabitation ( $r = 0.44, p < .01$ ), such that the more committed individuals are, the more likely they are to cohabit; satisfaction and commitment ( $r = 0.62, p < .01$ ), such that the more satisfied individuals are with their relationship, the more committed they are; and quality of alternatives and satisfaction ( $r = -0.41, p < .01$ ), such that the higher the quality of alternatives an individual perceives, the less likely they are to be satisfied in their current relationship. Many of these significant correlations make sense, but several of the correlations also led the study team to believe there may be some other factor affecting the results – perhaps involving the details within parental relationships.

### Hypothesis Testing

Because my hypotheses involve looking at two classifications – ACOD or child of intact family – I started with an independent sample *t*-test used to determine whether a participant's commitment level varied by parental marital status. As a reminder,  $H_1$  predicted that ACOD would have higher relationship comparison levels than non-ACOD.

Based on the *t*-test, there was no significant difference between ACOD ( $M = 6.42$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) and non-ACOD ( $M = 6.15$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ),  $t(262) = 1.71$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ,  $r = 0.11$ , although ACODs did have slightly lower commitment levels, with the *p*-value approaching significance, such that children of divorce are less likely to be committed in their adult romantic relationships.

Given the *t*-test results for commitment level, ANCOVAs were run to evaluate the significance of divorce status on commitment level when controlling for parents' marital conflict. The ANCOVA for ACOD and non-ACOD status on commitment levels when controlling for conflict in parental marriages was found to have no statistically significant covariates,  $F(1,188) = 1.58$ ,  $p = 0.21$ . Divorce status, however, was approaching significance as a main effect  $F(1,188) = 3.02$ ,  $p = .08$  such that people who see more conflict in their families tend to be less committed to their significant others.

I continued running *t*-tests on our other study variables to test if there was a significant difference between ACOD and non-ACOD participants. Results did not support our hypotheses. Table 8 displays *t*-test results of our other study variables.

[Place Table 8 Here]

Results from the *t*-test and ANCOVA led me to believe that parental conflict may have some effect on other outcome variables. Given the above *t*-test results, I ran several ANCOVAs to determine further differences between ACODs and non-ACODs on the dependent variables when controlling for parental conflict.

$H_2$  predicted that ACOD are more susceptible to their alternatives than children of intact families. The ANCOVA that examined the differences in susceptibility to alternatives between ACOD and non-ACOD when controlling for conflict in parental

marriages was found to have no statistically significant covariates,  $F(1,188) = 0.01$ ,  $p = 0.93$ , or main effects,  $F(1,188) = 0.32$ ,  $p = 0.57$ .

$H_{3A}$  predicted that ACOD have lower satisfaction levels than children of intact families. The ANCOVA that examined satisfaction levels between ACOD and non-ACOD when controlling for conflict in parental marriages was found to have no statistically significant covariates,  $F(1,188) = 0.29$ ,  $p = 0.59$  or main effects,  $F(1,188) = 0.53$ ,  $p = 0.47$ .

$H_{3B}$  predicted that ACOD will perceive themselves as having a higher quality of alternatives than people whose parents did not divorce. The ANCOVA that examined the differences in quality of alternatives between ACOD and non-ACOD when controlling for conflict in parental marriages was found to have no statistically significant covariates,  $F(1,188) = 0.49$ ,  $p = 0.46$ , or main effects,  $F(1,188) = 2.53$ ,  $p = 0.11$ .

$H_{3C}$  predicted that ACOD perceive themselves as having a higher investment size than people whose parents did not divorce. The ANCOVA that examined the differences in perceived investment size between ACOD and non-ACOD when controlling for conflict in parental marriages was found to have no statistically significant covariates,  $F(1,188) = 1.29$ ,  $p = 0.26$  or main effects,  $F(1,188) = 0.73$ ,  $p = 0.40$ .

Following the ANCOVA testing each of my study variables, I ran interactions between divorce status and conflict to determine differences between ACOD and non-ACOD in study variables. None of the results were significant. Additionally, I used a mean-split interaction to determine if *high* conflict had a greater effect on the study variables. The mean for conflict among the study sample size was  $M = 2.55$ , thus, anything above 2.56 was coded as “high” conflict and anything 2.55 or below was coded

as “low” conflict – for the purposes of this interaction test. Again, no results were significant.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

The overarching goal of this study was to determine whether perspectives of romantic relationships vary in ACOD versus adult children of intact families. Though our hypotheses were not directly supported by our data, the findings in this study are still useful in aiding further research to take a deeper look at ACOD and their romantic relationships. Because there is not much research on this topic, this study serves as a foundation and encouragement of further studies on ACOD. Additionally, my research has helped narrow the focus for further researchers, given that parental conflict (measured via observed conflict prior to divorce and observed conflict within parents' marriage) has shown more significance between study variables than being an ACOD or non-ACOD. This significance within conflict opens a whole new area for researchers to explore: the types of parental conflict that lead to changes in perspectives of romantic relationships and at what age that observed conflict becomes problematic for children. More specifically, the current study guides further research toward communication studies rather than psychology or sociology studies, a discipline also underrepresented in studying ACOD.

How and why parents communicate with their children is among the most important research scholars can examine. Given that people's perceptions are often based on what they hear, witness, or are told (i.e., how parents raise their children to believe or think), understanding the communication surrounding such an important topic – divorce – would be crucial to any further study. As exemplified in this study, conflict – whether consciously or subconsciously portrayed to children – was important in participants'

relationships. Several scholars have examined the ways in which thoughtful communication practices hurt or benefit children undergoing familial divorce or the shift to a blended family (Braithwaite, Doxey, Dowdle, & Fincham, 2016; DiVerniero, 2013; Gentry, 1997; Musick & Meier, 2010; Rodriguez, 2014), but few examine conflict and its effect on adult relationships. For example, a qualitative study which asks participants specific questions about how their parents address/ed conflict with their children, in what quantity conflict was visible (either intentionally or unintentionally) to children, and how divorce and marriage were talked about in the participants' homes may provide insightful additions to this topic. This is an excellent opportunity for further research.

Results for this study were surprising. With over 200 participants from various geographical locations and of all different ages, I certainly expected to find some differences between the key variables for ACOD and non-ACOD. Given that the results of our study were not what I expected and are not statistically significant, I hope that future researchers can use our foundational information to make progress in understanding ACOD. Furthermore, I hope future researchers take my results, limitations, and suggestions into consideration when choosing to pursue communication research. I firmly believe this research will be helpful in aiding ACOD and families undergoing divorce. Below, I acknowledge the limitations of the current study and suggestions for future researchers interested in this topic.

### **Limitations**

Given the nature of this study and the time frame with which it had to be completed, there were several unavoidable assumptions in this study. Because the survey was completed by participants via an online method (Qualtrics), it was assumed that the

participants followed instructions and were completely honest in their answers to the questions in the survey. Additionally, since I could not be present and directly monitor each participant while s/he completed his/her survey, it was assumed that the participants completed the survey alone in a quiet, uninterrupted space and consulted no one else while finishing.

The current study has several strengths. In light of several missing data problems, this study collected unique data on ACOD and children of intact families in ways that have not been done before. Such unique research includes information about the age at which the participant experienced divorce, comments about the communication used in the participants' households to discuss divorce and marriage, and participants' current perspectives on their romantic relationships as legal adults. I did not ask the geographic location of participants in the survey, but Qualtrics provided a map which indicated responses in Alabama, Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee – a wide range for the sample size for this research. Such a strength, I recognize, is also a limitation given that these states are predominantly southeastern (with the exception of Kansas). This study would have been stronger had it been able to include participants from further west and further north thus providing better generalizability across the United States.

There were several limitations with this study which should be considered when analyzing my results. Though I was pleased with the number of survey respondents for this study, I recognize that a sample size of this caliber still cannot precisely represent the entire population, nor can it account for all the discrepancies among household differences or backgrounds. Only 18% of our sample size were adult children of divorce – thus, our sample may be systematically different from the broader population which

may have contributed to a set of findings that differ from those obtained by other researchers.

Another limitation I would like to highlight is the use of the researchers' network for respondents for this study. Because the researchers were all from Wake Forest University, the majority of advertisement for this study was provided via Wake Forest networks and Wake Forest students' snowball sampling. This likely resulted in an unintentional cluster sample and selection bias given that many of the voluntary participants knew the nature of my study and my reasons for conducting such research. With a cluster and selection-bias sample comes the majority of college-aged students (18-22), which likely contributed to the inconsistency of this study to previously conducted studies related to this topic. This is a limitation that can be overcome by intentional geographic targeting to encompass participants from all over the country with a variety of social status, economic status, and otherwise.

### **Additional Considerations**

There is something to be said about only researching individuals already in a relationship. Perhaps by surveying individuals not in a relationship, I would have found information about why they may not be in a relationship, why they chose to end their last one if applicable, and what they think about potentially creating a relationship in the future. For example, a single individual who has been in a long-term relationship earlier in his/her life may perceive future relationships differently based on past expectations and memories of their parents' marriage. Our average satisfaction level among respondents – both ACOD and non-ACOD was very high ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), which says something

about people currently *in* relationships and why they have chosen to maintain them. I think these perspectives should be explored.

Finally, our respondents are overwhelmingly white, which could have vastly altered our research results. Limits of having a primarily white sample were not diversified via economic status, as mentioned above, but could be overcome in future studies by being more intentional with participant recruitment. Had the research team had more time to complete this study, I would have ensured that we took this important aspect of divorce research into account.

The scope of this study included people ages 18 or older in heterosexual romantic relationships. The research team chose to narrow this scope of study for several reasons – largely related to time constraints and commitment to a thorough project conducted in a timely manner: two semesters. As mentioned above, because of the researchers' network, geographic area was limited as well as sample size. Because this study is still part of the beginning of much more research on ACOD to come, I chose not to broaden the study for fear of losing valuable attention to results for ACOD and are thus content with the results obtained.

### **For Future Research**

This study provides groundwork for many future study implications. An interesting construct to add would be economic status, via a question regarding household income. I recognize that our data is limited in analyzing outside factors such as household income, education, and geographic location and thus encourage future researchers to include and consider these variables in their studies. Furthermore, as mentioned in the “Limitations” section of this paper, I recognize that a predominantly white sample poses

some crucial restrictions on our data. For future researchers, I suggest being intentional about recruiting minorities to participate so that the data on these groups is more reliable and minority families are better represented. Such information would more clearly answer hypotheses regarding divorced families and may also provide insight to the types of families most frequently getting divorced, etc. Additionally, having a generalizable sample is important for conducting research of any kind and I hope future researchers can attempt to properly represent American families as a whole.

One of our limitations, as mentioned above, was not surveying individuals not in a relationship. Perhaps the individuals not in relationships have interesting reasons for why this is so, what they think about their past relationships (if any), and what they are looking for in a current relationship. I recommend that future researchers explore this area of people to find out their perspectives on romantic relationships from the outside. These individuals have likely at least had some sort of a relationship and may be able to better explain why it didn't work out and what they hope to accomplish with the next relationship. As also mentioned previously, our satisfaction level was very high among respondents ( $M = 6.20$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), so considering individuals not currently in a romantic relationship may generalize satisfaction and make it more representative of a body of people – whether ACOD or non-ACOD.

I intentionally asked for demographics of the participants' parents in order to be able to draw conclusions about each of our participants and the variance in data results. However, I did not ask about the participants' partners' demographics, which may have been helpful. In doing so, future researchers may be able to account for differences in relational satisfaction according to other external complications such as race, age,

distance, etc. Another interesting question to add would be religious background, providing insight to the current cohabitation statistics and people who may be getting married or staying married because of religious reasons. I encourage researchers to consider this as well. The addition of such considerations could lead to a phenomenal study – one that would pioneer data of its kind for years to come.

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**Table 1***Participant Relationship Status*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Dating	27	10.2
In a Relationship	64	24.1
In a Serious Relationship	87	32.7
Engaged	4	1.5
Married	79	29.7
Divorced and Remarried	3	1.1
Other	2	0.8

**Table 2***Participants' Mother's Relationship Status*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cohabiting	2	0.8
Married	197	74.1
Divorced	24	9.0
Divorced and Remarried	16	6.0
Other	27	10.2

**Table 3***Participants' Father's Relationship Status*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Cohabiting	1	0.4
Married	202	75.9
Divorced	14	5.3
Divorced and Remarried	27	10.2
Other	22	8.3

**Table 4***Age at Time of Parents' Divorce*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
5 or younger	6	2.3
5-10 years old	6	2.3
10-13 years old	5	1.9
14-18 years old	7	2.6
18-22 years old	4	1.5
Older than 22	2	.8

The unaccounted for 88.7% of the age at time of divorce was missing data from the respondents.

**Table 5***Frequency of Observed Conflict Prior to Divorce*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Never	6	2.3
Rarely	6	2.3
Sometimes	6	2.3
Frequently	6	2.3
Most of the Time	3	1.1
Always	2	.8

The unaccounted for 88.7% of the age at time of divorce was missing data from the respondents.

**Table 6***Frequency of Observed Conflict in Parents' Marriage*

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Never	42	15.8
Rarely	43	16.2
Sometimes	42	15.8
Frequently	26	9.8
Most of the Time	6	2.3
Always	2	.8

The unaccounted for 39.5% of the age at time of divorce was missing data from the respondents.

**Table 7***Correlations amongst Study Variables*

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V13	V14
V1: Relationship Status														
V2: Cohabitation	-.731**													
V3: Num. of Relationships	.346**	-.359**												
V4: Age at time of Div.	0.061	-0.022	0.159											
V5: Observed Conf. Prior to Divorce	-0.083	-0.274	-0.075	.589**										
V6: Current Observed Conflict	.342**	-.296**	.290**	1.000**	1.000**									
V7: Participant Sex	-0.014	-0.001	-0.111	-0.130	0.038	0.134								
V8: Participant Age	-.198**	.140*	-0.087	0.051	.452*	0.037	-0.070							
V9: Participant Race	-0.021	0.095	0.003	-0.013	-0.064	0.052	0.055	-0.086						
V10: Commitment Level	-.483**	.441**	-0.080	0.127	-0.125	-0.093	-.139*	.190**	-0.075					
V11: Satisfaction level	-.246**	.178**	0.058	0.225	-0.067	0.062	-0.032	0.019	-0.063	.614**				
V12: Quality of Alternatives	.240**	-.310**	0.019	0.037	0.153	-0.004	.161*	-0.039	0.011	-.589**	-.407**			
V13: Investment Size	-.451**	.426**	-0.088	0.161	-0.106	-0.082	0.051	-0.041	0.081	.569**	.469**	-.384**		
V14: Susceptibility to Alternatives	-0.049	0.053	0.026	-0.214	-0.242	0.027	.150*	-0.037	0.064	-.207**	-.357**	.235**	-.142*	
V15: Divorce Status	.205**	-.173**	0.052	. <sup>c</sup>	. <sup>c</sup>	0.035	.132*	-0.051	0.030	-0.089	0.002	0.051	-0.075	0.007

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

c. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

**Table 8***Differences in Variables between Groups*

	Mean ACOD	Mean non-ACOD	<i>t</i>	p
Commitment	6.42	6.15	1.71	0.30
Satisfaction	6.29	6.18	0.82	0.53
Alternatives	5.22	4.97	-0.91	0.30
Investment	5.99	5.81	1.20	0.49
Susc. to Alternatives	5.94	5.88	-0.71	0.14

## Appendix 1 Informed Consent

### *Project Title: ACOD: Perceptions of Romantic Relationships*

#### **Study Description**

This is an online research study being conducted by researchers at Wake Forest University. The purpose of this study is to assess the effects of divorce on a person's perceptions of romantic relationships into adulthood. You do not have to be a child of divorce to participate. In this study, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your current romantic relationship. The surveys will be collected online through a program called Qualtrics. The research is for academic purposes. Survey completion takes approximately 15 minutes.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may discontinue your participation at any time by closing your browser window without penalty. Any responses entered up to that point will be deleted. You may also choose to not answer any question(s) you do not wish to for any reason by leaving the response box for the question(s) blank.

#### **Possible Risks and Benefits**

We do not anticipate any risk in your participating; however, because the surveys ask you to think about your current relationships and the relationships of your parents, you may feel uncomfortable. The risks from participating in this study are not more than would be encountered in everyday life.

While we cannot promise you any direct benefit from your participation in the study, the information gathered from the study will help us learn more about interpersonal communication, specifically related to adult children of divorce and their perceptions of romantic relationships.

#### **Confidentiality/Anonymity**

The research team will take precautions to protect the confidentiality of your information, including collecting no *clearly* identifying information. The study will, however, ask for your gender, age, and relationship status. If you do not feel comfortable giving this information given the research's sample – which largely consists of the researcher's personal network – please skip these questions or do not participate in the study.

Please note that while in transmission on the internet, your responses may not be entirely secure. Your survey data will be stored on a secure server maintained by Qualtrics. In this data file, your data will not be linked to your identity in any way.

The downloaded survey data will be kept in a secure location. Only authorized study team members will have access to the research records and passwords for office computers and networks will be protected. When research data are no longer scientifically useful, they will be destroyed. The information obtained from this study will be used for research purposes only.

You have the right to ask questions at any time. Contact Corey Washburn at 336-758-4691 or [washcj12@wfu.edu](mailto:washcj12@wfu.edu) with questions, complaints, or concerns about this research. You can also call this number if you feel you have been harmed as a result of your participation in this research study. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 335-758-5888.

We encourage you to print or save a copy of this page for future reference.

### **Electronic Consent**

By clicking “I agree” at the bottom of this page, you are indicating that you are at least 18 years old, have read this document in its entirety, and are willing to participate in this research project. When you click “I agree,” you will advance to the survey.

If you do not wish to participate, please close your browser window now.

**Appendix 2 ACOD: Romantic Relationships Survey**

Q23 What is your current relationship status?

- Single (1)
- Dating (2)
- In a relationship (3)
- In a serious relationship (4)
- Engaged (5)
- Married (6)
- Separated (7)
- Divorced (8)
- Divorced and Dating (9)
- Divorced and Remarried (10)
- Other: Please specify (11) \_\_\_\_\_

Q24 Do you currently live with your partner?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q30 What is the sex of your partner?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other: Please specify (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q25 What is your mom's relationship status?

- Cohabiting (1)
- Dating - no prior marriage (2)
- Married (3)
- Divorced (4)
- Divorced and Remarried (8)
- Other: Please specify (7) \_\_\_\_\_

Q26 What is your dad's relationship status?

- Cohabiting (1)
- Dating - no prior marriage (2)
- Married (3)
- Divorced (4)
- Divorced and Remarried (6)
- Other: Please specify (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Q1 For the following questions, please consider your current relationship.











Q6 How many relationships have you had prior to your current relationship? (Do not include your current relationship in this number).

- 0 (1)
- 1-3 (2)
- 4-8 (3)
- 9-11 (4)
- 12-15 (5)
- More than 15 relationships (6)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q7 How old were you at the time of your parents' divorce?

- 5 or younger (1)
- 5-10 years old (2)
- 10-13 years old (3)
- 14-18 years old (4)
- 18-22 years old (5)
- Older than 22 (6)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q8 Were you aware of any conflict prior to or leading up to your parents' divorce? Please be as descriptive as possible.

Display This Question:

If Did your parents discuss their divorce before the divorce was finalized? Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Married Is Selected

Q9 Have you seen or are you aware of any conflict in your parents' marriage? Please be as descriptive as possible.

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q10 In what quantity do you remember this conflict?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Frequently (4)
- About half the time (5)
- Most of the time (6)
- Always (7)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Married Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Married Is Selected

Q11 In what quantity is this conflict?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Frequently (4)
- About half the time (5)
- Most of the time (6)
- Always (7)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q12 Did your parents ever discuss their marital issues with you?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Married Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Married Is Selected

Q13 Do your parents ever discuss their marital issues with you?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q14 Did your parents ever discuss their divorce with you?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If Did your parents ever discuss their divorce with you? Yes Is Selected

Q27 How so?

Display This Question:

If What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced Is Selected

Or What is your mom's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Or What is your dad's relationship status? Divorced and Remarried Is Selected

Q15 Did your parents discuss their divorce before the divorce was finalized?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Display This Question:

If Did your parents discuss their divorce before the divorce was finalized? Yes Is Selected

Q28 How so?

Q16 Please select your sex.

Male (1)

Female (2)

Other: Please specify (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q31 What is your mom's sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other: Please specify (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q32 What is your dad's sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Other: Please specify (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Q17 What is your age?

- Under 18 (1)
- 18-22 (2)
- 23-30 (3)
- 31-44 (4)
- 45 - 54 (5)
- 55 - 64 (6)
- 65 - 74 (7)
- 75 - 84 (8)
- 85 or older (9)

Q18 What is your racial background?

- White (1)
- Black (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Hispanic/Latino (5)
- Other: Please specify (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Q19 What is your mother's age?

\_\_\_\_\_ Age in Years (1)

Q20 What is your father's age?

\_\_\_\_\_ Age in Years (1)

Q21 What is your mother's racial background?

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Hispanic/Latino (5)
- Other (6)

Q22 What is your father's racial background?

- White (1)
- Black or African American (2)
- American Indian or Alaska Native (3)
- Asian (4)
- Hispanic/Latino (5)
- Other (6)

Q29 If you would like to elaborate on any of the questions addressed in this survey, please do so in as much detail as you like.

**Corey J. Washburn**  
*Curriculum Vitae*

**EDUCATION**

*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC*

Master of Arts in Communication, Specialization: Interpersonal Communication, May 2017

Thesis: "Adult Children of Divorce: Explaining Romantic Relationships into Adulthood"  
GPA: 3.9

*Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC*

Bachelor of Arts in English, minors in Communication and Entrepreneurship, May 2016  
GPA: 3.4

**RESEARCH INTERESTS**

Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication, Corporate Communication,  
Parental Communication, Divorce and Marriage Communication