

# Parents' Discord and Divorce, Parent-Child Relationships and Subjective Well-Being in Early Adulthood: Is Feeling Close to Two Parents Always Better than Feeling Close to One?

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*We assessed the associations between parents' marital discord and divorce, patterns of parent-child relationships, and adult children's subjective well-being. Parental divorce and marital conflict appeared to increase the odds that children were close to neither parent in adulthood. Parental divorce (but not marital conflict) appeared to increase the odds that children were close to one parent only. Drawing on parental resources and balance perspectives, we tested competing hypotheses about parent-child relationships and offspring subjective well-being. Offspring had the highest level of well-being when they grew up in a low-conflict married family and were close to both parents. In cases of divorce and high levels of marital conflict, however, children were no better off if they were close to both parents than to one parent only.*

During the past three decades, studies have shown that children with divorced parents have an elevated risk of experiencing a variety of problems in early adulthood, including low socioeconomic attainment, weak ties with parents, symptoms of depression and relationship instability. This topic has been of interest to social scientists from a variety of disciplines, including demography (Cherlin 1999), family sociology (Booth and Amato 2001), education (Pong, Dronkers and Hampden-Thompson 2003), criminology (Thornberry et al. 1999), economics (Haveman 1994) and child development (Emery 1999). Similarly, studies suggest that exposure to chronic, overt, unresolved conflict between parents, even in the absence of divorce, increases the risk of comparable long-term problems for children (Amato and Booth 1997; Emery 1982). Of course, many children who experience divorce or grow up with discordant parents do not develop serious problems in adulthood. Nevertheless, these findings have been replicated so frequently that additional research on the processes that link parents' marital distress and offspring's long-term outcomes is clearly warranted.

This research focuses on two child outcomes: emotional closeness to parents and subjective well-being. Our first goal is to estimate the effects of divorce and marital conflict on parent-child relationships among young adults. We go beyond prior studies, however, by focusing on the mother-father-child triad. That is, we consider the effects of divorce and marital conflict, not on each parent-child relationship separately, but on the closeness of children to both parents. Specifically, we test whether parental divorce and marital discord increase the

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likelihood of a pattern in which children are emotionally close to one parent but not the other.

The second goal is to test whether offspring in divorced or discordant families have better subjective well-being when they are close to both parents or to one parent only. Most scholars believe that mother-child and father-child relationships are valuable resources for children. Hence, having close relationships with both parents should be the optimal situation to ensure children's positive adjustment and well-being. As we describe below, however, if the parents' relationship is strained, children may have difficulty feeling emotionally close to both parents without simultaneously feeling disloyal to each. Offspring who feel distressed in such situations may find it easier to side with one parent and distance themselves emotionally from the other. From this perspective, the psychological cost of being divided between two feuding parents may outweigh the benefits of being close to both parents.

The sample of young adults in this study grew up in a period (the 1980s) in which the divorce rate had reached its peak. Furthermore, these respondents experienced their early adult years at a time when offspring are relying on parents for economic and emotional assistance for increasingly extended periods (Furstenberg 2000). For these reasons, the focus of this study – the impact of parents' marital discord and divorce on children's relations with parents and subjective well-being – is particularly relevant to this sample.

## Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

### *Parent-Child Relationships*

One of the key assumptions of family systems theory (Minuchin 1974) is that all parts of the family system are interconnected. According to this perspective, problems in one particular subsystem, such as the mother-father dyad, are not confined to that relationship and have the potential to affect other sub-systems, such as parent-child relationships. This spillover dynamic (Erel and Burman 1995; Repetti 1989), in which the mood, affect, or behavior in one setting is transferred to another setting, predicts weaker parent-child ties in families in which parents are divorced or have high levels of discord.

An accumulation of research provides evidence of spillover and shows a clear link between the quality of the relationship that parents have with each other and the quality of the relationship that children have with each parent. In their review of 68 studies, Erel and Burman (1995) noted that when parents have a harmonious marital relationship, children tend to be emotionally close to parents. Conversely, when parents have a discordant marital relationship, children are more likely to be emotionally distant from parents.

Most of these studies, however, have focused on one parent-child relationship at a time and have not considered the possibility that a family relationship pattern may develop in which offspring are emotionally close to one parent but emotionally distant from the other, especially in martially-distressed families. In the present study, we refer to this pattern as *incongruent parent-child closeness*.

Detecting such patterns requires that researchers consider the mother-father, mother-child and father-child relationship simultaneously. The few studies that have used this strategy have found that a pattern of incongruent parent-child closeness is common in married-couple families marked by high levels of marital tension (Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine and Volling 1991; Cummings and O'Reilly 1997; Peterson and Zill 1986; Rossi and Rossi 1990).

Being close to one parent only may be especially prevalent in postdivorce families. Compared with children in married families, children with divorced parents are more likely to have poor quality relationships with mothers and fathers (Amato and Booth 1997). In cases of divorce, however, the family system may become fractured or may become two separate systems (Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch 1996), thus increasing the possibility of inconsistency across family dyads. Moreover, the consequences of divorce tend to be particularly strong for the father-child relationship – especially for daughters (Amato and Booth 1997). This occurs because mother-child relationships tend to be closer than father-child relationships in general (Rossi and Rossi 1990) and because mothers usually have physical custody of children after divorce. Buchanan, et al. (1996) reported that adolescents in divorced families, especially daughters, tended to be close to one parent only – usually the mother. Similarly, Amato and Booth (1997) reported that when divorce occurred during offspring's adolescence, young adult women tended to have weak ties to their fathers and strong ties to their mothers. Postdivorce families, therefore, may be a particularly likely context for incongruent parent-child relationships.

Almost all of the research in this area has focused on children and adolescence. There is evidence, however, that the quality of early parent-child relationships tends to persist into young adulthood (Amato and Sobolewski 2001). These considerations lead to several hypotheses. Although other studies have supported the first hypothesis, it serves as a starting point for our work.

*H1: Marital conflict and divorce when children are growing up weakens the emotional bonds between parents and children in early adulthood.*

We also formulated two hypotheses specifically about patterns of incongruent parent-child closeness in early adulthood.

*H2: Marital conflict and divorce when children are growing up is associated with a heightened likelihood of incongruent parent-child closeness in early adulthood.*

*H3: When there is a pattern of incongruent parent-child closeness, children are more likely to be close to their mothers only than to their fathers only, and this is especially true for daughters.*

## **Children's Subjective Well-Being**

### ***Parental Resources***

Coleman's work on family social capital is particularly relevant for understanding how parents serve as resources for children. According to Coleman, family social capital lies in the strength of the relationships between parents and children. Close relationships, in turn, give children access to parents' personal and material resources (1988, 1990).

Family social capital has meaningful consequences for child outcomes, as evidenced by a wealth of research connecting positive parent-child relationships to children's well-being. The quality of parent-child relationships has been linked with children's behavior problems, psychological adjustment, subjective well-being, educational achievement and ties to other kin (Amato 1998; Belsky, et al. 1991; Fagen, et al. 1996; Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb 2000; Peterson and Zill 1986). Parent-child relationships continue to be important for offspring as they enter adulthood (Amato and Booth 1997; Rossi and Rossi 1990). Furthermore, current cohorts of young adults are relying on parents for emotional and economic assistance for an extended period of time, which suggests the continued relevance of parent-child relationships beyond adolescence (Furstenberg 2000).

Most family scholars assume that fathers and mothers make independent contributions to their children's development and general well-being (Marsiglio, Amato, Day and Lamb 2000). Although children's relationships with one or both parents may be compromised in divorced or single-parent families, an implicit assumption of most researchers is that if parents' social capital is accessible, it is beneficial. Consequently, positive parent-child relationships should contribute to offspring well-being irrespective of family structure or the quality of the relationship between parents. Across a broad range of family circumstances, offspring should benefit from having close relationships with mothers and fathers, and two close relationships are better than one.

### ***Balance Theory***

Close emotional ties to both parents, however, may not be advantageous in distressed marriages. Contrary to a parental resources perspective, balance theory (Heider 1958; Newcomb, et al. 1965) emphasizes the consistency of interpersonal relationships rather than their additive effect. If offspring maintain close ties to both parents, and if the relationship between the two parents is hostile or strained, then offspring are likely to experience a psychological dilemma – an aversive state of dissonance (Festinger 1957). Under these circumstances, trying to be loyal to both parents implies being disloyal to each. Buchanan, et al. (1996) referred to this situation as being "caught in the middle." According to balance theory, trying to remain close to two feuding parents involves an emotional cost that may outweigh the benefits of having two strong parent-child relationships. In such cases, taking sides may be less stressful than attempting to remain neutral.

Although only a few studies have tested this possibility, most have tended to support balance theory. For example, two studies found that children who had frequent contact with their nonresident father fared worse when their mother and father had a high-conflict relationship (Amato and Rezac 1994; Johnston 1994). Amato (1986) found that daughters who felt close to both married parents had an especially low level of self-esteem when their parents had an antagonistic relationship. Another study found that adolescents from divorced families reported the same level of subjective well-being whether they were close to one or both parents, which suggests that having positive bonds with two parents confers little additional benefit when parents do not have a positive relationship (Buchanan et al. 1996).

We draw on the parental resources and balance perspectives to test competing hypotheses about the advantages (and disadvantages) associated with different patterns of parent-child relationships. The parental resources model assumes that two close parent-child ties are better than one, irrespective of the nature of the interparental relationship. This perspective leads to the following hypothesis:

*H4: Irrespective of the quality and stability of the parents' marriage, children's subjective well-being is lowest when they are close to neither parent, intermediate when they are close to one parent only, and highest when they are close to both parents.*

In contrast, the balance perspective leads to the following hypothesis:

*H5: If parents have a positive relationship, children's subjective well-being is highest when they have a positive relationship with both parents. In contrast, if parents are divorced or have a high-conflict marriage, children's subjective well-being is higher when they are close to one parent only – a pattern of incongruent closeness – than to both parents. Put another way, the negative effects of divorce and marital conflict on children's subjective well-being are strongest when children are close to both parents.*

Note that the parental resources perspective and balance theory are in agreement when the mother-father, mother-child and father-child relationships are all distant. Almost all observers would agree that this situation seriously disadvantages children. Hence, we expect that children in these circumstances will have a relatively low level of subjective well-being.

## Method

### Sample

This study analyzes data from the study of Marital Instability over the Life Course, a 17-year longitudinal panel study (Booth, Amato, Johnson and Edwards 1998). The target population consisted of all married individuals in households in the

contiguous United States with a telephone, both spouses present and both spouses 55 years of age or less. In 1980, telephone interviewers used random digit dialing to select a sample of households and a second random procedure to determine whether to interview the husband or wife. After 20 call-backs, 17 percent of targeted individuals could not be reached. Of those individuals contacted, 78 percent gave complete interviews. The final sample consisted of 2,033 married persons (not couples). Compared to U.S. Census data, the sample was representative of married individuals in terms of age, race, household size, housing tenure, presence of children and region of the country. The sample was contacted again in 1983, 1988, 1992 and 1997, and additional interviews were conducted with 78 percent, 66 percent, 58 percent and 53 percent of the original respondents, respectively.

A sample of offspring of the main respondents was included as part of the 1992 and 1997 waves of data collection ( $N = 691$ ). To be eligible, offspring had to be 19 years of age or older at the time of the interview and have resided in the parental household in 1980. Eighty-seven percent of the parents in 1992 and 1997 with eligible offspring provided names and telephone numbers of children. Of those for whom names were available, 88 percent were interviewed, resulting in an overall completion rate of 77 percent. When parents had more than one eligible child, a random procedure was used to select the child for inclusion in the study. The analyses pooled data from 471 offspring interviewed in 1992 and 220 offspring interviewed for the first time in 1997. (This sample is comparable to the sample described in an earlier publication based on the same data set. For information about the sample, see Amato and Sobolewski 2001.)

We relied on Heckman's (1979) method to correct for attrition bias. We constructed a probit regression equation to predict parent attrition from the panel. Parents who dropped out of the study were more likely to be African American, younger or older than average, fathers, renters, poorly educated, married for fewer years, and living in the south. Marital discord and divorce were not significant predictors of attrition. Based on these variables, we calculated lambda, the estimated probability that parents would drop out of the panel. We also used probit analysis to predict failure to complete an offspring interview, given that parents remained in the sample through 1992 or 1997. We used both variables as controls in preliminary analyses of these data. These controls did not substantively alter the results, however, so we did not include them in the final models.

Because patterns of parent-child relationships in early adulthood were central variables in the analysis, we omitted 36 offspring (5 percent) with a deceased parent. Because our goal was to estimate the effects of parental divorce or discord in childhood on young adults' relations with parents and subjective well-being, we excluded 51 offspring (7 percent) who were older than 36 years of age in 1997. These offspring would have been older than 19 in 1980, the year the study began. The final sample included 604 offspring.

## Measures

We used the 1992 and 1997 waves of data for the offspring variables. Parent variables came from all waves from 1980 to either 1992 or 1997, depending on

when offspring were interviewed. (For information on the wording and coding for all scales, see Amato and Booth 1997.)

Parents' divorce status was obtained from the parent interviews. If parents divorced at any time prior to the offspring interview, they were counted as divorced ( $1 = \text{divorce or permanent separation}$ ,  $0 = \text{continuously married}$ ). Overall, 122 (20 percent) offspring in the sample experienced a parental divorce.

We relied on three scales to measure parents' marital discord. The first was a five-item measure of marital conflict. Items referred to the frequency and severity of fights over such things as child-care and the division of household labor ( $\alpha = .54$ ). The second scale was a 13-item measure of marital problems. Respondents were asked whether their marriage suffers from various problems including whether one (or both) partners spends money foolishly, is not home enough, has difficulty controlling anger, is moody, is jealous and drinks or uses drugs ( $\alpha = .78$ ). The number of reported problems served as the scale score. The third scale was a 13-item measure of divorce proneness, which included both cognition (thinking about divorce) as well as behavior (discussing the possibility of a divorce with spouse, friends or family members). The sum of the items served as the scale score ( $\alpha = .91$ .) Within each year, the correlation between these three scales ranged from .49 to .57 (all  $p < .001$ ; see Amato and Booth 1997 for details).

We standardized, equally weighted and averaged these scores within waves to create a single discord score for each period. We then averaged scores across waves to create a general marital discord score ( $\alpha = .82$ .) We included scores from all years in which offspring were no more than 19 years old and living with both parents. For example, offspring with continuously married parents who were 19 in 1997 had a marital discord score based on all waves of data from 1980 to 1997. Offspring who were 28 in 1997 would have been 19 in 1988, however, so their parents' marital discord score was the average of reports in 1980, 1983 and 1988. To simplify the analysis, we divided the marital discord scale into low and high groups. To establish a meaningful cutting point, we examined parents who divorced during the study, and we averaged their discord scores from all waves prior to marital dissolution. For example, if parents divorced in 1990, then we averaged their conflict scores in 1980, 1983 and 1988.

To create a high-conflict group, we selected never-divorced parents who had a mean level of discord greater than or equal to the mean level of discord among parents who later divorced. This cutting point corresponded to the 80th percentile on the conflict scale for the full sample. A total of 115 marriages fell into this category. Our strategy of treating conflict as a binary variable is consistent with a recent study by Beach, Fincham, Amir and Leonard (2005). Based on a taxometric analysis, they concluded that marital discord is a distinct state experienced by about 20 percent of couples. Interestingly, their cutting point (20 percent high-conflict vs. 80 percent low-conflict) is essentially identical to ours.

We measured parent-child relationships with offspring's ratings of their mothers and fathers on the following item: "Overall, how close do you feel to your mother/father?" Response options were 1 = *not very close*, 2 = *somewhat close*, and 3 = *very close*.

Offspring's subjective well-being was assessed using four scales. The first was the Rosenberg (1965) measure of self-esteem ( $\alpha = .77$ ), which included agreement with such statements as "I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others." The second was the Langner (1962) measure of distress symptoms ( $\alpha = .73$ ), which assessed physical symptoms, such as headaches or nervous stomach, and emotional symptoms such as feeling isolated and lonely. A seven-item scale measured satisfaction with various aspects of life, including job, home, friends and neighborhood ( $\alpha = .65$ ). The fourth measure was a single item that measured overall happiness with life (1 = *not very happy*, 2 = *pretty happy*, and 3 = *very happy*).

Because they could be related to parent-child relationships as well as parental discord and divorce, we controlled for offspring age in years ( $M = 23.6$ ,  $SD = 3.8$ ), gender (1 = *female* (50 percent), 0 = *male*), race (0 = *White*, 91 percent, 1 = *non-White*), and whether they lived with at least one of their parents in the year they were interviewed (1 = *yes* (31 percent), 0 = *no*). We also controlled for parents' mean years of education ( $M = 13.9$ ,  $SD = 2.2$ ).

For the variables used in our models, missing data were not a notable problem. The maximum amount of missing data on any variable was 2 percent, and we used the expectation maximization (EM) procedure to impute missing values in these cases.

## Results

### *Descriptive Results*

Table 1 shows a cross tabulation of young adults' responses to the two questions on emotional closeness to mothers and fathers. Total percentages are shown in the cells. Slightly more than one third of the sample (36 percent) reported being *very close* to both parents, and only a small number (3 percent) reported being *not very close* to both parents. The marginal totals indicate that the majority of respondents (66 percent) reported being *very close* to their mothers, and only 6 percent reported being *not very close* to their mothers. The corresponding levels of closeness were lower for fathers: 43 percent of respondents reported being *very close* to their fathers and 15 percent reported being *not very close* to their fathers. Ratings of closeness to mothers and fathers were positively associated, with the Spearman rank-order correlations between the two ratings being .35 ( $p < .001$ ). This correlation reveals that reports of closeness to mothers and fathers were only moderately associated.

Because few offspring reported being *very close* to their fathers only, we combined them with offspring who reported being *very close* to their mothers only. This decision resulted in three groups: 36 percent of young adults felt *very close* to both parents, 37 percent felt *very close* to one parent only (usually the mother), and 28 percent felt *very close* to neither parent. (Although there are good reasons to expect different outcomes for offspring who are close to their mother rather than their father, the small number of cases for fathers made it difficult to distinguish between these two groups in most analyses.) To simplify the presentation of later results, we use the term "feeling close" to refer to



Table 1: Crosstabulation of Young Adults' Ratings of Feeling Close to Mothers and Fathers

% Close to fathers	% Close to Mothers			Total
	Very close	Somewhat close	Not very close	
Very close	36	6	1	43
Somewhat close	23	18	2	43
Not very close	7	5	3	15
Total	66	29	6	100

Note: Values are total table percentages.

Sample size = 604.

$\chi^2 = 96.72$  ( $df = 4$ ),  $p < .001$ .

offspring who felt *very close* to one or both parents. Offspring who reported feeling *somewhat close* or *not very close* were considered to be "not close" to that parent.

### Marital Conflict, Divorce and Closeness to Parents

The next step in the analysis examined the associations between parents' marital conflict, divorce and offspring's closeness to parents. Table 2 shows the results of a multinomial regression analysis in which closeness to parents was regressed on parents' marital conflict and divorce, along with the control variables. Results are shown for offspring who were close to one parent only or not close to either parent. Offspring who were close to both parents served as the reference group. This analysis revealed that parental divorce was associated with significantly higher odds of feeling close to neither parent or to one parent only, relative to offspring who grew up with two continuously married parents in a low-conflict marriage. Marital conflict was associated with significantly higher odds of feeling close to neither parent, although it was not related to feeling close to one parent only. A second analysis (not shown), which treated offspring with

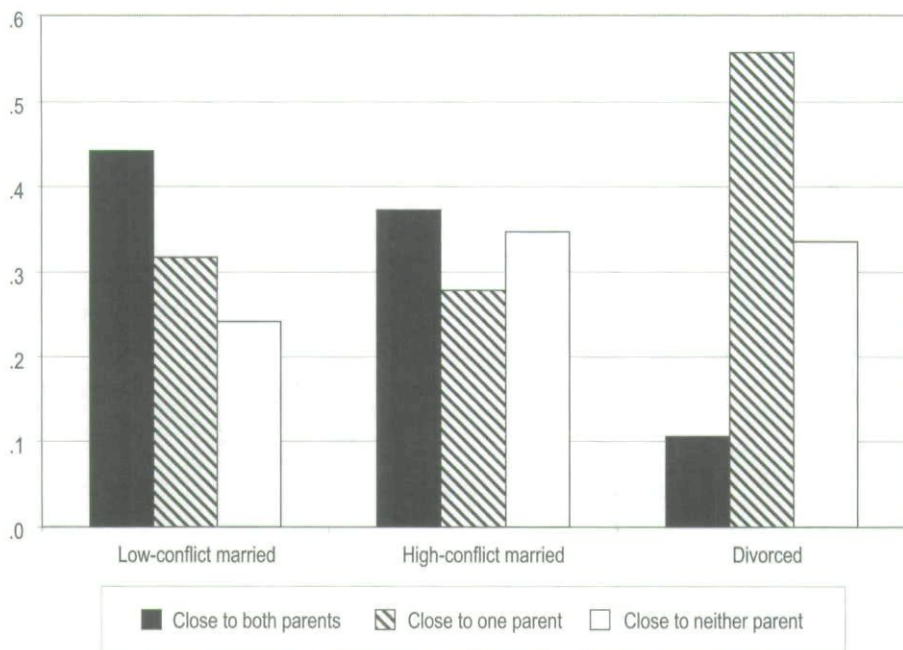
Table 2: Multinomial Logistic Regression of Closeness to Parents on Parents' Divorce and Marital Discord

Variables	Close to Neither Parent			Close to one parent only		
	B	(SE)	Exp(B)	B	(SE)	Exp(B)
Parental divorce	1.80***	(.35)	6.02	1.99***	(.33)	7.34
High-conflict marriage	.55*	(.26)	1.73	.06	(.27)	1.06
Low-conflict marriage	—	—	—	—	—	—
Offspring age	.02	(.03)	1.02	.01	(.02)	1.01
Offspring female	-.55*	(.24)	.58	.20	(.22)	1.22
Offspring nonwhite	.09	(.39)	1.09	.23	(.36)	1.26
Offspring lives with parents	.25	(.25)	1.28	-.04	(.24)	.96
Parents' education	.00	(.05)	1.00	-.03	(.05)	.97
Intercept	-1.16	(1.04)		-.19	(.98)	

Note: Sample size = 604. "Close to both parents" is the excluded category of the dependent variable.  $\Pi^2 = 71.33$  ( $df = 14$ )  $p < .001$

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . (two tailed)

Figure 1. Estimated Probability of Parent-Child Relationship Pattern by Family of Origin Type



divorced parents as the omitted category, revealed that offspring with married, high-conflict parents were less likely than those with divorced parents to be close to one parent only ( $b = -1.908$ ,  $SE = .389$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Because the results of multinomial regression analysis are often difficult to interpret, we used the regression equations in Table 2 to calculate the predicted probability of feeling close to parents for offspring with parents in low-conflict marriages, parents in high-conflict marriages, and divorced parents. (All control variables were set at their means to calculate the probabilities.) These results, shown in Figure 1, indicate that offspring who grew up with continuously married parents had a higher probability of feeling close to neither parent if their parents had a high rather than a low level of conflict. Moreover, offspring with divorced parents (compared with offspring with married parents with low-conflict relationships) had a greater probability of feeling close to neither parent and an especially high probability of feeling close to one parent only. Finally, as noted above, offspring with divorced parents were more likely than those with married, high-conflict parents to be close to one parent only.

How do the results presented thus far inform our hypotheses? Hypothesis 1, which stated that marital conflict and divorce are associated with weaker emotional ties between children and parents, was supported. As Table 2 and Figure 1 indicate, marital conflict and divorce both appeared to lower the odds that children were close to both parents. Hypothesis 2, which stated that conflict and divorce were associated with a higher likelihood of incongruent parent-child closeness, was only partly supported. Parental divorce – but not marital conflict – was associated with an elevated likelihood of being close to one parent only.

The third hypothesis stated that when a pattern of incongruent parent-child closeness exists, children, especially daughters, are more likely to be close to their mothers than to their fathers. To test this, we conducted a multinomial logistic regression in which the dependent variable had four values: close to neither parent, close to father only, close to mother only, and close to both parents, with those who were close to mother only serving as the reference group. This analysis (not shown), which included all control variables, revealed that parental divorce was associated with a higher likelihood of being close to mother only than any other pattern, including being close to father only ( $p < .01$ ). Consistent with our main analysis, however, parents' marital conflict was not associated with an increased likelihood of incongruent closeness with mothers or fathers. With respect to differences by offspring gender, the estimated effects of parental divorce and marital conflict were generally similar for sons and daughters. A significant interaction involving child gender, however, occurred for parental divorce ( $p < .05$ ). Divorce was associated with an increased likelihood that children of both genders were close to their mothers only, but the estimated effects were stronger for daughters than for sons. Consistent with hypothesis three, these results indicate that under conditions of marital distress (at least when a divorce occurs), offspring, especially daughters, are more likely to feel closer to their mothers than to their fathers.

### **Marital Conflict, Divorce and Children's Subjective Well-Being**

The results presented thus far suggest that parents' marital distress have implications for parent-child closeness patterns during offspring's early adult years. The next step focused on the links between these factors and offspring's subjective well-being. This analysis relied on structural equation modeling using the Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) software (Arbuckle 1997). This approach provided two advantages. First, it treated offspring's subjective well-being as a latent variable. Because measurement error was incorporated in the model, the analysis produced more accurate estimates of effect sizes. Second, it used multiple group models to understand how offspring's subjective well-being varied with family-of-origin type and the pattern of closeness to parents.

A measurement model was created for offspring's subjective well-being, based on the four indicators described earlier: life satisfaction, general happiness, distress symptoms and self-esteem. Confirmatory analysis revealed that all four indicators loaded significantly on a latent well-being factor, with loadings ranging from .52 to .65. The data fit the model reasonably well:  $\chi^2 = 5.74$ ,  $df = 2$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .06. Treating any individual indicator (or set of indicators) as a separate latent variable lowered the fit of the model to the data significantly. Consequently, a solution with one latent variable provided an optimal fit. (For details on the measurement model, see Amato and Sobolewski 2001.)

A preliminary analysis indicated that parental divorce and marital conflict were associated with comparatively low levels of subjective well-being. The  $b$  coefficients (based on a standardized version of the latent dependent variable) were  $-.38$  ( $p < .01$ ) and  $-.39$  ( $p < .01$ ) for divorce and marital conflict, respectively.

These coefficients can be interpreted as effect sizes. In other words, offspring with divorced parents or high-conflict parents scored nearly 40 percent of a standard deviation below offspring with two continuously married, low-conflict parents (the omitted comparison group). The analysis included parents' education and offspring's age, offspring's gender, offspring's race and whether offspring were living with parents as control variables. These results are consistent with prior studies showing that parents' marital conflict and divorce are associated with comparatively low levels of subjective well-being in adulthood (e.g., Amato and Booth 1997).

Associations between offspring's pattern of relationships with parents and offspring's subjective well-being were also examined. The *b* coefficients were  $-.54$  ( $p < .001$ ) for being close to only one parent and  $-.83$  ( $p < .001$ ) for being close to neither parent, respectively. In other words, offspring who were close to only one parent scored about one-half of a standard deviation below those who were close to both parents (the omitted comparison group), and offspring who were close to neither parent scored .83 of a standard deviation below offspring who were close to both parents. This result is consistent with prior studies showing that closeness to parents is related to offspring's subjective well-being in adulthood (e.g., Amato and Sobolewski 2001). These results do not indicate, however, if the pattern of closeness to parents *moderated* the estimated effects of divorce and marital conflict on offspring's subjective well-being.

To determine whether the pattern of parent-child relationships played a moderating role, this research employed multiple group models. These models assessed whether the pattern of parent-child relationships and family-of-origin type interacted in their association with offspring's subjective well-being. In one analysis, the subjective well-being means were constrained to be the same in all nine groups (three patterns of parent-child relationships by three family-of-origin types). In a second analysis, the means were allowed to vary by family-of-origin type and closeness to parents. The difference in chi-square values between the two analyses indicated that a model in which group means were allowed to vary fit the data substantially better than did a model in which group means

**Table 3: Latent Subjective Well-Being Means by Parents' Marital Conflict, Divorce and Emotional Closeness to Parents**

Closeness to parents	Family-of-origin type		
	Low-conflict married	High-conflict married	Divorced
Close to both parents	.71 <sub>a</sub>	.16 <sub>b</sub>	.08 <sub>b</sub>
Close to one parent only	.00 <sub>b</sub>	.06 <sub>b</sub>	.02 <sub>b</sub>
Close to neither parent	-.14 <sub>b,c</sub>	-.58 <sub>c</sub>	-.32 <sub>b,c</sub>

Note: Means with different subscripts are significantly different at  $p < .05$  (two-tailed). Means that share a common subscript are not significantly different. Subjective well-being has a standard deviation of 1. Control variables include parents' education, offspring's gender, offspring's age, offspring's race, and whether offspring live with parents.

$N = 604$  offspring.  $\chi^2 = 64.31$ ,  $df = 38$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03

were constrained to be the same ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 62.19$ ,  $\Delta df = 8$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result is equivalent to demonstrating a statistical interaction between the type variables.

Table 3 shows the latent subjective well-being means for all nine groups. To produce these values, the mean for one group (those with two continuously married parents who were close to one parent only) was arbitrarily fixed at zero and then the means for the other eight groups were calculated as deviations from zero. The significance of the difference between all means were determined in a series of analyses treating each group, one at a time, as the reference category. Each group's mean was set at zero, and then the significance of the difference between the other group means and the mean for the comparison group were calculated. In the table, means that did not differ significantly ( $p < .05$ ) share common subscripts, whereas means that differed significantly do not share common subscripts.

Hypothesis 4 (which was based on the parental resources perspective) stated that offspring have the highest level of well-being when they are close to both parents and the lowest level of well-being when they are close to neither parent, irrespective of family type. How do the data in Table 3 fit with this hypothesis? Offspring who grew up with continuously married parents in a low-conflict relationship (column 1) had a significantly higher level of well-being when they were close to both parents than when they were close to one parent only or close to neither parent. Although the mean for being close to neither parent was lower than the mean for being close to one parent only, this difference did not achieve statistical significance. When offspring grew up with two continuously married parents with a high-conflict relationship (column 2), offspring had the highest level of well-being if they were close to both parents, but the mean for this group did not differ significantly from the mean for offspring who were close to one parent only. Offspring who were close to neither parent, in contrast, scored significantly lower than did offspring in the other two groups. Finally, when parents were divorced (column 3), the mean level of well-being did not vary significantly with closeness to parents. These results are not consistent with the hypothesis that closeness to parents improves children's well-being, irrespective of family type.

Hypothesis 5, based on the balance perspective, assumed that the estimated effects of divorce and marital conflict are strongest when children are close to both parents. This aspect of the hypothesis was supported (row 1). Nevertheless, the central prediction, that offspring with divorced parents or high-conflict married parents have a higher level of subjective well-being if they are close to one parent rather than to both parents, was not supported. Instead, when parents had a high-conflict relationship (column 2) or were divorced (column 3), levels of offspring well-being were similar, irrespective of whether they were close to both parents or one parent only (row 1 vs. row 2).

Overall, the results did not provide consistent support for either the parental resources perspective or the balance perspective. Instead, the results in Table 3 indicate that offspring had the highest level of well-being when they were close to both parents and their parents had a low-conflict marriage. In fact, the mean for this group was significantly different from the means for *all* other groups. Clearly, this is the optimal arrangement for fostering the subjective well-being of youth.

Moreover, offspring who were close to neither parent and whose parents had a high-conflict relationship or were divorced had the lowest levels of well-being – levels that were significantly different from most other groups. This particular configuration would appear to be the least optimal arrangement for fostering the subjective well-being of youth. These results suggest that the estimated effects of parent-child closeness patterns on well-being vary across family types – an interpretation consistent with the statistical interaction noted earlier.

## Discussion

The findings from this study resonate with prior research on the links between marital discord, divorce and the quality of parent-child relationships. When parents divorce, or when their marital relationship is distressed, offspring are especially likely to report feeling emotionally distant from parents. The results of our study concur with a growing body of literature suggesting that circumstances in the family of origin have consequences for parent-child relationships that persist well into the early adult years (Amato and Booth 1997). This finding means that many youth from divorced or discordant homes experience the transition to adulthood without the support of two close parent-child ties.

The second hypothesis stated that marital conflict and divorce were associated with an increased likelihood of an incongruent parent-child closeness pattern. This hypothesis was supported, but only with respect to divorce. The fact that children from high-conflict families were no more likely than children from low-conflict families to have a pattern of incongruent closeness suggests that conflict between parents (and children's corresponding feelings of being caught in the middle) was not the primary explanation for an incongruent pattern. Instead, residency patterns probably contributed to the prevalence of this pattern (primarily involving mothers) in postdivorce families. Following marital dissolution, mothers typically have physical custody (Kelly 1994). In the present sample, 85 percent of offspring with divorced parents reported living primarily with their mothers following marital dissolution, and levels of father-child contact after divorce are often modest (see Amato and Sobolewski 2004 for a review). Moreover, many nonresident fathers act more like "visitors" than parents after divorce. The logistics of living in separate residences often lead fathers and children to have relationships that are primarily recreational in nature (Lamb 1999). Because these activities tend to be somewhat superficial, it is difficult for children and nonresident fathers to maintain deep and mutually-satisfying bonds. Consequently, it is not surprising that many young adults with divorced parents report being close to their mothers (with whom they lived throughout childhood) but not to their fathers.

Consistent with the third hypothesis, offspring (especially daughters) in an incongruent pattern were more likely to be close to mothers but not to fathers. Closeness to mother only was more common than closeness to father only in all types of families. When parents remained continuously married and had a low-conflict relationship, 72 percent of cases of incongruent closeness involved being close to mothers but not to fathers. The corresponding figure was 78 percent when parents remained continuously married and had a high-conflict relationship.

Similarly, 91 percent of all cases of incongruent closeness in postdivorce families were with mothers, which may reflect the fact that mothers typically have physical custody, as noted above. Although patterns of incongruent closeness that favored mothers was high across all types of families, the association between being close to mother only and family-of-origin type was statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 8.62$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Although these findings reflect a general tendency to be close to mothers rather than fathers, residential arrangements following divorce may make this outcome even more likely.

These findings also indicate that as long as parents remained married, there is a consistent tone to family relationships across various dyads. Although there were cases of incongruent closeness patterns among married-couple families, offspring with married parents tended to report similar ties to mothers and fathers. As Figure 1 indicates, when parents had a low-conflict marriage, the most common outcome was for offspring to report being close to both parents. In contrast, in discordant marriages, two weak parent-child relationships were more common. Rather than finding internal balance through one close parent-child relationship, these offspring were especially likely – relative to those in other family types – to report being close to neither parent. These results are generally consistent with the spillover literature, which finds robust evidence of a link between marital distress and weak parent-child ties (Erel and Burman 1995).

Using the parental resources and balance perspectives, competing hypotheses about parent-child relationships and offspring's subjective well-being were tested. Although patterns of parent-child relationships were related to offspring's subjective well-being, these associations were contingent on the nature of the parents' relationship. Consistent with the parental resources perspective, when parents were continuously and happily married, offspring had the highest level of well-being when they were emotionally close to both parents. Consistent with balance theory, however, the advantage of being close to both parents was less evident when parents were divorced or had a high level of marital conflict. Under these circumstances (and contrary to the parental resources perspective), offspring were no better off if they were close to both parents than if they were close to one parent only. In other words, marital discord and divorce appeared to negate the advantage of having two close parent-child ties. This finding is consistent with a prior study that reported the same finding among adolescents from divorced families (Buchanan, et al. 1996). Nevertheless, the findings were not entirely consistent with the balance perspective either. Because offspring in divorced and discordant families were no better off when they were close with one parent rather than two, the hypothesis that offspring who side with one parent are advantaged was not supported.

It appears that both perspectives are partly correct (and partly incorrect), and that a more accurate understanding of how parent-child closeness is related to children's psychological well-being needs to incorporate information on family type. Children in families marked by conflict or divorce face two risks. On the one hand, they can try to be close to both parents and have access to each parent's resources, yet risk feeling caught in the middle between feuding parents. On the other hand, they can be close to one parent only and avoid the stress of trying

to maintain loyalties to both parents, yet lose access to one parent's resources. The benefits and risks linked to each of these options might offset one another, leaving offspring with no net advantage in terms of subjective well-being. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that children in high-conflict families and divorced families had similar levels of well-being if they were close to both parents or to one parent only.

The finding that, following divorce, offspring with two close parent-child ties were no better off than were offspring with a close tie to one parent only may be unwelcome to policy makers concerned with encouraging postdivorce involvement from both parents. Most parents do not engage in cooperative co-parenting after a divorce—an arrangement that is optimal for offspring outcomes (Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan 1997). Offspring in this sample, however, experienced divorce at a time when few states offered educational classes for divorcing parents and when the role of nonresident fathers following divorce was ambiguous. A meta-analysis of the literature on nonresident fathers found that studies conducted in the 1990s were more likely than studies conducted in earlier decades to show positive associations between father involvement and children's well-being (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). It is possible, therefore, that more parents are doing a better job now than in the past of cooperating after marital dissolution. Correspondingly, nonresident fathers may be more effectively transmitting resources to their children. It remains for future research to assess these possibilities. Efforts to encourage post-divorce cooperative co-parenting should not be dismissed based on the findings of this study (see Sobolewski and King 2005).

The clearest finding from this research is that children's subjective well-being is highest when children are close to two continuously married parents who have a low-conflict relationship. Indeed, offspring in this group had a significantly higher level of well-being than did children in every other group. Overall, 43 percent of the young adults in our sample grew up in this type of family (the 95 percent confidence interval for this estimate is 39 percent to 47 percent). The apparent benefits of having close bonds with fathers as well as mothers supports the continued relevance of both parents as resources for youth as they make the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg 2000). The benefit of having close bonds with both parents, however, is apparent only if the parents have relatively little conflict in their relationship.

An advantage of this research is the use of parents' reports of marital conflict and divorce and offspring's reports of closeness to parents and subjective well-being, thus avoiding the problem of common method variance. Data on conflict and divorce were also collected prior to the collection of data on offspring outcomes, which means that these data were obtained in the correct causal order. Despite these advantages, however, this study contained several notable limitations. First, it was not possible to assess how changes in the independent variables (marital conflict and divorce) were associated with changes in the dependent variables (closeness to parents and subjective well-being). Second, it could not be determined from these data whether children's relationships with parents may have contributed to marital distress, or whether children's subjective well-



being influenced their closeness to parents. Future research should consider the possibility of reciprocal links between the interparental relationship, parent-child relationships and offspring well-being. Third, because there were no available measures of the relationship between parents following divorce, it could not be determined whether parents had a cooperative or hostile relationship following marital dissolution. In addition, the measure of closeness to parents was based on a single item. This item had strong face validity, but like most single-item measures, it undoubtedly contained a good deal of measurement error.

Another limitation is that the sample lacked the diversity necessary to explore ethnic variations in these patterns. Cultural and class differences have potential implications for parenting practices, marital quality and other family dynamics that might result in a different story than the one told here. Finally, these results are limited to a relatively young sample of offspring, with most being in their 20s. Future research on the causes and consequences of patterns of parent-child relationships should look further into the life course and consider important events and transitions that might influence these processes over time.

Despite these limitations, this study makes several contributions to the literature on family relationships. This research is one of the first to focus explicitly on patterns of parent-child relationships, as opposed to examining each parent-child relationship separately. This study found that marital conflict and divorce were both associated with an increased likelihood of being close to neither parent. In contrast, divorce, but not marital conflict, was associated with an increased likelihood of having a close relationship with only one parent, usually the mother. This study also found that when married parents had a low-conflict relationship, mothers and fathers made independent contributions to their children's subjective well-being. But when parents had a discordant relationship or were divorced, children were no better off if they were close to two parents rather than one. Perhaps most importantly, these data clearly demonstrate that young adults report the highest level of subjective well-being when they are raised by two continuously married parents with a low-conflict relationship. Unfortunately, less than half of all young adults (43 percent in our sample) grow up in this type of family. This finding highlights the importance of the quality as well as the stability of marriages, and should be of interest to policy makers concerned about the current state of marriage and its implications for children.

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