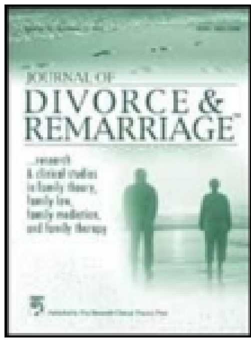

Journal of Divorce & Remarriage

Routledge
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ISSN: 1050-2556 (Print) 1540-4811 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjdr20

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To cite this article: Leanne Francia & Prudence Millear (2015) Mastery or Misery: Conflict Between Separated Parents a Psychological Burden for Children, Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 56:7, 551-568, DOI: 10.1080/10502556.2015.1080090

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2015.1080090

Published online: 29 Oct 2015.

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Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 56:551–568, 2015
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ISSN: 1050-2556 print/1540-4811 online
DOI: 10.1080/10502556.2015.1080090

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Mastery or Misery: Conflict Between Separated Parents a Psychological Burden for Children

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This qualitative research examined parenting, parental conflict, and parent–child relationships following separation in the context of Australian government reform in 2006 and subsequent changes to the Family Law Act (1975). Participants were English-speaking men and women, age 16 to 27 years. The research was guided by attachment theory and social conflict theory, and embedded in grounded theory. The Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict model emerged from the data. Two factors moderated the parent–child relationship: emotional security and responsive parenting. The research found it was not parental conflict, but how parental conflict was handled, that created the psychological burden for a child.

KEYWORDS child, divorce, parental conflict, parent–child relationship, shared parenting

Parental separation creates for a child a new kind of family. This qualitative research examined the complexities of parenting, parental conflict, and parent–child relationships following separation. The central focus was ongoing parental conflict and the potential impact on child development. This was in the context of the current legal framework in Australia established by changes to the Family Law Act (1975) (Cth) in 2006.

Following separation, a child's family does not evolve into a truncated version of the previously intact family, but often becomes a family that now consists of a complex web of old and new relationships (Fehlberg, Smyth, Maclean, & Roberts, 2011). Contemporary research suggests that a

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child experiencing parental separation benefits from quality parenting, parents who are cooperative, and having a say in his or her living arrangements (Cashmore et al., 2010; Fehlberg et al., 2011). In contrast, a child experiencing parental separation is at risk of harm where there is high conflict between parents, little quality parenting, little warmth or few boundaries in the child's emotional climate, and inadequate housing and income (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

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Theoretical origins for this research lay in attachment theory, being the experience of an early secure attachment as a foundation for later adaptation, accomplishment, and peer competence (Bretherton, 1992). Attachment is a universal human phenonema, and a biologically preprogramed basis to ensure survival (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). A major determinant of secure attachment is having a caregiver who is sensitive and emotionally responsive to a child's needs (Main, Hesse, & Hesse, 2011). Infant competence is therefore embedded within a quality caregiving system. In the midst of significant life experiences, such as parental separation, this fundamental system serves to protect a child from maladaption with parents emerging as a powerfully protective organism of their child's development (Rutter, 1987).

This protective mechanism comes with a caveat. Bowlby's (2007) research highlighted an interesting point, that of a child's ability to tolerate risk factors, such as the loss of a secure attachment, which can go undetected. This loss can affect a child of any age; however, when it is a young child, adults might be unaware of the anxiety a child experiences. Bowlby referred to learned dissociative behavior wherein a young child deactivates his or her attachment-seeking response. Bowlby proposed a sleeper effect, where earlier impacts on attachment needs influenced a child's future resilience and mental well-being leaving a child vulnerable to social and emotional problems in the future. Of additional concern is research suggesting that significant life experiences have the power to shift a parent–child attachment from one that is secure to one that is insecure. Thus attachment remains open to revision in the light of real-life experiences (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000).

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

In 2006, the Australian government introduced changes to the Family Law Act (1975) (Cth). These changes were part of an overhaul of the family law and child support systems. Since 2006, there has been an increase in judically determined shared care arrangements (from 4% prereform to 34%

postreform in the 5–12-year-old age group; Weston et al., 2011). The Family Court is required to give primary consideration to the benefit of a child having a meaningful relationship with both parents, together with the need to protect a child from physical and psychological harm (Family Law Act, Section 60CC, 1975).

Children in judicially determined shared care arrangements in Australia have reported being less happy with the arrangements than children in other arrangements. McIntosh and Chisholm (2008) found 43% of children in contინous shared care arrangements wanting more time with their maternal caregiver, compared with 7% of children in other parenting arrangements. McIntosh and Chisholm reported 28% of children in their study experienced emotional distress in the clinical range 4 months following judicial determination.

There often exists, in judically determined care arrangements, parents who are in conflict (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008). Litigation has a tendancy to heighten contentious parents in what has been described as "an unholy alliance between adversarial interventions and the conflictual characteristics of . . . certain individuals within these families" (Kelly, 2003, p. 48). Against a background of conflict and judicial determination, social conflict theory formed part of the framework of this research.

PARENTAL CONFLICT

Social conflict theory defines conflict as the disagreement about scarce resources, goals, and states (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993). Parental conflict following separation can lead to two types of competitive conflict, indirect and direct. Indirect competition consists of passive parental behaviors such as attempted triangulation of children in conflict, using children as spies, and denigrating the other parent in front of children. Direct competition involved overt behaviors by parents such as yelling, screaming, and attacking (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993).

Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) reported that where parental conflict cools over time, previously hostile parents were more likely to become disengaged rather than cooperative in their relationship. In contrast, where relationships between parents were initially detached, rather than hostile, these relationships become more cooperative over time.

THIS STUDY

There is a limited body of qualitative literature that reports on Australian children who are affected by parental separation and who live in shared care arrangements. There is also limited research on children's emotional

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development, self-concept, feelings, and ability to develop competence through exploration of their external environments in these situations (Beckmeyer, Coleman, & Ganong, 2014). This study aims to extend the literature in these areas, interviewing young adults about their experiences in separated families. The interviews explored the child's attachments, in the context of an emotionally secure environment following parental separation, and how parental conflict challenged their attachments and relationships with their parents, siblings, and stepfamilies, as they grew older. It was expected that where conflict between parents persisted, developmental outcomes and mental health of children would be negatively affected.

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METHOD

Participants

Participants ($N = 19$, 4 men, 15 women) were English speakers ranging in age from 16 to 27 years, including two sets of siblings (i.e., brother and sister pairs). Seventeen of the participants had experienced parental separation. Two of these participants did not know one of their biological parents and answered in the context of the separation of their biological parent and stepparent, as two participants had a biological parent who had died. The care arrangements postseparation generally remained stable, with changes being made when parents moved states or towns.

Living arrangements were fluid throughout the childhood years; for the majority of their childhood, participants fell into one of four categories: those who lived with a primary carer and spent one or more nights with the other parent ($n = 8$); those who spent their childhood in a parent-arranged week on–week off or year on–year arrangement, depending on where their parents were living ($n = 2$); those who spent their childhood in a court-ordered arrangement ($n = 5$); and those who grew up in changeable parent-arranged arrangements ($n = 2$). Twelve participants were 12 years old or younger and 5 participants were 13 years old or older when their parents separated. The data from 17 participants formed part of the research. Of the 17 participants, 13 participants experienced ongoing parental conflict. The remaining 4 participants reported conflict that lasted for a short period or no parental conflict during or after separation.

Design

The design consisted of face-to-face interactions as part of a research partnership. Semistructured interviews usually took about 50 min, and enabled participants to use their own language to provide a rich context within which to study the true nature of their reality. Because discussions involving experiences of parental separation were likely to give rise to emotional distress,

the ethical issues of working with this population were considered using the Human Research Ethics Committee guidelines of the University of the Sunshine Coast.

The methodology of grounded theory provided the flexibility to seek a theoretical model (Glaser, 1999).

Materials

The development of research questions was critical to shaping the research with emphasis on the interview being both a reflective and retrospective process. An overarching problem of parental separation and its impact on children was identified, with related subquestions developed around home, sports, school, and friendships. The theoretical framework of attachment theory contributed to the development of research questions. Questions were open-ended, and loosely framed to be exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive. Questions were framed to step back into the participant's past experience (e.g., "describe your experience of school postseparation"), with the last question in each subset bringing participants back to the here and now (e.g., "of what value is education to you now").

Procedure

Once ethical clearance was gained from the University, participants were recruited through local community organizations, university lectures, local sporting organizations, and local newspaper advertisements. A snowballing technique was employed and participants were asked if they were aware of other young adults who might be willing to participate. All participants self-selected into the sample. Sample size was determined once theoretical saturation was reached.

Interviews were conducted in English in a private room free from distraction, and were recorded on a handheld Sony audio recorder. All recording equipment was checked prior to each interview. Few notes were taken during the interview. The researcher wrote in a reflective journal following the interviews and throughout transcription. The data set consisted of the interview transcripts. All interviews were transcribed manually by the researcher onto a laptop computer. The data was entered into NVIVO software. This software package was further used to code and analyze the data. All data were stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Prior to the interview taking place, all participants were given a Research Project Information Sheet, a complete set of interview questions, a brochure setting out details of free and paid counseling services, and a consent form for signature. The last interview question specifically addressed emotional

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distress. Participants could bring a support person to the interview. A telephone was made available free of charge to participants who might be experiencing emotional distress to enable them to access counseling prior to leaving the interview.

Analytical methods of grounded theory coding were open, axial, and selective. Open coding aimed to develop variables, and involved a line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Axial coding looked at the process and interactions, and examined the relationship between variables (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Selective coding involved the telling of the story and the creation of theory, through the identification of a core variable, the variable that was theoretically saturated, centrally relevant, and had the power to pull all the categories together to form an explanation (LaRossa, 2005). Between-method triangulation involved interviews and the researcher's field journal (Tuckett, 2005). Comparisons offered a means of validating interpretations through comparison of one piece of data with other pieces of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS

The interviews were analyzed using grounded theory (LaRossa, 2005) and the themes grouped together to find the superordinate theory. The underlying theory was that parental conflict is at the center of a child's experience of divorce and separation. The child's living arrangements were less important than the level of discord in his or her parents' relationship. The absence or resolution of conflict allows the child to be secure in his or her relationship with both parents, and to continue developing age-appropriate mastery. When parents continue to be in conflict, over time the child had less secure attachments, poorer relationships with both parents, and a grudging share of material resources.

Results are discussed for Figure 1, the Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict model. Figure 1 consists of five parts. The upper part of the diagram (A and B) shows the family at the start of the separation, whereas the lower part (C, D, and E) explores what happens over time after separation, which was the focus of most of the time within the interviews (and hence the bulk of the output reported here). Part A represents the establishment of a coparental relationship following separation, with Part B representing the child's world, as a triadic base that supports the child's physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. Regardless of the amount of time spent with each parent, B should be a secure base within which a child continues to have emotional and physical access to both parents.

The presence or absence of ongoing parental conflict (Part C) represents a moderator between a child and his or her emotional security. Children make some form of appraisal of parental conflict in terms of the impact

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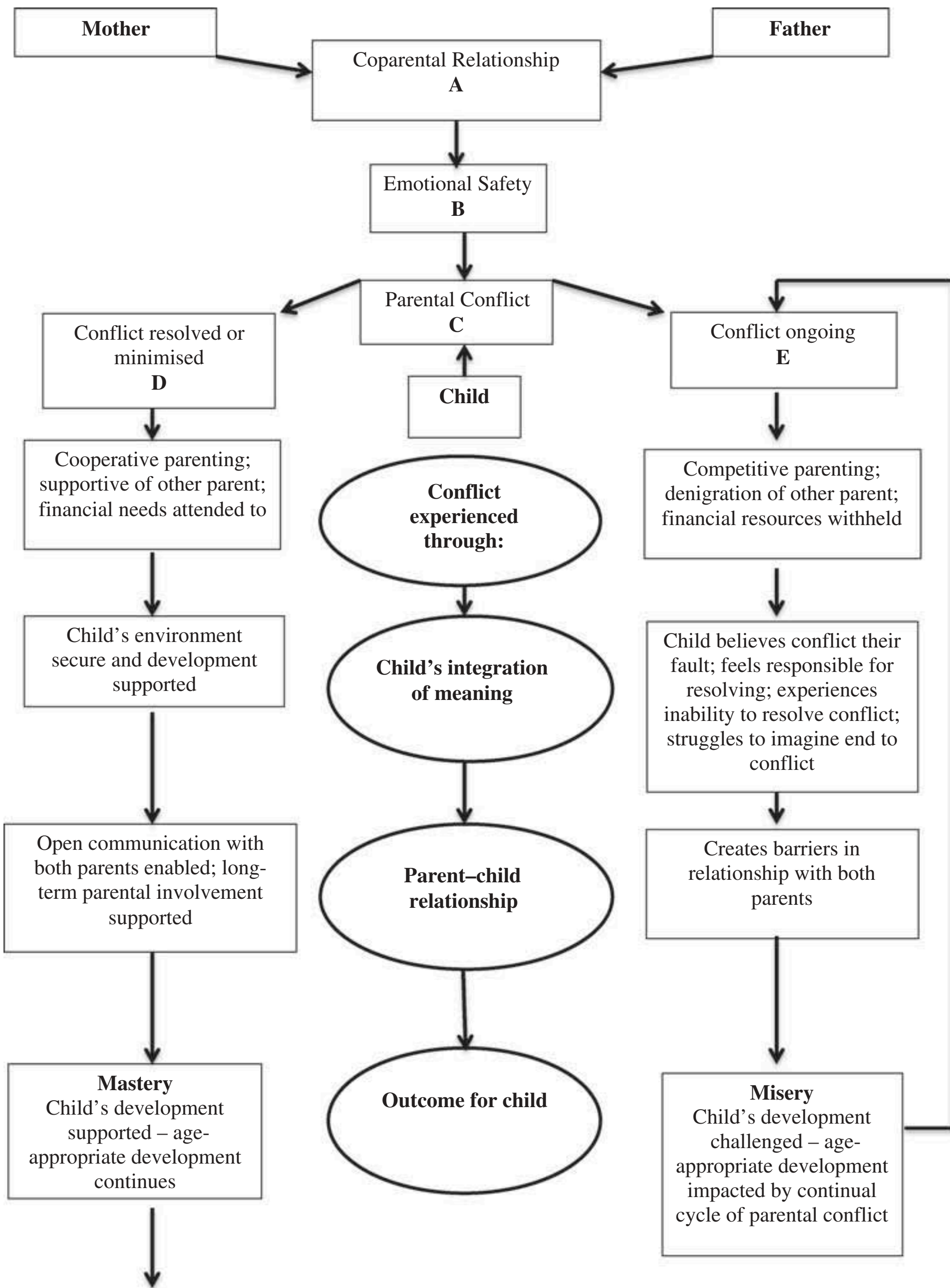

FIGURE 1 Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict model.

on themselves, their attachments, their trust in their parents, and danger posed. This is affected by whether parental conflict is resolved (Part D) or is ongoing (Part E). Resolution or lack of resolution of conflict flows

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into the child's experience of parenting (shared or disparate), attitude to the other parent (respectful or derogatory), and the share of material resources (available or withheld). As such, Part D represents how resolution of the conflict assists the child when parents are responsive to the threats that affect a child's well-being. A child in this context is able to maintain a relationship with both parents, and his or her development is supported. In contrast, Part E represents the negative consequences of ongoing parental conflict. In this context, parenting becomes disparate and unresponsive. A child's relationship with both parents is negatively affected.

The first pathway discussed is Part D, as it is representative of the part that conflict plays in a child's development, and in a child's relationship with his or her parents. When parental conflict is resolved, there is the potential for positive outcomes, not only for the child, but also both parents. Responsive parenting supports the secure triadic base and is less likely to involve child-related matters. Shared parenting is supported and a child transitions between households with day-to-day practicalities attended to. A child is supported in his or her relationship with both parents.

> Yeah it was supported, and we would take halfway trips where dad would drive me halfway and mum would drive me halfway . . . there was never any hate in the separation, I mean they would fight but they never used me to get to each other. . . . I am so lucky. Some of the separations are so traumatic and I could never imagine that. (Female, 19 years)

In Part D, a child's material needs are also more likely to be met. Interestingly, all participants whose parents had been able to resolve conflict did not speak about money issues. It might be a circular argument, but in the absence of conflicts, there was no reason to use payment of money as a tool in any ongoing conflicts. The participants whose parents were able to resolve their differences and maintain respectful relationships after divorce gave their children a sense that life was controllable, and offered experience in problem solving. The children were then able to develop mastery and to change the meaning of potentially damaging information about them. The participants whose parents had resolved or minimized their conflict after separation enabled their children to get on with their lives. Indeed, these interviews were concluded more speedily (around 20 min, compared to 40–50 min or more) than where conflict continued, as these participants had more to say about the difficulties that their parents' acrimonious relationship posed for them as children.

Part E represents a second pathway where parental conflict remains unresolved. Here a child makes similar appraisals as in Part D. However, where the conflict is ongoing, a child begins to question why the conflict is occurring, who is responsible, and whether he or she has the skills to

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cope. At the same time, in a child's external world, shared parenting evolves into disparate parenting, unsupported, disjointed, and with little continuity of care. One participant stated, "I think that is the main thing that makes a difference . . . not hating each other would make coming to decisions for the children easier" (Female, 22 years).

Child distress increases as a child experiences ambivalence in hostile environments where practical day-to-day needs are either ignored or unattended to. "It is something that impacts the children and forever . . . and I think all the disjointed . . . what's going to go on . . . leads to a lot of confusion" (Female, 23 years). Additionally,

> And then I used to never get out of the car and I would scream and I would cry and one time I threw up because I was making myself sick and I was really stressed about the whole situation because going back to dad was like the end of the world for me. (Female, 17 years)

> I think that's the most important thing having neutral ground, but having split parents that are talking bad about each other, that neutral ground is lost. (Female, 27 years)

Putting disparate parenting into context, a participant shared this example involving her brother who was grounded for 3 months:

> And like having two sets of rules is just ridiculous. My mum grounded my brother . . . she never spoke to my dad about the grounding . . . she could have had a grown-up conversation about it with my dad . . . but to say he is grounded 1 week every fortnight is just inconsistent. And he has no rules consistently; he has got no consistent boundaries. (Female, 22 years)

The practicalities of shared parenting and taking necessary items from house to house can become burdensome for a child; for example:

> I was, yeah, like a packhorse, and my parents were sort of hating each other, and it would be like, I will drop you at the end of the street, because they didn't want to come into the street because they were really fighting and we had to walk down the street with all our bags each week . . . I gave up the keyboard because I got sick of carrying it between the houses. (Female, 23 years)

The parent–child relationship is affected. A child might feel angry toward a parent due to the conflict, as the anger conflicts with positive feelings the child might previously have felt toward that parent. Confusion and guilt could arise in a child who might not yet understand that a person can feel both positive and negative emotions toward another person. In this

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context a child's trust in, and relationship with the other parent, is weakened, as shown by these examples.

> But I think probably the fighting thing, that was worse, and I think it was more than just fighting. My mother was constantly bad mouthing him the whole time and when I was younger I was like oh, I thought he was alright and you say he is not . . . well that probably impacted the way I view both of them. And they still do it now, like about a year ago my dad said "If I could see your mum on the other side of the road having a heart attack I wouldn't cross the road to help her." (Female, 23 years)

> After the separation . . . hostile, angry, they just hated each other, no communication. They would communicate through us. There was just no relationship. It was confusing. Oh well if you hate mum then shouldn't I hate mum? Yeah, so there was lots of confusion . . . so it would just be lies and he would feed us lies and then, yeah, it was just [sighs heavily]. (Female, 22 years)

> Well my relationship with my parents was jumping back and forth depending who I lived with . . . Even if they weren't saying it you could tell by their mannerisms. So my dad had, I won't say a passionate hate, but he was really disliking of my mother . . . so when I was with my dad I almost began to hate my mum in a way because I would listen to the things he says and I would listen to his perspective. (Male, 19 years)

> To hear such horrible things been said about our mum is not nice . . . when I was a teenager I would cry about it. (Female, 22 years)

Denigration of the other parent creates a barrier to a child maintaining a relationship with the parent who is doing the denigrating, as one participant reported: "I think emotionally it made it hard on me to try and have a relationship with him because he is just very negative" (Female, 22 years). In addition, one participant found that her father kept the mother's phone number with a derogatory name attached: "He was quite angry so some of the time it was hostile . . . we looked on dad's phone and saw . . . (my half-brother's) mum was called 'bitch' and my mum was called something else, I can't remember, and we thought that's not nice, that's our mum" (Female, 21 years).

Participants found these behaviors hard, "probably the conflict, because it was ongoing and yeah, just we were never put first, we were just stuck in the middle and like what happens now" (Female, 21 years). Another participant shared that now that "they don't see each other it is less visible, but still every week I will hear 'your so and so [swearing] father' . . . they still hate, yes I would say hate" (Female, 23 years).

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Material resources might be withheld, which resulted in children being unable to continue to participate in sports, extracurricular activities, or schooling activities. One participant shared, "I told him I still don't have any money for next semester but yeah, no help from him . . . but he has his Bentleys he's driving around in" (Female, 21 years). Fathers could shift the blame for current money concerns to the mothers, as one participant reported:

> Dad's really bad, like he will bring up the past, about like how in the property settlement he didn't get any money, and he blames mum for taking his money. Like even like my phone's broken, can you help? and he is like, "Your mother has all the money." (Female, 17 years)

Money and payment for various items became on ongoing problem, which was often not understood by other people or organizations.

> Yeah, well money was always an issue . . . it was a big problem, and they would always be in our ears about how so and so hasn't paid for something so why should we, and we were like well what can we do? . . . When it came to, like, they have been paying for it for this long then go and tell your mum why don't they pay, or go tell your dad to pay, and that would put us in difficult situations so I think at times and even . . . we didn't want to go into sport because we felt guilty for our parents having to pay for it, that was definitely a part of it. (Male, 19 years)

Participants sought ways to minimize the problem by avoiding the activity—"I tried to do things that didn't cost money" (Female, 18 years)—or paying themselves, as, "I don't know it always seemed like a big effort if I asked him to pay for things. So I usually stopped asking and tried to pay for it myself. Like he had the money" (Female, 18 years).

Another participant shared:

> Oh that was a big deal . . . because dad did not want to have to pay financial support to mum because I was still under 18 or whatever. So that was a big drama, full of crap . . . so every change had to go through the court. Everything! Yep it was all court, everything was court. There was nothing that was asked between me and my brother, what do we want. (Female, 22 years)

Indirectly, a child might experience a spill-over effect of negative feelings that originate in parental conflict. A spill-over effect is experienced when the behaviors and emotions in the parental relationship bleed into the parent–child relationship. This was highlighted in this participant's comment:

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> I mean my sister still has problems with dad because my dad . . . I don't want to say blames us for the relationship, the divorce, but he still sees the aspect of my mum in both of us, so when he sees us, he sees the relationship he had with our mum and he still gets that kind of agitation. Yeah he can't really cope and especially with . . . sister because she is a woman and . . . sister is a lot like our mum. So anytime he sees her, he kinda gets that hatred for our mum. (Male, 19 years)

The psychological burden that resulted from ongoing parental conflict, and parents who recruited their child to be their negative advocate in the conflict, can be too great for a child to bear. Participants were honest in how they found their experiences, and the toll of continual anger and conflict. They reported such feelings as, "Her saying that was like, cut exactly, it felt like a knife in my heart" (Female, 27 years), and "It's still horrible . . . not to say I'm still not struggling with it . . . it was always us that had to sort out their issues" (Female, 22 years). The emotional struggle was shown as, "but the whole way through I was an emotional, like, train wreck" (Female, 22 years), and "I told her to stop and that she wasn't divorcing me, she was divorcing dad, and unless she wanted to divorce me well she had to deal with dad and not me" (Female, 27 years). The consequences of the ongoing conflict could be grave for the child:

> I had mild suicidal thoughts, there were times when it was so hard . . . it was really, really traumatizing . . . we were like in the middle of a war. (Male, 19 years)

> I just wanted it to be gone. I didn't want it to exist. I wanted to pretend it didn't happen. I just wanted to act like I was normal and pretend it was okay. (Female, 18 years)

> It is bitter, really bitter . . . she makes snarky remarks and dad gets really angry. (Female, 20 years)

Finally, there is weariness for the children that nothing changes: "Well they still don't talk to each other and they still hate each other so it's not pleasant" (Female, 22 years).

Inevitably children experience an inability to resolve the conflict, an inability to imagine an end to the conflict, and the expenditure of enormous amounts of energy in their endeavour to ensure their own emotional safety. Rather than the situation where there was little parental disharmony and age-appropriate development could continue to unfold, the ongoing presence of conflict challenged the child's sense of normal family life. For example, one participant explained her experience of her parent's choices:

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> The hardest part? . . . It was hearing the bitching, bitching. It was never that they couldn't sort it out, it was always we had to be links . . . like I think that we were dragged through everything. It was always us that had to sort out their issues . . . and I think a lot of people with divorced parents, even though they may have grown up with it, they still struggle with it unless their parents get along nicely, then it's all sweet . . . like I have friends that have Christmas together. Like the parents with their partners, and I was there for it and it was unimaginable. I mean there are lots in my circumstances, like thousands, but this is just like how it could be, and this is like how my parents chose to do it . . . and unfortunately, still do. (Female, 22 years)

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DISCUSSION

The complexities and challenges of parenting, parental conflict, and parent–child relationships following separation are evident in both the literature and in this research. This research evidenced parental conflict as a moderator between a child and emotional security, and the psychological impact when children are continually burdened with adult issues and situations they cannot control. In the context of the current legal framework in Australia that supports shared or substantial care arrangements between parents, there has been an increase in arrangements where children, often on a weekly basis, transition between parents' homes. Of interest in the research were three key child-related matters that remained a source of conflict following separation: shared parenting, the parents' viewpoint of each other, and money. These are intertwined with the psychological burden placed on a child drawn into parental conflict as a negative advocate.

One interesting study investigated the effect of parental conflict on children's physical health, and found that parental conflict after divorce propogated threats to children's physical health (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). Fabricius and Luecken (2007) reported that the more parental conflict children experienced, the worse their relationships were with their fathers, regardless of the amount of time they spent with their fathers (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007).

There is a high level of child reliance on the emotional environment created by parents (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007). Emotional regulation is therefore not a task to be mastered by a set age, but rather a process that is sensitive to changing goals and contexts (Diamond & Aspinwall, 2003). As protectors of a child's development, parents are key to the creation of an environment where a child feels safe (McIntosh & Chisholm, 2008).

When parents are in conflict, a child will make an appraisal of each event that relates to personal issues such as the establishment of trust, development of attachment, regulation of emotions, and beliefs about self and the social world (Grych & Fincham, 1990). When parental conflict is resolved,

a child learns conflict resolution, develops self-efficacy in dealing with perceived threats, and is able to participate in problem solving (Folkman, 2008; Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003).

Contrastingly, in the alternate pathway, the origin of a child's emotional security turns on a child, through unresolved parental conflict and unresponsive parenting. In this context, where the passage of time does not diminish parental conflict, a child's development is challenged (Kelly, 2003). Stability is an illusion, with parental conflict more likely to involve child-related matters of shared parenting, denigration of parent–child relationships, and material resources (McIntosh, 2003). The child has to cope in an environment that provides little protection between him or her and potentially damaging self-esteem information. A child might not feel effective, leading to the possible development of maladaptive coping strategies, little emotional regulation, and low ability to manage conflict (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The parent–child relationship is weakened.

Ongoing parental conflict has the potential, often for years, to hold a child in a psychologically cyclic system of misery, resulting in a gradual wearing down of the value of the resources and efforts invested by a child (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Although a broader body of research supports resilience among children of separated families, the wishfulness of resilience might be examined in the context of a child who has, for years, had to carry the burden of being forced to wear the heavy, oversized coat of ongoing parental conflict referred to in Part E (McIntosh, 2003).

Parents who remain in conflict are often compromised by a limited availability of parental mind to assist them in integrating conflict in a healthy manner (Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000). Parents can remain so wrapped up in conflict that they are unaware of the anxiety their child is experiencing, or fail to see the warning signs that their child is distressed (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Parents need to be responsive to what a child is endeavoring to say. Even when a parent is not nearby, children benefit from being held in the mind of their parent, knowing that they are thinking of them, that they are caring for them, and that the parent genuinely accepts the child's love (Fairburn, 1952). Limited availability of parental mind impedes parents from taking a breath, from attending to their child, from reflecting on the meaning of their child's behavior, and from connecting with them. Responsive parenting and reflective actions create meaningful interactions within which a child develops, explores his or her world, and learns to regulate his or her emotions (Kelly, 2003).

The Cooperative Competitive Parental Conflict model proposes that the level of impact of parental conflict on a child's being able to access emotional security is moderated by whether the conflict is able to be resolved or not, and further suggests that two factors moderate the parent–child relationship: emotional security and responsive parenting. By placing the child's observations into the broader context of the emotional environment

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following parental separation, the model attempts to lay a foundation for a more complete understanding of the impact of ongoing parental conflict on a child's development and relationships in the years following parental separation. The intended outcome is to support developmentally sensitive resolutions that maintain the health of parent–child relationships, and support the vulnerabilities of child and adolescent development.

Strengths

A strength of this research is that the data were derived from participants who experienced and were affected, either positively or negatively, by parental separation. Parental reporting can have limitations, particularly with parents in conflict who might not be likely to self-select into research (Beckmeyer et al., 2014). Parents might also underreport their child's problematic behaviors or experiences.

Participants in this research were not limited to university students; high school students, participants now in the workforce, and one participant who was now a parent were also included. Participants represented a variety of cultural backgrounds, with three participants growing up in overseas countries, three participants growing up in a mixed culture family of origin, two indigenous participants, and the remaining participants being non-indigenous Australians. Despite this diversity, theoretical saturation of the themes was achieved.

Limitations

There were limitations, and despite measures being put in place around validity and reliability, due to few controls, qualitative research can give rise to poor representation and poor replication. As the research is retrospective, it might additionally be confounded in terms of accuracy of recall of what could have been a highly emotional experience for participants. A low number of participants whose parents had resolved conflict and high numbers of female participants might also be considered limitations. A final limitation is that a child's processing and appraisals are influenced by his or her developmental stage.

Future Research

Future research might consider the internal workings of the model to further develop understanding of attachment processes and their operation in adulthood. Future research might examine parental conflict and its impact at differing developmental stages, as well as paternal involvement as embedded

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in a broader pattern of family interactions, particularly the relational processes between separated parents who remain in conflict. Future research might also investigate the impact of factors that mediate ongoing parental conflict and resolution of parental conflict, such as counseling.

CONCLUSION

Every new relationship, every new remarriage, and every new divorce adds complexity and multiplicity to a child's family relationships. In every new relationship there are differential experiences with a number of parenting figures that have the potential to create positive and negative consequences for a child. Therefore it is vital to continue to develop a more accurate formulation of what protection of a child's development is following parental separation, including what protective measures exist when the protection of an emotionally responsive parent is either absent or is present but turns on a child. This is embedded in the context of a legal system that omits a child as a participant in his or her own life planning, gives the child a one-size-fits-all outfit to wear, and then requires a child to wear it into adulthood, without complaint when it becomes too tight, is wearing thin, or no longer suits the season the child is in.

It should not be forgotten that in any battle, wounds will abound, with scarring lasting for years, if not a lifetime. However, the research suggests that parental separation does not have to be harmful to a child. It is clear that no amount of research or legislation will establish a perfect one-size-fits-all parenting arrangement. The pertinent point is that it is not necessarily the conflict, but the way the conflict is handled, that affects the child, with quality of parental responsiveness and coparental communication laying a strong foundation for positive or negative outcomes for a child.

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