

Running Head: Repercussions of Parental Divorce on College Students

The Implications and Repercussions of Parental Divorce on College Students and their
Recent, Current and Future Romantic Relationships
Goucher College

Kevin Cournoyer, Veronica Kemeny, and Allie Lipson

Abstract

The researchers posed questions about family history and recent, current, and/or future romantic relationships to college students and recent graduates who had experienced a parental divorce. Four narrative works (3 females and 1 male) were created in order to depict their individual experiences. Through the research design of phenomenology, themes and important distinctions were observed in the phenomenon of divorce. The results suggest that children of divorce grapple with a complicated web of problems that includes, but is not limited to, problems of intimacy, trust, power/control, and the misuse and overuse of defense mechanisms. All of these problems appear to find their roots in the experience of the child's parental divorce. We feel that fear/protection captures and encompasses all of the above mentioned themes, and therefore it is the overall focus of our research. All interviews were conducted at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland.

The Implications and Repercussions of Parental Divorce on College Students and their Recent, Current and Future Romantic Relationships

The experience of divorce and its increasing frequency [or ‘occurrence’] in our society has made it a focus of many developmental research studies. Overall, quantitative research methods have dominated published research on divorce and its implications, possibly because of greater efficiency in reaching a larger sample size, so that the findings are more generalizable. However, the qualitative studies that have been performed have provided much needed depth and insight into this complex phenomenon. There has been a lack of qualitative studies on divorce because the research on divorce as a social phenomenon and qualitative research methods are all new, emerging paradigms. The results from both research methods have produced consistent findings illustrating that [or ‘suggesting that’] those who experienced parental divorce lack the sufficient social and emotional skills to develop their own intimate relationships. One researcher has become an expert on this very topic and her studies have inspired much of the research in this area. Judith S. Wallerstein has studied this phenomenon since the 1970s, and her well-known longitudinal study included a report twenty-five years later that chronicled the progress [or ‘course’] of the lives of her original participants. Wallerstein et al. (2001) state that, “Though the divorce was designed to relieve stress and may well have done so for the adult, for the child stresses of the divorced family may be more burdensome, and he may feel correctly that he has lost more than he has gained.”

Other researchers have explored the extent to which a divorce has caused difficulties with intimacy and how these problems have affected the child’s eventual perception of marriage:

Consequently, if children have parents who are divorced, they may be less likely to trust their own partners and have confidence in the longevity of the relationship. By experiencing a parental divorce children have witnessed the demise of something that was supposed to last forever. Therefore, they may be less likely to trust in the institution of marriage and be less trusting in their own relationships. (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001)

Many children of divorce have reported that they lack emotional coping mechanisms. In turn, their future romantic relationships and marriages may suffer in comparison with those of their peers who grew up with their families intact.

Children of divorce often experience emotional, physical, and financial abandonment with the disbandment of their family, a unit supposedly bound by everlasting ties. Therefore, they fear that they will lose love and experience similar instability in the future. This may cause them to expect their future relationships to end prematurely. This split forces a child to mature at an age when they are developmentally ill-equipped:

They attribute their caution and reluctance to engage in relationships to two primary reasons: (1) they fear they will make the same mistakes in their relationships that their parents made and (2) they worry about the feelings of rejection that would result if their partner were to betray them. This latter fear is particularly salient for individuals who described having a distant relationship with and receiving little support from their parents following the divorce. (Mahl, 2001)

In many instances of divorce, the paternal figure in the child's life withdraws or becomes nonexistent. This separation and loss of an essential relationship can lead to distrust and a fear of abandonment in potential relationships, especially in the romantic realm:

Parent-child relationships often serve as the basis for developing peer relationships and subsequent intimate relationships in adulthood. Hence, the inability to develop a meaningful relationship with the father as a result of his absence can be a hindrance in the development of future intimate relationships. (van Schaick & Stolberg, 2001)

Experiencing a divorce leaves children and adolescents with a feeling of powerlessness over their lives. They often deal with this tumultuous time by seeking the stability they crave in the form of independence. As David Mahl (2001) explains, “Many of the participants [have] indicated that they were forced to become independent as a result of their parents’ unresponsiveness.”

Although a large body of research, especially in the quantitative realm, has been devoted to the study of divorce, our study attempts not to necessarily fill a gap in the literature, but instead to offer a very rare and exciting look at the phenomenon of divorce. Unlike most qualitative and quantitative studies, our study includes a special characteristic: each one of us (the researchers) is a young adult affected by divorce. The three of us experienced a divorce in our own families, and it was this phenomenon that bound our group together and compelled us to initiate the project. Performed by young adults of divorce, our study and analysis provide a deeper layer of empathy and understanding in terms of what emotions were being experienced and why, what actions were taken in response to the divorce, and how those actions hurt or helped. Our themes emerged out of these main questions, and our main questions reflect our own experiences with the [catastrophe, trauma, misfortune, disaster, or suffering] of divorce.

Three Approaches

Our research project utilizes three of the five approaches to qualitative research. As our project progressed, we moved in and out of approaches, mixing different elements from each approach to better illustrate and give justice to our participants’ stories. Therefore, we thought it pertinent to describe each approach used.

In our project we have utilized a narrative approach to fully capture the actual experience with divorce that each participant has internalized. In Qualitative Inquiry and Research

Design, John Creswell provides the definition of the narrative approach to qualitative research as, “a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, P. 17). While a narrative approach is a good way to describe the experience of an individual, our study is focusing on a small group of individuals. Therefore, we also chose to employ phenomenology. Phenomenology seeks to summarize in key statements the universal experiences of participants during a common phenomenon. In contrast with a narrative study, “a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (van Manen, 1990, P. 177). Phenomenology really allows us to combine the massive amount of information from all of the interviews into key themes that help us describe the essence of the experience. However, as of late, we have been leaning towards creating some type of visual representation that could describe the phenomenon of divorce. Thus, we are moving in the direction of grounded theory. Creswell presents the definition of grounded theory as a “qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Predictions and [Guiding?] Question

In the beginning of our project, after reviewing the literature and discussing our own personal experiences with the divorce, we compiled a list of possible themes that we expected to emerge from the analysis of the interviews. These were: a) children of divorce would feel undeserving of happiness; b) they would lack healthy emotion regulation skills as well as problem-solving skills; c) they would lack a healthy perception of marriage/relationships; d) they would have an exaggerated tendency to avoid perceived confrontations; e) they would tend to participate more in sexual relationships in order to avoid or compensate for intimate relationships. We now believe that all of these predicted themes result from a subconscious fear and avoidance that stems from the experience of their parents’ divorce. Therefore, for our research study we decided to explore how a college student’s experience with a parental divorce may influence their current, recent, and/or future romantic relationships.

Methods

Participants

We interviewed Goucher undergraduate students and recent graduates between the ages of 19-23 about their parental divorces and experiences in their recent or current romantic relationships. Due to the emotional nature of the study, we made the decision that we would only approach friends and/or acquaintances as potential participants. During the recruitment process, the participants were informed of the general focus of the study in order to confirm their eligibility. We only interviewed Goucher undergraduate students and recent graduates because of their accessibility to the researchers. Also, romantic relationships in college tend to be more emotionally mature than earlier romantic relationships. Therefore, they often form a deeper connection as they are the potential foundation for long-term commitments. We tried to obtain an equal representation of both genders in order to compare the experiences of young men and women. In order for participants to be eligible, their parents had to have been either separated or divorced for at least one year. We implemented this stipulation because we felt that a year gave the students sufficient time to process and internalize the event insofar as it would show in the person's everyday experience, specifically their romantic experiences.

Interviewing Process

After selecting our participants, a meeting place was selected by the participant for the interview, which was explained as possibly lasting between thirty minutes and an hour and a half. Most interviews were conducted in either the participant's or the researcher's private residence in order to protect confidentiality. No interviews were conducted in open, public areas for this same reason. Prior to the interview(s), the participants were given the consent form where the procedure and confidentiality were

explained. It was during this time that they were informed that they had the right to terminate their participation at any time and also of their right to access their personal interviews at any time throughout the research process. To ensure anonymity, all participants took pseudonyms that were only known to the researchers and the participants.

Risks

There were a few substantial risks that came along with our research. As with most interviews in a qualitative setting, the participants were emotionally vulnerable to the researchers. Divorce is a very powerful experience that encompasses a person's everyday lived experience. We asked questions about the participants' experiences with the divorce itself, including the events and the emotions, and we also asked questions about the participants' experiences with their current or recent relationships. These questions opened up the risk of the participants possibly exposing problems in their relationships and it also exposed the risk of participants sharing private family problems. Also, we recorded the interviews, which always carry a risk of exposure.

In order to minimize the risks, the researchers took several protective measures. In the beginning of the interview, each participant was asked to minimize the use of names in order to reduce the risk of exposure. Throughout the interview, the researcher maintained an empathetic and sympathetic environment in order to facilitate disclosure and also to make the participant feel cared for, validated, and understood. In addition, throughout the interview, our participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. When necessary, participants were asked reassuring questions such as "Are you

okay?” and “Do you want to take a break?” in order to allow the participant to better cope with the interview experience.

Research Design

At the outset of the project, we originally intended to use a phenomenological approach. Our group originally came together because of our own experiences with parental divorce, and after sharing our own stories with one another, we were inspired to create a project where others that have endured parental divorces could tell their stories.

As the project progressed we started to notice the connective nature of our themes. The themes that we had established after listening to the first two interviews began to resurface in our other interviews. Seeing the same themes affect multiple participants in our interviews, we started to move away from phenomenology. We felt that while naming themes was a powerful way to describe what occurred with a college-student and his/her experience with parental divorce, the phenomenological approach itself did not sufficiently touch upon the connective nature of the themes within the interviews.

While we have not yet totally [or ‘wholly’] abandoned phenomenology because we do think that telling the essence and meaning of the experience for the participant is important, we have begun to consider a different way to present our findings. Instead, we started to move toward a grounded theory approach in order to illustrate the connections between the themes. We felt that grounded theory allowed us to better portray the themes’ interrelatedness and mutual causality

Also, for our project we decided to create narratives for each of the participants in order to give even more depth to their experiences. Our focus throughout this entire

project has really been the experiences of each participant with their parents' divorce and how that experience has found its way into their everyday lives, while focusing on their romantic relationships.

Narratives

Ann

This interview was with a female who chose the name Ann for the purpose of this research. Going into the interview, it was evident that Ann was nervous. Her voice was tight and her body was stiff. I noticed that her responses to the first few questions were almost automatic as she really didn't process the questions before she answered them. I started the interview by asking her age at the time of the divorce. She was in third grade and approximately eight years old. I then asked her about her home life before the divorce. She said that she could not remember very much. However, she was able to recall one experience in which her parents fought. She recounted, "One time we had just gone out to get ice cream and I was sitting at the kitchen table. My mom and dad started fighting. I didn't know what was happening and they told me to go upstairs. There weren't too many huge incidences." Ann's mother later told her that they were getting a divorce because her father drank too much. At her young age, she did not understand that her mother meant alcohol and remembered thinking, "But I drink too!"

Her father moved out and she saw him bi-weekly for a year until she moved with her mother and brother from the Southwest to New England. For the first few years in New England, Ann visited her father in the Southwest during her spring breaks and for a month every summer. By the time she reached early adolescence, Ann remembered, her opinion of her father changed. She recounted an experience in which she was playing with her next door neighbor and noticed that both of their fathers were drinking. She

explained to us that her father was a Vietnam veteran and on that particular night she remembered him experiencing flashbacks. She stated, “He came back late at night, drunk, and went to his room. He started screaming and didn’t know who I was. I broke down and called my mom crying, ‘I want to come home,’ and I think that was when I first decided I didn’t want to see him any more.” The summer after her eighth grade year, Ann decided that rather than going to her father’s house for the summer, she wanted to attend a performing arts camp. She has yet to return to his house.

Ann’s father never reached out to her or attempted to fix their broken relationship. She later found out that during the divorce process, when the issue of custody came up, her father declined to file for legal custody. She recalled, “It’s like saying one of your parents doesn’t want you.” When I asked about her relationship with her father now, she explained, “I don’t really feel any connection to him at all.” Although she did not mention her mother frequently during the interview, she described her relationship with her mother as consistently strong through the years. She explained that her mother is very supportive and a very positive part of her life.

Jesse

Jesse admitted to me that his early childhood was spent in a “traditional family” until he was about nine years old. That year, money became an issue, and suddenly Jesse’s mom transitioned from a stay-at-home mom to a career-driven socialite who was “too busy to do traditional chores.” The sudden switch caused a lot of strife within the family, especially with Jesse’s father, who he described as an alcoholic that grew up in a home without love. Two years later, after constant fighting, Jesse’s parents decided to separate.

When his father approached him in the basement, Jesse recalled that there was something in his dad's face that instantly made him think of divorce. Before his father even said the words, Jesse had already said them and started to cry.

The actual legal process of the divorce took three years of fighting over custody, bickering over equities, and ignoring the feelings of Jesse and his sister. During the process, Jesse's dad moved three times: first to another city in New Hampshire, then to Philadelphia, PA, and finally to Wyoming, as if each time his dad "did not feel far enough away already." Being too young to fully understand, but old enough to be aware of it all, Jesse kept his distance from his parents, went numb, and bottled up his feelings for many years.

It has been 10 years since his parents' divorce, and Jesse, now 23 years old, has two families: one that consists of his mom and his biological sister, with whom he has strong bonds, and the other that consists of his dad, a step-mother, a step-brother, and a step-sister, who he describes as a constant reminder of the separation between himself and his father. Jesse continues to maintain strong bonds with his mother and sister, even through all of the fuss. When asked about his father however, Jesse could only tell me about pain, about being left behind, about being replaced, and about his father's inability to show him, or anyone else, love.

Olivia

On a Tuesday evening, a 19-year-old female chose the name Olivia for this research project. We began the interview with the history of her parents' marriage and divorce. Olivia was eight years old when her parents finally separated although it was not official until she was 13. She revealed that after years of suspicion, her mother

received the confirmation she needed to leave Olivia's father. Olivia's father had been cheating on her mother for years, and even after confronting him and providing ultimatums, in the end, her father continued having affairs. Her father went to a rehabilitation center for sex addiction, which Olivia remembers as being explained by her mother as "a hotel different from hers." As a young child experiencing many changes, her older brother sheltered her and her sisters from the increasing tension in the house. She recounted, "I credit my brother for a huge amount with keeping me and my sisters safe from how bad the marriage was."

Prior to the separation, her house was an unhappy place where the adults were too self-involved to pay attention to the young children who were innocent bystanders. "I just don't remember my parents being around a whole lot. Umm, I remember a lot of babysitters especially the year after my parents got divorced." Olivia also explained that, even at such a young age, she understood the concept of divorce and, to a certain extent, expected that one day her family would experience it. "I kind of knew that's where it was heading so like a divorce was kind of inevitable. When they told us that my dad was moving out we were all kind of happy." With her parents' divorce, Olivia and her siblings remained faithful to their mother, who struggled to support the family while attending college. On the other hand, Olivia's relationship with her father became increasingly distant, which she attributed to his refusal to deal with emotional matters. Despite her misgivings about her father, however, she still "mourns" that she doesn't have a close relationship with him. She has continued to see him, but their relationship has remained superficial through the years.

A major event in their relationship was when her father's company fell apart and he refused to continue financially supporting Olivia and her sister's educations. She has now taken on personal loans to cover the remainder of her education at Goucher and yet is unable to talk to him about how he failed their family. Olivia's mother has been her main support system through the years and they remain extremely close. She credits her mother's strength for keeping the family afloat and respects her deeply because of it. Originally, Olivia judged her parents for the divorce because, from her eyes, her parents were giving up on their marriage and the family. As time has passed, she has grown to realize how the divorce was a tough decision to make and acknowledges that her mother was brave to confront her husband about the affairs and the sex addiction.

Viola

Viola's parents were never happy. Her mother once told her that she wanted to leave her father after three months into the marriage. They started to separate when Viola was 13, and they legally divorced when she was 17 years old. While the legal battle lasted a little over four years, the house before the separation was no picnic either. Viola described it to us as a house without affection, where the kids huddled into one of their sisters' rooms while the parents engaged in intense, loud fights.

When Viola's mom decided to move out, Viola acted in anger, she confessed, initially blaming her mother for the entire separation. Viola chose to live with her dad, and virtually shut out her mother to the point of not speaking with her for an entire year. While both parents back-stabbed and told rumors about each other, Viola's dad let go of all of the house rules, making it slightly easier for her to transition.

However, with her mother out of the house, Viola took on a role that most 13 year olds in our culture are not equipped to handle.. She became the mother of the house, and thus inherited the care of her little sister. She made it her responsibility to set rules, set boundaries, and to enforce the rules for her little sister, as well as cooking, cleaning, and fighting with her dad. Eventually her dad began to treat Viola as if she was the real mom, often saying phrases or things that he used to say before the divorce. At this time, Viola went to college, broke away from her family, and during the interview described her leaving as “a good thing for everybody.”

While her relationship with her mom had already completely broken down by the onset of the divorce, during the divorce their relationship was even worse. Viola found herself mocking her mother, inciting her to cry, and often seeking things to complain about with the sole purpose of making her mother feel miserable for moving out. Once she went off to college, she was able to finally patch things back up with her mother through a lot of talk and compromise. One of the main reasons that she was able to do this was her failing relationship with her dad.

Her relationship with her dad had always been strong, but when the divorce happened, Viola was quick to jump to her dad’s side. She moved in with him and often would almost ask for him to complain about her mother so that she could dig in and feel her anger towards her mother run even deeper. However, when the smoke began to clear, she started to see that her dad was not perfect and that he himself was to blame for a lot of the problems that her parents had. It was at this point when she started to, as she described it, “shift away from his camp, and come back to neutral.”

It has been six years since Viola's parents separated, and two years since they made it official. She is now 23 years old and her relationship to her parents is almost one of indifference as she charges out into the world vowing that no person, whether older or younger, will ever control her in any way. While she accepts both of her parents for what they each did, she is still constantly on the defense against everybody. She does not necessarily know what she is defending, but she does know that her strategy is needed in order for her to survive. As she described it to the interviewer, there are some things that she knows that are harmful to her relationships and to her self, but "they are the only way" that she knows.

Her parents are currently trying to creep back into her life through phone calls and emails and visits. However, when parents, who are probably the only people that are always supposed to be there, have left once before, what is stopping them from doing it again? After being emotionally left behind by both parents who were too wrapped up in their own quarrels, Viola is left only with herself and the near inability to trust that anyone will ever stay around long enough for her feel calm and comfortable.

Results

This semester we conducted and transcribed five complete interviews. For this paper, we have chosen to incorporate four out of those five interviews. We chose not to use one of the interviews because, after much discussion, we decided that that particular participant had not yet reached an acceptable level of maturity in terms of his romantic relationships to provide adequate insight. While we have not discarded the transcription or the interview, we have left it out of our analysis.

Our analytic process was very extensive and meticulous. After each interview, the tape was played for the entire group in order for the group to listen for tone, pauses, changes in the volume of the participant's voice, and other subtle characteristics that could not be reflected in transcriptions.

Our coding process began on paper. We originally tried to avoid the program Nvivo, because it is a fairly new analytic research program. At first, each one of us printed out a copy of each interview and read it over several times in order to find themes. While reading each interview, we highlighted, underlined, and wrote long descriptions of possible themes in the margins. We analyzed each transcription together and discussed each one of our ideas as they emerged. However, this process became too tedious and too lengthy to continue for the duration of the project. We also came to the realization that we had to eventually mold our findings into a structured paper, and would thus need some type of organized report of each interview with its accompanied themes. Thus, we embarked on a journey through NVivo and found ourselves much better off. We imported each interview into the program, and then each researcher coded their respective interviews. After reading through each interview meticulously and coding each interview for any and all themes, including background information, we combined all of our analysis into a master list which consisted of 66 free nodes, key concepts that emerged from the interviews.

We then printed out the list of free nodes, and began to analyze, discuss, and eliminate them because of similarity or because of insignificance. Each node was considered throughout this process and was discussed until we reached a point of saturation, where concepts began to repeat themselves instead of expressing new ideas.

Also, at this time, fresh, exciting nodes began to emerge as others were combined, altered, or renamed. After much discussion, we narrowed the list down to 51 free nodes. We decided at this point to create sets in NVivo in order to make the process of reviewing each node easier.

Before this time of analysis, we had not yet come up with an official list of overall themes with which we could place the rest of our nodes under. As a group, we decided that with only these four interviews considered, we have found four major over-arching themes: relationships with parents, power/control dynamics, intimacy issues, and trust issues. All four of these themes are interwoven insofar as they stem from one another and are affected by each other.

Discussion/Conclusions

As our research progressed, and our analyses deepened, we developed a main over-arching theme of fear/protection. Fear is a deep emotion that stems out of a perceived threat. Protection is the behavior that comes from fear, and manifests itself in many ways that all attempt to lessen the fear that is experienced. It is important to note that all of the other themes that we will mention hereafter fall under the heading of fear/protection.

A child's relationship with his/her parents is a sacred bond. It is a child's first attachment and first agent of socialization. From the parental relationship, a child gains values, behaviors, norms, and ideas, and these things shape and mold the world around them. A divorce disrupts, strains, and splits a child's world, as the child loses all that he/she knows and all that he/she considers sacred. Suddenly, the child is faced with the

possibility that anything can end, even the supposedly forever-lasting relationship of his/her parents.

The first theme that we considered was the participants' relationship with their parents, both toward their parents as a couple, and their individual relationship with each caregiver. Consistently, we found that no matter how severe or mild the divorce was, it still negatively impacted the child's development of healthy, romantic relationships. With one exception, a central theme we found was that in paternal relationships, abandonment was felt by the participants financially, physically, and emotionally. In Jesse's interview, when asked about his father during the divorce, he responded:

Ever since they got divorced, he first moved out to a few towns away, and then he moved out an hour away, then he moved to Philadelphia, PA and then to Wyoming. So he kept moving farther and farther away. That's always been a hard thing; it's always made me fear someone leaving, like really strong..... it felt like he wasn't taking care of us anymore.

Jesse's account of his father's constant moving almost has an active quality to it, as if his father wanted to leave him. Jesse internalized this abandonment to the point of later blaming himself for his father's physical and emotional detachment, saying that, "If I was able to show him enough love, he wouldn't have left."

Financial strains are common in many divorces; however, some children experience a financial abandonment, usually, from the father. Three out of four of our participants experienced this phenomenon and feel that it has ruined their trust in their fathers, especially in their role as provider. A clear example of this was recounted by Olivia after her father's company failed to support the family. Due to his rapid decline in income, he sacrificed his family's needs for his own. Although he had four children from his marriage, when tough financial times arrived, he decided to cease supporting the

education of his three youngest daughters. Olivia summarizes his internal outlook as, “I went off on this big adventure and it didn’t work out for me so I am going to take care of me and myself, and you [wife] worry about our kids because I am just a sperm donor.”

The second theme that emerged in our interviews was the constant struggle of power/control that our participants felt because of their parental divorce. Each participant tried to gain back the power/control that they had lost by using different defense mechanisms.

Ann felt abandoned by her father. For most of her life she lacked a male presence. She had an epiphany during the interview in which she connected her promiscuous behavior to filling the void of a male presence. When asked about her promiscuous behavior Ann responded:

Anne: My whole life, I sort of had this need to have a man in my life at all times, whether it was just like physically, [or just to] like the name of a boyfriend, I mean my mom would always joke around about it and I never really picked up on it until recently. But yeah, like in high school I was always, you know, looking for a boyfriend, looking for someone to hook up with, and I just need a male. I just need a male, I just feel this need to always have some sort of intimate male figure in my life.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Ann: Because my dad has not been in my life at all.

Interviewer: So, you just expressed that you need someone physically to be there. That is a constant need, but you didn’t mention anything about the emotional need. What do men bring to you emotionally now? Or what do they lack for you emotionally? I don’t know if I worded that well.

Ann: I mean, I think that emotionally they bring, they kind of fill that space, it’s not necessarily emotionally connected.

After recounting the chronological events from the divorce up until her current sexual relationships, Ann was able to link her father's absence in her life as the reason behind needing to have constant physical male companionship.

Jesse gained control over his disrupted world by always playing it safe when it came to romantic relationships. He purposefully would avoid certain situations in order to preserve his self-esteem. When asked why he had not dated in the past 4 ½ years, Jesse said:

Jesse: I go for what's safe. So like....I'll choose someone that I know can't reject me. I would go for a girl with a boyfriend. I've done that twice now.

Interviewer: What does that do for you? How does that make you feel?

Jesse: It makes me feel like even if I get rejected by the person, it's not my fault because they have someone else.

Jesse actively seeks rejection in order to escape the fear of a negative answer. His fear of rejection causes him to defend himself against possible intimate relationships, which therefore allows Jesse to stay safe. This helps him gain control over the unknown possibilities of a relationship.

Viola took on a unique role during the divorce of her parents. She essentially became the mother in her house, which included providing care for her recently divorced dad and her little sister. This role allowed her relationship with her parents to develop into one of brutal honesty and indifference, because her parents were no longer considered caregivers, but were instead treated as equals.

In Viola's own words, she says:

Everyone has a moment, or a period in their life where they suddenly start to realize that their parents aren't perfect. That their parents are adults as well, and you know, human beings that are capable of doing really dumb

things. But it happened very quickly, all in one moment, and not at in age that I was really ready for it, I guess. My parents went from being perfect one second to being completely fucked up the next, which was a completely radical shift.

Viola came to the conclusion that her parents were not perfect, and in order to gain back the control that she lost with that knowledge, she started to be constantly on the defense. Being on the defense allowed her to feel in control of her feelings and of others because she gained the ability to control what ideas affect her and which ones don't. This type of control, while effective in some instances, becomes excessive when it is used as a defense mechanism.

Intimacy and trust are usually described as two of the most important aspects in a relationship. The two aspects ran very deeply in three of our interviews. In Viola's interview, she clearly portrayed how it feels to be left behind by a parent and have your sense of trust pulled out from under you, when she says:

Umm, I mean definitely what happened with my parents just taught me that I can't rely on other people, even people that you're supposed to be able to rely on. I mean if there's anyone in the world that is supposed to be always there for you, it's your parents. And not that they ever dropped us completely, but I mean in a lot of senses, they sort of stepped out of the picture, for a long time.

Viola paints a picture of how the loss of trust between a child and a parent can invade the child's sense of trust in others. Her loss of trust also clearly inhibits her ability to be intimate, which cripples her chances of finding fulfillment in romantic relationships. During the interview, Viola described to us her process of trust:

I go through a really complex process of trusting partners before I let them in my life at all. And, it's not like a questionnaire that anyone sits there

and I like check them off and score them, but I am friendly with a lot of people, but I am not close with a lot of people. Because it takes a lot for me to trust you, and it's just built throughout my life.

Trust for Viola is not something that is given, but it is more something that has to be earned through consistent actions. She was deeply hurt by her parents' divorce, and when her trust was taken away from her, she could only do what felt instinctual, which was to guard her sense of trust and to only expose it to someone who was truly worthy.

The departure of a parent from a family occurs because of many factors. However, from a child's perspective, most of the reasons for the divorce are unknown or distorted, and instead the child blames himself/herself. In Jesse's interview, it quickly became apparent that he blamed himself for his father leaving the family. After describing the situations around the divorce, the interviewer asked him why his dad had left. Jesse responded:

Jesse: Because part of me believes that (pause) it was my inability that made it so that he couldn't show love.

Interviewer: What inability?

Jesse: My inability to show love to him. And that has been one of my major issues throughout my entire life. I believe that I am unable to show love.

Interviewer: Where do you think that comes from?

Jesse: From the fact that he left. Like, if I was able to show him enough love, he wouldn't have left. And throughout my life that has plagued me like, in order to compensate that with my friendships and my relationships, I have always showed too much and that has scared a lot of people off.

Jesse believes that his father left because of an inability that he himself possessed, when in actuality there were many reasons. However, the internalization of that belief leads Jesse to experience intimacy problems in his romantic relationships. He shows too much

affection because he believes this necessary to make someone love him. Showing too much affection is a defense mechanism for Jesse because it allows him to believe that he is trying to portray his romantic feelings, whereas he subconsciously knows that this will push people away. Upon meeting a potential romantic interest, his fear of being rejected is triggered, which activates this defense mechanism.

Olivia is a young woman who has yet to expose herself fully in an emotional relationship. She has trouble acknowledging her need for intimacy both to herself and others. When describing a situation where she did not reveal to a friend her romantic interest in him, she explained her silence by saying, “I have a fear of intimacy. A serious fear of intimacy that prevents me from telling anybody how I really feel about them.” She goes on to say, “Well, I wasn’t really admitting to myself that I wanted to be in a relationship. Umm, and I wasn’t admitting to myself because that meant that I could get hurt.” Her fear stems from her unstable relationship with her father, who provides little to no support for her in any aspect of her life. By allowing herself to be emotionally intimate, she is reopening childhood wounds that haven’t yet been healed. Olivia acknowledges that her emotional [problems, difficulties, scars] might seem burdensome to future partners, yet her expectation of a satisfying relationship would be one where both individuals strive towards mutual emotional vulnerability and intimacy. She expressed this as, “I need somebody that I can really be intimate with and that pushes me towards that.”

During our research, we have explored some of the intricate complexities of the repercussions of divorce on children. While there is more research that needs to be conducted on this phenomenon, we feel that our findings illustrate that children of

divorce suffer with intimacy issues, trust issues, and parental issues that children from intact families do not.

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