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Work in Progress

Reworking the Relationship: College Students and Their Divorcing Parents

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Work in Progress

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Wellesley, Massachusetts

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About the Author

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Abstract

The effect of parental separation and divorce on children who have already left home when the marital dissolution occurs has received scant research attention. In a study of gender differences in the experiences of 15 male and 15 female undergraduates whose parents separated while they were in college, the following findings emerged: Undergraduates of both sexes expressed far greater feelings of closeness, concern, responsibility, and loyalty to their mothers than to their fathers. Women students felt more concern, responsibility, and anger toward parents than did men students. Father-daughter relationships tended to deteriorate post-separation, while father-son relationships improved. Male and female subjects were equally able to set limits with mothers and fathers when feeling burdened by parental communications and expectations.

The author suggests that college students are more androgynous than their parents and that young women feel freer to express heretofore forbidden affects. The preference for mothers by students of both sexes is striking and most likely flows from the emotional connection between mothers and children during the pre-college years.

The effect of parental separation and divorce on children is an issue of major concern to educators, clinicians, and students of human development in the United States today. Within the past 15-20 years, divorce research has burgeoned, particularly research on the impact of marital dissolution on youngsters under the age of 18. However, little attention has been directed toward an understanding of the effect of divorce on the next age group — the older adolescent/young adult, 18 to 23, the age of the traditional college student.

A few researchers have attempted to correlate certain attitudes and characteristics of college students with parental divorce that occurred during those students' *childhood* years (Greenberg & Nay, 1982; Simpson, 1979); but the impact on residential college students of separation and divorce that has occurred *not* in the distant past but

rather *contemporaneously*, while the youngster is living away at school, has received scant attention.

Assumption of minimal effect

The explanation for this dearth of investigation appears to rest, at least to some extent, on the assumption that the effects of marital dissolution are negligible when parents wait to part until youngsters have reached an age at which they are — presumably — essentially independent beings and thus likely to be relatively untouched by whatever is occurring in the lives of their mothers and fathers back home. Indeed, life-span theories of development (whether psychodynamic, psychosocial, or cognitive-developmental), on which this assumption is based, generally do portray the relationship between parents and their children as one of increasing emotional distance over the years, suggesting that the impact of a marital break will be substantially reduced when the two generations live, psychologically, in two separate worlds (Kaufmann, 1985). A number of divorce researchers have, in fact, concluded that the effect of divorce on children diminishes as age increases (Kurdek, 1981; Longfellow, 1979); and some, like Esman (1982), have stated very definitively that

the healthy older adolescent is not likely to be seriously affected by changes in a family from which he is already well along the road to emancipation. (p. 272)

My research aims to challenge Esman and others who assert that separation and divorce impact young adults minimally. This challenge rests on three bodies of scholarship: first, the work of a number of theorists and researchers who have begun to critique the dominance of the separation-

individuation theme in adolescent development literature (Adelson & Doehrman, 1980; Offer & Offer, 1975); second, models of college student development specifically, which tend to stress the growth of *both* psychological autonomy *and* interconnection during the college years (Astin & Kent, 1980; Chickering & Havighurst, 1981; Katz, 1981); and third and finally, the work of Stone Center and other feminist scholars, who have brought to light the male bias of much developmental literature — with its pervasive emphasis on the themes of separation and differentiation to the exclusion of the role of relational connectedness throughout the life cycle (Gilligan, 1982; Kaplan, Klein, & Gleason, 1985; Miller, 1984).

Gender differences explored

The goal of my research was to examine the effect of parental separation and divorce on college students, ages 18 to 23, during the first three years post-separation in the following five areas: parent-child relationships; sibling relationships; affective and behavioral responses; interpersonal communication; and meaning of the separation/divorce. Here I shall report on a portion of the results in only the first area, parent-child relationships.

I was interested, in particular, in exploring gender differences in the response of students to their parents' separations and divorces. My hypotheses about these differences were based on research and theory familiar to most friends of the Stone Center: women's expressions of concern about and responsibility to others, in contrast with men's tendency to conceptualize relational issues in terms of rights and justice (Gilligan, 1982); the special

mother-daughter bond that has been identified in a number of studies for various aged pairs (Baruch & Barnett, 1983; Kaplan, Klein, & Gleason, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980); and women's tendency to orient themselves toward meeting the needs of others rather than to acknowledging and acting to meet their own needs (Miller, 1986).

Specifically, I predicted that women's sense of concern about and responsibility for their parents after the separation would be greater than that of the men students; that females would express more loyalty to their mothers than to their fathers, in contrast with the male students, who would not express a loyalty preference; and that women undergraduates would be less able than the men to set limits with their parents when their parents' expectations or behaviors post-separation became burdensome to them.

As you will hear, some of my hypotheses were upheld, but some were not supported, and they were not sustained in what I think were very interesting ways. As all researchers know, the findings that are unanticipated are sometimes as dramatic and fascinating — if not more so — than those expected!

Research methodology

Subjects for the study were 15 male and 15 female residential undergraduates whose parents had separated *after* they left home to attend college. The undergraduates, who were volunteers from 11 private colleges and universities in the Boston area, generally represented a middle to upper-middle class population. Their parents had been married an average of 23 years before the separation; and the marital break occurred, on average, nine months after the young people entered college. At

the time I met with the students, their mothers and fathers had been living apart for a mean of 17 months.

Students participating in the study were asked to fill out a 100-item, two-part questionnaire. The first part requested demographic information about the subjects, their families, and the separation/divorces. The second part was designed to gather quantitative data, for the most part on ordinal scales, about students' thoughts and feelings about the marital breakup. In addition, I interviewed all the undergraduates individually for about 1-1/2 hours each, using a semi-structured, semi-clinical format. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed both quantitatively and thematically. In this presentation, I shall report results from both the questionnaires and the interviews.

Closeness with parents pre-separation

In order to understand the impact of separation and divorce on the parent-child relationship, I first had to explore the nature of the *pre-separation* relationship between the generations. I examined what I termed "closeness" between children and their parents. "Closeness" encompassed several aspects of the inter-generational relationship: a feeling of pleasure in the interpersonal connection; a wish to be in contact with the parent; a sense of trust in the mother and/or father; the confiding of feelings and sharing of intimate aspects of the self; and the experience of deep parental caring.

A statistically significant and striking finding emerged regarding closeness. Exactly 70.0% of the college students were rated as having been closer to their mothers than to either their fathers (13.3%)

or to both parents equally (16.7%) before the marital split. No differences were found between the female and male subjects. This finding was of particular importance because it set the stage for many of the other findings of the study.

As would be expected, students expressed a wide range of complex feelings about their relationships with their parents pre-separation, including some subjects of both sexes who indicated that growing up they had always felt far closer to their *fathers* than to their *mothers*. However, these young adults were clearly in the minority; students overwhelmingly talked about their relationships with their mothers before the marital rift as closer emotionally than with their fathers.

This sense of closeness did not mean perfect harmony or even lack of considerable conflict between mothers and children. Many spoke of substantial differences with their mothers about a wide range of issues. Nevertheless, they perceived their mothers as more attuned to their feelings, more open to their communications, more involved in their lives, and as expressing both verbally and behaviorally more ongoing concern and care than their fathers—even when the relationship with fathers was basically a positive one.

I shall let the young adults speak for themselves. (All names and identifying information have, of course, been altered to preserve confidentiality.)

Ned: My mother and I are incredibly close because we're a lot alike. . . . We were always very close. We probably fought harder but always made up, and I guess when you're close with somebody it just seems that you get into stupider fights or something, but we always made up and have always been very close. She understands me in a second . . . knows when I'm lying or knows when I'm not feeling happy or whatever.

Alan: My mother and I have always been very close. . . . I trusted her opinion more than I trusted anyone else's. . . . I mean as far as friends, school, relationships, anything like that, I would always come to her. . . . She would always . . . have good advice.

Some of the students, especially some of the women, described relationships with their mothers pre-separation that transcended appropriate parent-child boundaries. In these instances, mothers used their youngsters as confidants during their childhood years, talking with them about a wide range of personal problems, including concerns about the marriage. This use of children as confidants rarely appeared in subjects' descriptions of their relationships with their fathers.

The relationship between some students and their fathers pre-separation could best be described as hero worship, an attitude of unmitigated admiration never expressed in describing mothers. Most fathers, however, were characterized not as heroes but rather as men who had been very distant both physically and emotionally during their youngsters' childhood and adolescent years.

Peggy: Things that I thought were really important, he didn't think were important at all. Like he never came to my high school graduation. I was in gymnastics, and he never came to a gymnastics meet—never came to a soccer game. . . . And even when I was the homecoming coordinator, and we rode around in old-fashioned convertibles and stuff, I went, "Dad, you've got to go. We've got old-fashioned convertibles. We get to drive around the football field." And he didn't come.

Changes in parent-child relationships post-separation

Whatever the nature of the parent-child relationship pre-separation, the marital breakup

served to challenge that connection with at least one parent for almost every student — moving the relationship to a point of either significantly increased intimacy or, alternately, considerably increased emotional distance.

Table 1 shows the changes in the relationships between subjects and their parents following the marital separations.

Looking first at students' relationships with their *mothers*, you can see that about half of the female undergraduates (53.3%) and about half of the male undergraduates (46.7%) felt that the relationships with their mothers had improved post-separation; 26.7% of the subjects of both sexes reported that relations with mothers remained the same, and the remaining students reported deterioration in the mother-child connection. Here, then — in regard to *mothers* — the pattern for the young women and men is basically the same.

In contrast, in regard to *fathers*, the pattern for female and male students is quite different; 66.7% of the women felt that their relationships with their fathers *deteriorated* post-separation, whereas 66.7% of the men reported that their relationships with their fathers *improved* after the marital split.

For many of the students, an increased sense of closeness with both mothers and fathers emerged following the separation as they began to see parents as individuated human beings and as parents began to reveal to the young adults aspects of themselves — in particular vulnerabilities — that they had never displayed before: their hurt, anxiety, loneliness, and fear. For some students, this new view of parents as vulnerable human beings was, at least initially, quite frightening.

Table 1

Change in Relationship With Mother Versus Father Since Separation by Gender

Parent	Improved	Deteriorated	Remained the same
Mother			
Females	53.3%	20.0%	26.7%
Males	46.7	26.7	26.7
Both Sexes	50.0	23.3	26.7
Father			
Females	26.7%	66.7%	6.7%
Males	66.7	26.7	6.7
Both Sexes	46.7	46.7	6.7

Percentages do not always total 100.0 because of rounding.

For most of the undergraduates, however, parental sharing of thoughts and feelings about the separation/divorce was viewed as confirmation of their emerging adulthood, with its potential for more peer-like communication and interaction.

Janice: My father was opening up more and more and talking to me about his feelings, which is something that he's... I mean, we've always had this father-child relationship where father knows what's right, and the child sort of follows after and does what he or she is told. And I've never really been that comfortable, or I've been growing more and more uncomfortable with that relationship... and at that point really enjoyed being able to be confided in as an adult and really felt that he was respecting me.

As a result of the marital separation, a number of fathers, often lonely in a way that they had never experienced before, began to reach out to their youngsters — phoning them, asking them to visit, and making plans to spend vacations together. After years of never expressing love to their children,

some fathers, post-separation, began to verbalize affection. For example, Roy's father, a working-class man described as always having had great difficulty relating to his academically-oriented son, turned to Roy one day and said, "You're the most important thing. You're my son, my kid." Subjects were often emotionally touched by fathers' attempts at connection, and in these cases, relationships with fathers improved.

Improvement in relationships with mothers after the marital break was frequently attributed to two factors, neither of which was ever mentioned in regard to fathers. First, a number of the young adults found that having fathers physically out of the house made the atmosphere at home much more comfortable and that in such an atmosphere it was far easier than in the past for meaningful mother-child communication to occur.

A second factor that often led to improvement in the relationship between mother and undergraduate was the emerging capacity for independent functioning demonstrated post-separation by some mothers. Especially for that group of highly ambitious and competent college women whose mothers had been viewed heretofore as basically rather unintelligent, dependent, and superficial, the change in the mother's behavior often served to catapult the daughter to a new appreciation for and closeness with the middle-aged woman.

Bev: I used to see her as such a weak person, just a dumb kind of housewife, you know. . . . I've always wanted to be more like my dad—like smart and intellectual. . . . I didn't have any respect for her. I just . . . I thought she was cute and everything, but I just felt superior or something to her. And then when this whole thing happened, instead of her totally falling apart like I would have thought, she's like

. . . she's really a strong person, and she's really taking care of things. . . . She's just really come out of it in such . . . in a very strong way, and I have a lot of respect for her now.

Deterioration in relationships between fathers and their college-age children, both males and females, was attributable to a variety of causes. A number of fathers cut off contact with their offspring almost entirely after the separation. Many of them used money as a weapon to force continuing connection with or control over students or to push the children into an alliance with them.

As noted earlier, some fathers who had had little real emotional connection with their children pre-separation began to reach out to their youngsters after the marital split and were welcomed by their offspring. In contrast, other fathers who sought contact with and support from college-age offspring post-separation were met with fury at these attempts at forming relationships so belatedly—only when they, the parents, were presumed to be in need of the connection. In these cases, the reaching out of fathers resulted in further deterioration of relationships that were already poor. This was particularly true in regard to father-daughter relationships.

Sandra: Now he suddenly. . . he's calling me every once in awhile at school. And when I'm home he sits me down and says, "Tell me what's going on in your life." And I have a really hard time with that because I've done a lot and I've been involved in a lot ever since junior high and even before that, and he never took the time. I understand that he's a father, and he has different responsibilities, but take the time to find out what's going on in my life rather than waiting until I'm almost 21 years old. I think that that's a little bit late. And I don't feel comfortable talking to him because I don't know him, and I can't open up to him

because he never gave me the chance to know him. And now when he sits me down I just feel all edgy, and I feel like I don't even want to talk to him. And I get very short and nasty. And I've tried to say, "Hey, he's losing a family. He doesn't have to lose a daughter," but on the flip side of that, he can't lose something that he doesn't have.

Whereas the personality change noted most often post-separation for mothers was perceived as a positive one (increased competence), the change most often mentioned for fathers was typically assessed very negatively and was a significant factor in the deterioration of father-child relations. A number of subjects described their fathers as having undergone what they termed a "mid-life crisis," either as a precursor to (or precipitant of) the marital split or as a response to the dissolution of the marriage. A substantial number of fathers entered into relationships with new women either before the actual marital breakup or fairly quickly after the separation; their dating behavior, change of dress, and new style of living in general were often extremely disconcerting to their children, especially to their daughters and especially when the changed life pattern seemed to preclude appropriate or meaningful contact with the subject. Bev's description of her father's visit to her during her Junior Year Abroad is illustrative.

My father came to visit me for Christmas, and I hadn't seen him in months. . . . And this, you know, dapper guy (got off the plane) who'd lost, you know. . . he'd lost some weight. . . . He was transformed, physically and every way. You know the first thing he wanted to do was rush off and go shopping, and I was thinking, "Oh, great! This is dad. . . . dad's going to buy me stuff." But instead he wanted to go shopping for *him*. He wanted new clothes and new everything, and he was just very into his appearance and. . . he was just trying to

become young again or something, so anyway that was a very bizarre two weeks I spent with him.

Deterioration in the relationship with some mothers resulted from subjects' feelings that their mothers were unwilling—or unable—to make what was viewed as a reasonable accommodation to the new life they were facing as single women. A few mothers were perceived as having abandoned their children, a perception inevitably leading to the weakening of the mother-child bond.

I noted earlier that, pre-separation, 70.0% of the students were closer to their mothers than to either their fathers or to both parents equally. After the marital separation, 73.3% of the subjects were rated as closer to their mothers.

Anger toward parents

Table 2 reveals some notable patterns regarding feelings of anger toward parents.

Subjects overall expressed statistically far greater feelings of anger toward *fathers* than toward mothers: For example, looking at anger at the level of a "great deal," you can see that not a single female student nor a single male student reported feeling a "great deal" of anger toward the mother; in contrast, looking at a "great deal" of anger toward *fathers*, 33.3% of the college women and 13.3% of the men expressed anger at this level.

Contrary to what we have come to expect in terms of male-female differences (Miller, 1983), women college students expressed far *more* anger at both their mothers and their fathers than did men students; 26.7% of the young women expressed a "good deal" of anger at mothers whereas only 6.7% of the men did so. A total of 53.3% of the females reported a "good deal" or "great deal" of anger at

fathers; only 20.0% of the males noted anger at fathers at those two levels.

Table 2

Feelings of Anger by Gender for Mother Versus Father

Frequency of anger

<u>Parent</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Good deal</u>	<u>Great deal</u>
Mother				
Females	6.7%	66.7%	26.7%	0.0%
Males	40.0	53.3	6.7	0.0
Both Sexes	23.4	60.0	16.7	0.0
Father				
Females	0.0%	46.7%	20.0%	33.3%
Males	33.3	46.7	6.7	13.3
Both Sexes	16.7	46.7	13.4	23.3

Percentage does not total 100.0 because of rounding.

Women's anger was more intense and directed than that of the men, especially their anger at their fathers. The anger of the males, in contrast, was often strikingly modulated. In fact, 40.0% percent of the men claimed they never got angry at their mothers, and 33.3% reported never feeling angry with their fathers.

Carol's and Fred's descriptions of their anger at their fathers illustrate this striking difference.

Carol: I think I've learned a lot about my father. I think I... at first I was deceived by his story that... his case was exceptional (about falling in love with another woman)... But since I've thought about it like just over last year, I've just sort of developed my own opinion... My anger has grown more and more... as time has gone on. I've gotten more and more angry, and actually now I'm probably the most angry of the three kids.

Fred: There might be a little bit of anger at my father... I wish my father had treated my mother better... I don't think he really mistreated her. I just think he was unaware of what she was feeling, and he was preoccupied with his work... So I'm not really angry at him because I don't think he really did mean things out of spite, you know, he just... because of his personality, he's just deficient in some areas.

Communication with parents

Both female and male subjects reported significantly more units of contact with mothers than with fathers post-separation. Over half of the students, 53.3%, indicated that at present they had six or more contacts (by phone, in person, or by letter) per month with their mothers; only 16.7% of the undergraduates noted that level of contact with fathers. Exactly half of the subjects conjectured that they would be having more contact with their fathers at present if their parents had remained together.

Students were asked to name the one person with whom they had talked the *very most* about the separation/divorce. Forty percent of the females and 40.0% of the males reported that they shared more with their mothers than with anyone else, including fathers, siblings, friends of the same or opposite sex, and counselors. Twenty percent of the men indicated that they had spoken with their fathers more than with anyone else about the events at home; not a single female named her father as the primary recipient of her thoughts and feelings.

Feelings of concern for parents

Students were asked about the direction of change, if any, in their feelings of concern for their parents after the separation. They were also asked about the level of that concern at present.

In Table 3, you can see that an overwhelming number of the students overall, 96.7%, reported, post-separation, increased concern for their mothers; only 70.1% of the young adults reported an increase in concern for their fathers. Young adults of both sexes also expressed a higher *level* of concern presently for mothers than for fathers; 53.4% of the undergraduates felt a “great deal” of concern for mothers versus only 26.7% who felt that level of concern for fathers.

Students expressed a wide range of concerns about their separating and divorcing mothers and fathers — concerns which can fundamentally be divided into two categories, home/occupational functioning and social /emotional functioning. Concern about home/occupational functioning was most prevalent among those young adults whose parents had been in very traditional marriages, in which family responsibilities had been determined by gender, with fathers serving primarily as breadwinners and mothers primarily as homemakers. When these marriages dissolved, parents typically needed to assume at least a piece of the heretofore unfamiliar role, a difficult task after so many years of depending on someone else to meet those needs. Edward expressed his worries about his parents as follows:

I have concern for my father because when I go home I see how sometimes there’s no food in the house, and he’s not the best at keeping the house clean. He tries, but. . . and with my mother it’s a little different. She’s buying a condominium, so it’s a different kind of concern. . . . Just her financial dealings and things like that. . . . She really doesn’t know how to handle money. She does —she’s smart — but she’s not experienced so much in that kind of stuff.

Concern about parental social/emotional functioning was widespread among the students. The young people were well aware of their parents’ psychological turmoil, whether or not those upsets were shared directly with them. They worried about their parents’ loneliness, depression, and anxiety, and they expressed concern, in particular, about the way their mothers and fathers were managing relationships with younger brothers and sisters still at home.

As noted earlier, fathers seemed to begin dating sooner after the separation and became committed to new relationships more quickly than the mothers. The relatively rapid reconnection of fathers appeared to be viewed differently by the men versus the women students. For male subjects, fathers’ relationships with new women were more often viewed favorably, and when fathers were involved

Table 3

**Concern for Mother Versus Father:
Change in Level Since Separation
and Present Level**

Direction of change

<u>Parent</u>	<u>Decreased</u>	<u>No change</u>	<u>Increased</u>
Mother	0.0%	3.4%	96.7%
Father	23.4	6.7	70.1

Present level of concern

<u>Parent</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Good deal</u>	<u>Great deal</u>
Mother	3.4%	10.0%	33.3%	53.4%
Father	16.7	36.7	20.0	26.7

Percentages do not always total 100.0 because of rounding.

in ongoing relationships, college men's concerns about their fathers diminished considerably.

For women students, on the other hand, the new alliances of their fathers were not particularly welcomed and did not necessarily serve to diminish their concerns about their fathers. On the contrary, oftentimes the new relationships were viewed as evidence of fathers' instability or crisis of identity, which kept daughters' concerns high.

As hypothesized, females' concern about their parents was statistically greater than that of their male counterparts. Women's concern about their fathers was, in particular, far greater than that of the male undergraduates — an expression of care which was very striking in relation to the especially intense anger felt by daughters toward fathers.

Feelings of responsibility for parents

As with feelings of concern, subjects were asked about the direction of change and present level of their feelings of responsibility for their parents.

In Table 4 you can see that, as with concern, a far greater increase in sense of responsibility was expressed toward mothers than fathers; 76.7% of the students noted an increase in relation to their mothers, while only 46.7% reported an increase in felt responsibility for their fathers after the separation. The present level of responsibility was also much higher for mothers than fathers; 40.1% of the students reported feeling either a "good deal" or a "great deal" of responsibility for mothers versus 13.4% for fathers; in fact, 50.0% of the undergraduates indicated that they "never" felt responsible for their fathers.

Table 4

Responsibility for Mother Versus Father: Change in Level Since Separation and Present Level

		<i>Direction of change</i>		
<u>Parent</u>	<u>Decreased</u>	<u>No change</u>	<u>Increased</u>	
Mother	10.0%	3.4%	76.7%	
Father	23.4	30.0	46.7	

		<i>Present level of responsibility</i>			
<u>Parent</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Good deal</u>	<u>Great deal</u>	
Mother	26.7%	33.4%	23.4%	16.7%	
Father	50.0	36.7	10.0	3.4	

Percentage does not total 100.0 because of rounding.

Overall, as predicted, the data revealed a trend toward greater female than male sense of responsibility.

The sense of responsibility took a variety of forms. For some, responsibility involved helping parents in specific, concrete ways, especially when students were at home during vacations. For others, responsibility was a major operating principle of the relationship with their parents, and behavior reflected that sense of commitment. For example, one male physically stood up to his father to protect his mother and sister from the older man's wrath, and another young woman transferred to a college nearer to home for one year so she could be available to her father and younger brother.

Most of the young people viewed responsibility primarily as being available to parents to provide

emotional support. "Emotional support" included a wide variety of interactions between parents and children that ranged along a continuum from children occasionally providing relatively mild psychic sustenance to young adults — like Karen — regularly rendering critical psychological maintenance.

Karen: My father feels maybe alone, and I feel kind of responsible for him because I'm always afraid he's going to drink again and stuff like that. . . . Like he gets scared because he doesn't see me and my brother a lot anymore — usually just on weekends. And he always tells me, "Call, call, you never call," so I kind of feel responsible like I have to let him know, "I didn't forget about you."

Loyalty to parents

In line with the results already discussed, Table 5 reveals that undergraduates of *both* sexes expressed far more loyalty to their mothers than to their fathers, with 70.0% of the students overall indicating *increased* loyalty to mothers and 46.7% reporting *decreased* loyalty to fathers. Similarly, both males and females described their level of loyalty to their mothers at present as far higher than to their fathers, 83.4% expressing a "good deal" or a "great deal" of loyalty to mothers versus only 50.0% indicating those levels of loyalty to fathers. My prediction that women would express a clear loyalty preference for mothers was sustained, but my expectation that males would not express a preference was obviously not supported.

Although strong loyalty to one parent frequently simplified students' lives because it clarified the primary focus of their care and attention, such preference did not always bring freedom from

worries and guilt about the relationship with the parent to whom subjects felt less committed.

Sarah: I feel only loyalty toward my mother. . . . And I'm afraid I don't hide that very well. I feel really bad about that. I feel like I should be more open. I should listen more to what my father says in a real sense and not in a superficial sense. But he's a jerk. He's been a jerk to me. He's been a jerk to my whole family. He's never cared about us. It's hard.

Vacations and holidays aroused severe conflicts about loyalty for many students, as they found themselves having to choose with which parent they would spend time.

Feeling burdened/Setting limits

Undergraduates reported feeling burdened by the words, actions, and expectations of their parents during the separation and divorce process. The

Table 5

Loyalty to Mother Versus Father: Change in Level Since Separation and Present Level

Direction of change

Parent	Decreased	No change	Increased
Mother	13.4%	16.7%	70.0%
Father	46.7	23.3	30.0

Present level of loyalty

Parent	Never	Sometimes	Good deal	Great deal
Mother	0.0%	16.7%	46.7%	36.7%
Father	16.7	33.3	33.3	16.7

Percentages do not always total 100.0 because of rounding.

emerging adulthood of the college students frequently became a double-edged sword. As noted earlier, parental sharing of thoughts and feelings was often viewed as a welcomed confirmation of newfound equality in the parent-child relationship. On the other hand, at times this sharing became excessive and thus an unwelcomed and uncomfortable burden on the undergraduates.

Mothers communicated their thoughts and feelings about the marital situation to their college children far more than did fathers, and mothers were seen as more burdening to their youngsters in this regard. Mothers also were viewed as relying on their youngsters far more than fathers and as more likely than fathers to seek information about the other parent.

Over three-quarters (76.7%) of the young adults were judged to feel burdened by some aspect of their parents' behavior; however, a full 91.3% of those students were able to set an active limit with one or both of their parents, when needed. No gender differences emerged here, so my hypothesis that women would be less able to act assertively to control parents' burdensome behavior was not upheld.

College students described the variety of ways in which they dealt with their parents when they were feeling oppressed by the demands of the older generation. The young adults would often attempt to delimit the extent to which they would empathically feel the distress of their parents, especially their mothers, by utilizing, very deliberately, internal psychological defenses or external, environmental demands or distractions. When they felt burdened, students would sometimes very pointedly tell a mother or father to terminate some particular

behavior, or they would put physical distance between themselves and a parent.

Limit-setting with parents was often described as a measure undertaken in an effort to preserve the integrity of the self.

Janice: I felt, after a point where things just got to be old hat I think everyone reaches a limit of being able to give, and I felt my responsibility was for myself. . . . I just felt that at a point. . . that I had to stop being so responsible, you know, the ideal daughter or whatever or friend, and have a little bit more responsibility for me — being a little bit more healthy in terms of paying attention to school work and my own needs. . . . I tried to keep phone calls, I guess, a little bit more reasonable. . . . I guess just let them know that I had some needs too and help them or trying to get them to see that they weren't the prime focus any more — that the rest of us, namely all of the children, had some issues to be dealt with too.

Students exemplify androgyny

As already noted, some of the gender differences that I anticipated finding were in fact confirmed in this study. Females did express a greater sense of concern and responsibility for parents than did males. They also felt, as hypothesized, more loyal to mothers than to fathers. However, males also expressed a clear loyalty preference for their mothers, and, when feeling burdened, females were no less able than their male counterparts to set limits with parents.

I like to think that these results reflect the trend in today's society toward androgyny. Males who feel comfortable expressing a strong preference for the parent of the opposite sex and females who can act assertively toward mothers and fathers may well be evidence that for at least

one segment of society, namely those young people pursuing college degrees, some gender differences may be subsiding.

In contrast with what I anticipated, I found far more anger expressed by the females than the males. I would suggest that here I may be tapping into the kind of high affective response to interpersonal relationships that has always been a part of women's lives, but now the affective response can include feelings of anger in addition to those feelings traditionally deemed "acceptable" for women, for example, anxiety, care, responsibility, and sadness. In particular, the considerable concern expressed toward fathers in conjunction with intense anger may be testament to the growing capacity of younger females to retain the positive, caring characteristics attributed to women, while at the same time embracing other legitimate aspects of emotional life which have felt forbidden to them heretofore.

Parents display traditional gender differences

In striking contrast with the androgyny that appeared to exist in the young adult generation, the parents of these college students — as portrayed by their offspring — very dramatically exemplified the traditional dichotomy in our society between mothers/females who express the communal-relational aspects of life and fathers/males who express the agentic-instrumental orientation to living (Bakan, 1966; Parsons & Bales, 1955).

Although I set out to demonstrate that the gender of the *child* was the critical factor in understanding young adults' relationships with their parents

post-separation, clearly what I found was that the gender of the *parent* was the more crucial determinant in illuminating the nature of the relationship between the generations. The overwhelming preference for mothers expressed by students of both sexes appeared to reflect the fact that for the most part, the young women and men I studied had experienced a dramatically different type of parenting from their mothers than from their fathers. Mothers generally exemplified the kind of concern, care, and emotional connection about which Miller (1986) and others have written. They demonstrated an interest in and were responsive to the feelings of their children; they also regularly revealed more of their *own* feelings to their sons and daughters than did fathers. They knew their youngsters intimately, and the children also knew their mothers. This deep knowledge set the stage for the interpersonal dynamic of care seen here — a reciprocity of concern, responsibility, and loyalty between young adults and their mothers, with roots in childhood, that simply did not exist with fathers.

Conclusion

In contrast with the assumption noted initially — that parental divorce has little impact on young adults — I found that the marital dissolution set in motion a transformation in the parent-child relationship for virtually all of the undergraduates. For some, parental separation and divorce provided an opportunity for individual growth and enhanced interpersonal relationships; for others, the breakup of the marriage served as the precipitant to decline and deterioration in connections between the

generations. For each of these 15 males and 15 females, however, the potency of the interpersonal transformation spoke eloquently and often poignantly to the power of parent-child relationships in general — and the significance of parental separation and divorce in particular — in the lives of college students in the 1980s.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation, a discussion is held. Selected portions of the discussion are summarized here. At this session Dr. Alexandra Kaplan joined Dr. Kaufmann in leading the discussion.

Question: Did you find any differences in students' experiences based on birth order?

Kaufmann: The most dramatic finding was that an undergraduate who was a first-born or last-born was significantly more likely than others to have parents who separated within the first six months of his or her college entrance. What this demonstrates, of course, is that family dynamics change as children — particularly oldest and youngest children — leave the nest. The departure of the college son or daughter may precipitate a crisis in the marriage.

Students whose parents broke up during the first six months of their freshman year had an especially difficult adjustment. Bob Kegan talks of “holding environments” that sustain and support people as they move on to new levels of emotional development, and for undergraduates that “holding environment” is home and the family. To have the family fall apart when things are still so new at college is extremely stressful.

Question: How did the changes that were occurring at home play themselves out in terms of dormitory relationships?

Kaufmann: Some students reached out to peers for emotional support, but I felt that the college environment often made it possible for subjects to deny the reality of the changes that were occurring in their families. The fast pace of undergraduate life, the academic and social demands on students, and the fact that parents of residential men and women are physically distant are factors that made it relatively easy to avoid dealing with the painful events at home.

Some of the subjects whose parents separated early in their freshman year mentioned that they had not yet established friendships at the time of the breakup and therefore felt that they had no one to talk to about family issues. A number of the students expressed the feeling that they would be burdening others if they talked about their problems — that people were busy and had their own difficulties and did not want to get involved. Of course, I don't know if this was just a rationalization for their own inability to share their upset.

Kaplan: What you're saying is very consistent with trends that we have found at Wellesley over the years. For example, Rona Klein and I have offered groups for daughters of divorce, and we have never been able to get a group together. I think part of it is just what you said. There seems to be a kind of sealing off of the affect, which means that students miss out on the emotional support they need and could get if they could reach out. We are more

successful getting students to come forward for incest survivor groups than for children of divorce groups.

Comment: I think that it is difficult for kids to come together because of their tremendous sense of vulnerability at this age. If they can, however, they can use this moment of disequilibrium to work through some issues and move to a new level of development, and perhaps the advertising for such groups has to include that perspective.

Kaufmann: I agree. I believe this is one of the aspects of the breakup which is different for college students than for younger children of divorce. The young adult can bring his or her social, emotional, and cognitive capacities to the crisis and can use these abilities to transform the crisis into a growth-promoting experience.

Question: Are there any statistics on the number of college students whose parents are divorcing?

Kaufmann: No. Statistics are available only in regard to minor children. We can assume that the number of undergraduates whose parents are separating and divorcing is increasing because we know that long-term marriages are breaking up more frequently now than in years past, but that is as much as we can say.

Question: Did you find that your subjects changed their own ideas about romantic relationships and marriage?

Kaufmann: Many college students are already involved in serious, love relationships, and most of

the others anticipate such relationships in the not-too-distant future. The breakup of their parents' marriages really unbalances them and makes them wonder about the viability of the institution of marriage in general and, in particular, their own capacity to make and maintain long-term, intimate relationships. On the other hand, an overwhelming number express their intention to marry. They claim they have learned something about relationships from the failure of their parents' marriages and that they will avoid making the mistakes of the older generation. They are wonderfully optimistic, and we can only hope that their optimism is warranted!

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