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Psychosocial and Academic Implications of Divorce on Adolescents: A Social Work Perspective

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Psychosocial and Academic Implications of Divorce on Adolescents: A Social
Work Perspective

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Social Work

St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas

St. Paul, Minnesota

In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

Abstract

Adolescents who experience parental divorce often experience several academic and psychosocial implications. The purpose of this project was to understand the overall psychosocial and academic impact of parental divorce on adolescents and the variables that influenced these responses. Using a semi-structured, qualitative interview six school social workers were interviewed regarding their professional experience within the school setting and their work with adolescents experiencing parental divorce. The findings were consistent with the research, which indicated that positive and respectful parental communication throughout all stages of the divorce process was key in regards to the psychosocial and academic implications. However, the data collected revealed a new area of importance: support. Respondents shared the value of support through individual professional interventions, support groups, as well as through the community supports and mentorship as a key component to the overall well-being of the adolescent and the family during parental divorce. These findings demonstrate the importance of communication within the home, family, and with key supports in order to provide a supportive, objective, and safe environment for the adolescent during a time of frequent change.

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Introduction and Purpose Statement

It is estimated that nearly half of marriages end in divorce; half of these divorces include an adolescent (Potter, 2010; Lopez, 1987). It is important to understand the potential psychosocial and academic implications of parental divorce on adolescents in order to provide adolescents and their families with supportive interventions.

Research has shown that divorce has a negative impact on an adolescent's psychosocial and academic functioning (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Kim, 2011; ONDRUŠKOVÁ, 2013; Potter, 2010; Videon, 2002). Academic implications have been identified in the areas of mathematics and literature (Kim, 2011; Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Potter, 2010). Research in the area of psychosocial functioning has explored the impact of divorce on adolescent's levels of depression, anxiety, self-regulation, increased/decreased ego, as well as triangulation, individuation, and lack of intimacy in current and future relationships (Ondruskova, 2013; Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily, C., 2012; Johnson, & McNeil, 1998; Kim, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Guentherman & Hampton, 1992; Drakulic, 2014; Aseltine, 1996; Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

There are two components typically identified as important to an adolescent's functioning after divorce: the quality of the parent's marriage and the quality of the parent's divorce. The quality of the marriage can create a healthy environment or one of dysfunction. The same can be said for the quality of the divorce. An amicable divorce can create a positive and healthy environment where the adolescent can thrive, while a divorce of high conflict can create an unstable environment with lack of support. If the marriage is one of high-conflict, the disassembly of this relationship may then create a positive and healthy environment for the adolescent (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kim, 2011; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Bing, Nelson,

and & Wesolowski, 2009). The divorce may create an increased sense of well-being in the adolescent, one that was not present during the time of the marriage, as a sense of stability is returned (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kim, 2011; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). The high-conflict marriage that yields a low-conflict environment post-divorce is an overall healthier environment for the adolescent. Compared to the low-conflict marriage that ends in divorce, which can create a decreased sense of well-being and the experience of a lack of stability (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kim, 2011; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989).

The quality of the divorce can create opportunities for the post-divorce relationship to thrive and can aid in creating a healthy, safe, and consistent environment for the adolescent (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). Two important factors to consider in the quality of the post-divorce family are the rate of engagement of the adolescent with the non-custodial parent as well as the age of the adolescent at the time of divorce (Johnson & McNeil, 1998; Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). These factors have been found to be key in the adolescent's overall psychosocial development.

Understanding parental divorce and its impact on adolescents is valuable to social workers that work with this population. Knowledge regarding this topic may be utilized to identify and curb academic and psychosocial regression. This study seeks to identify the potential psychosocial and academic effects on adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. This topic will be explored by examining the perspective of social workers that serve this specific population within the school system.

Literature Review

Research on parental divorce and its impact on adolescents has been conducted for many years. The initial research on the psychosocial and academic effects of parental divorce indicated a predominantly dismal future for the children and adolescents. Current research paints a more hopeful picture. Recent studies suggest that in some cases, divorce may be beneficial to the adolescent by decreasing high-stress environments. Thereby, they encourage academic and psychosocial success (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Kim, 2011; Ondruskova, 2013; Potter, 2010; Strohschein, 2005). Two variables that can impact the levels of stress in the environment and the functioning of the adolescent are the quality of the marriage and the quality of the divorce. The following sections further elaborate upon recent findings beginning with the psychosocial and academic implications of divorce followed by a discussion of the impact of the quality of the marriage before the divorce and the quality of the divorce.

Psychosocial

Studies have identified that the psychosocial development and well-being of the adolescent can be affected by parental divorce. Potter (2010) found that children whose parents recently experienced separation demonstrated a decline in their overall psychosocial well-being, scoring on average .07 below their previous well-being scores, a margin of nearly an entire unit. Potter's (2010) consideration of psychosocial well-being included the externalization of problems, the internalization of problems, as well as social skills in children. These variables were clearly defined: internalization referring to sad and lonely feelings experienced by children, externalization referring to impulsive behaviors, and social skills referring to the cooperation of the child with other peers. These reports were from multiple perspectives including the children, parents, and teachers (Potter, 2010).

Parental divorce can result in the shift of mental health due to stressors and changes in environmental, educational, relational, and fiscal resources. Changes in mental health vary as each adolescent processes differently and may internalize or externalize their response to the divorce, resulting in the development or exacerbation of various mental health symptoms and behaviors: depression, anxiety, social functioning, poor self-regulation, increased/decreased ego, as well as triangulation, individuation, and lack of intimacy in relationships (Ondruskova, 2013; Potter, 2010; Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily, 2012; Johnson, & McNeil, 1998; Kim, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Guentherman & Hampton, 1992). Consistently reported psychosocial effects being those of depression, anxiety, low-level social functioning, and differentiation and individuation (Ondruskova, 2013; Potter, 2010; Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily, 2012; Johnson, & McNeil, 1998; Kim, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Guentherman & Hampton, 1992).

Depression and Anxiety

Several clinical studies identify divorce as the primary cause in the development of depression and anxiety in adolescents. Alternatively, Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily (2012) noted that these diagnoses are strongly linked to familial mental health (i.e., primarily inter-generational occurrence of depression). Vousourea, et. al found that parental predisposition rather than parental divorce was the determining factor regarding the adolescent developing depression and anxiety (2012). It was also found that if depression is present in the parent of the adolescent during the time of divorce, there are limited mental health repercussions triggered solely as a result of the divorce in the adolescent (Vousoura, Verdeli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily, 2012). It is suggested that the adolescents of depressed parents are already at risk for low psychosocial health (Vousoura, et. al, 2012). Therefore, the

event of the divorce does not hold significant weight in determining whether or not an adolescent, with predisposed mental health, will develop mental health symptoms (Vousoura, et.al, 2012; Strohschein, 2005).

Depression is not exclusive to the adolescent during times of divorce, often the parent's mental health impacts that adolescent's mental health. Strohschein (2005) found in a study of parents in low-conflict marriages that a depressed parent is unable to attend to their adolescent's psychosocial and developmental well-being, particularly during the time of divorce, as they are preoccupied with their personal mental health. As a result of this inattentiveness, the adolescent has a higher rate of behavioral and emotional problems (Strohschein, 2005; Potter, 2010).

Social Functioning

According to Kim (2011), children of divorced parents typically demonstrate lowered levels of social functioning pre-divorce. Kim described social functioning as including engagement and play with peers, establishing and maintaining relationships, etc. (2011). Kim additionally noted that fewer relationships and friendship developed during the in-divorce stage. (2011). According to Kim, divorce is defined by three very individual stages: pre, in, and post-divorce (2011). Each stage within the study had specific characteristics that were individual to that stage, however there were elements studied that were fluid and moved between stages of the divorce process. Strohschein (2005) found that there was an increased level of anti-social behavior for adolescents whose parents divorced as compared to adolescents whose parents remained married, unless the adolescent came from families of pre-existing high conflict. In those families, Strohschein (2005) found that children of high conflict homes pre-divorce experienced decreased levels of antisocial behavior such as avoidance and isolation after the divorce.

Academic

Accompanying the psychosocial implications of parental divorce in adolescents are the academic implications, by way of grades, test scores, and overall graduation rates though the findings vary somewhat. The child's general psychosocial well-being has been found to be highly influential upon their academic success (Potter, 2010). Potter (2010) noted that children who come from homes of divorced parents perform, on average, poorer as compared to their peers who have both parents at home. Potter raises the point of psychosocial well-being in regards to overall academic achievement and the direct correlation between the two in children. Though the Potter study examined the experience of grade school children, Potter noted the importance of future studies examining the adolescent experience in future research, as they will have a different experience (Potter, 2010). Research on adolescents indicates that lower psychosocial well-being is connected to lower rates of graduation from high school than their peers from home where there has not been a divorce (Potter, 2010; Voursoura, et.al, 2012).

When studying the impact of parental divorce on academics, researchers have identified two areas affected: mathematics and reading/literature (Potter, 2010; Kim, 2011). Potter (2010) noted that math and reading scores dropped between 1.3 and 1.7 points for each wave of divorce that occurred, as opposed to children whose parents did not divorce. Here, waves refer to the stages of divorce (e.g. pre, in, and post) (Kim, 2011). Kim (2011) also reports a gap in math scores of 5.4 points lower in children of divorcees, as opposed to their peers of non-divorced parents (2011). However, this study found no significant effect on reading scores (Kim, 2011).

Following divorce, lower socio-economic status and decreased parental involvement has been found to lead to academic decline. Kim (2011) noted the increased potential for adolescents to drop out of school as opposed to peers whose biological parents remained married. Kushner

(2009) specifies that it is not simply the divorce, but rather high levels of pre-divorce conflict that results in the academic decline in the adolescent. Decreased socio-economic status increased this effect (Kushner, 2009). Kushner (2009) found that lower test scores and graduation rates were attributed to lower socio-economic status following parental divorce. As well as socio-economic status playing a role in educational decline post-divorce, decreased levels of parental involvement and attentiveness to the adolescent's completion of school related tasks and school attendance were found to play a pivotal role in educational success (Kushner, 2009).

Amato, Kane, & James (2011) noted that, when compared, adolescents of divorce who came from single parent homes and those that came from co-parenting homes did not have a significant difference in academic achievement. Contrarily, Kushner (2009) found an adolescent's move from a two-parent home to a single parent home, post-divorce, resulted in academic decline primarily due to their lack of supervision. This lower rate of supervision leads to lower attendance of school, the lower completion of homework, and lower provision of academic support within the home (Kushner, 2009).

Gender

Early studies on the impact of parental divorce on adolescents suggested that the gender of the adolescent may play a role in the adolescent's reaction to parental divorce. Recent findings suggest otherwise. One gender is not impacted more than another, rather differently (Videon, 2002). Videon (2002) suggested that perceived differences in gender responses found in earlier research may be due to the difference in the manifestation of symptoms. Aseltine (1995) found that adolescent gender responses were based on traditional gender stereotypes; with females having a more emotional and internal response while males experienced a more external and behavioral response. Aseltine (1995) suggested that earlier studies highlighted the male response

and minimized the female response as males traditionally externalized their reaction while females demonstrated a more internalized response and therefore was not tracked or believed to be present (Aseltine, 1995).

Despite initial reaction, no gender differences in adolescents were found in long-term effects of parental divorce (Aseltine, 1995). The more intense responses were temporary, and the adolescent was often able to transition from this stage of externalization (male) and internalization (female) to one in which they resided pre-divorce (Aseltine, 1995).

Recent studies have presented fewer differences in response, based on gender. Strohschein (2005) sought to test these theories of gender response to parental divorce taking into consideration previous findings that parental divorce impacts males stronger than females, before the theories of externalization and internalization were introduced. Strohschein's findings demonstrated that parental divorce impact males no differently than females.

Gender did pose varying results when applied to housing post-divorce and the parent in which the adolescent resided. Videon (2002) found that increased behaviors were presented by the adolescent when living with an opposite sex parent. It was also noted that an adolescent separated from the parent of the same gender in which a positive relationship dynamic was present led to increased delinquent behaviors (Videon, 2002). The connection was then made that adolescent boys are often separated from their father and live with their mothers—this may attribute to the perceived increase in behaviors in adolescent boys following parental divorce (Videon, 2002).

Age of the Child

Age has also been considered by researchers as an important contributor the adolescent's reaction to parental divorce. When parental divorce occurs when the child is younger there are

fewer psychosocial and academic repercussions than when parental divorce occurs during adolescence. Strohschein (2005) states that antisocial tendencies (i.e. avoidance and isolation) were affected by age of the individual at the time of divorce, impacting adolescents at a higher rate than younger populations.

Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan (1995) found that when a divorce occurs during adolescence, it affects the overall development of the adolescent and hinders their ability in regards to relational growth and self-awareness. (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). A divorce during this stage can affect the development of self as well as the connection to those around them (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995). Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan (1995) also noted that when divorce occurs much closer to young adulthood, it has an increased negative impact on adjustment following a divorce. What has been found is that age, as opposed to gender, proves to be the more important variable when determining the psychosocial and academic impact of divorce on the adolescent.

Quality of Marriage

Research has indicated that the quality of the pre-existing marriage has been found to hold a lasting effect on the overall development of the adolescent. Studies have indicated that marriages traditionally end due to high levels of conflict. While this conflict can often be undefined, it is often linked to socio-economic status and the impact of economic strains on the marriage (Kim, 2011; Videon, 2002). The research suggests the importance of establishing the levels of conflict that are present in the family prior to the divorce as well as the socioeconomic status and the implications of these on the adolescent psychosocial and academic functioning.

Level of conflict.

The level of conflict that is present in the marriage before the divorce occurs has proven to be paramount to the overall success of the adolescent, as well as hold influence over the potential negative repercussions that can be exacerbated by the divorce. This extends directly to the adolescent's mental health, as well as indirectly, as the level of conflict impacts parental mental health and the overall level of care and attention that can be provided to the adolescent (Strohschein, 2005; Potter, 2010; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). Vanassche et al. (2013) examined the level of conflict (i.e. frequent arguments, avoidance, neglectful behaviors, etc.) present in the home and found how this directly impacted the parent-child relationship; a disconnect in family functioning is often the result of high conflict, with limited communication and an imbalance in power. This parental conflict can disrupt the adolescent's "emotional security and their ability to regulate" (Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013, p 141).

In addition to conflict, a change in parental attention may also contribute to a decline in the adolescent's functioning. Potter (2010) attributes this decline to several factors: change in rules/structure within each household, less consistent interactions and interventions by the parents, and perhaps a change in parental/child dynamics that is indicative of friendship rather than a parental relationship. Ellwood & Stolberg (1993) corroborate Potter's findings, naming the inconsistencies in discipline and parental/child interaction as the main components in adjustment difficulties for adolescents. The change in dynamics accompanied by high levels of conflict present in the home can be damaging to the relationship between the adolescent and the parent (Potter, 2010).

Despite the traditionally negative developmental implications of high-conflict during the time of divorce, research has established that a marriage that was high conflict and ends in

divorce can have positive implications on the psychosocial health of the adolescent post-divorce (Kim, 2011; Strohschein, 2005; Richardson & McCabe, 2001; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). Strohschein states that this is known as the stress relief hypothesis (2011). This hypothesis maintains that an adolescent who has lived in an openly hostile and high-conflict home will experience improved mental health following the dissolution of the marriage, as a relief in stress may be experienced (Strohschein, 2005). Richardson & McCabe (2001) elaborate upon this, stating that adolescents from marriages of low-conflict reported a decreased ability to adapt to change and/or conflict as opposed to their peers from high conflict marriages. Divorce, in the case of a high-conflict marriage, may actually lead to an improved mental health status and higher levels of adjustment for the adolescent as opposed to their low-conflict counterparts (Strohschein, 2005; Richardson & McCabe, 2001).

Socioeconomic status.

Socioeconomic status has been shown to affect the family functioning both pre and post-divorce. Socioeconomic status is defined here as the income and educational level obtained by the parents. Lower socioeconomic status and the corresponding decreased financial resources can strain the marriage and cause an increase in levels of conflict (Strohschein, 2005). Intact marriages often report a higher socioeconomic status, while families of divorce report lower socioeconomic status (Kim, 2011; Strohschein, 2005; Aseltine, 1996). These financial strains can be inhibiting to the adjustment process of the adolescent and parent post-divorce (Kim, 2011; Lopez, 1987). Traditionally, this is found in regards to the mother, as the father often remains within the work force and maintains employment and income, or the mother works at a lower paying job (Strohschein, 2005). Regardless of maternal income, the overall income of the home is being divided and an unavoidable change in economic status occurs.

As aforementioned, high levels of conflict in the home are indicative of problems related to psychosocial development and adjustment of the adolescent, often leading to antisocial tendencies, depression, and anxiety (Strohschein, 2005). Strohschein (2005) found that in households with a high-income level and high educational achievement by the parents, that the adolescents have fewer emotional and behavioral problems, regardless if divorce occurs.

Quality of Divorce

Research suggests the quality of the divorce also influences the psychosocial functioning of the adolescent. Kim (2011) states that there are several stages to the divorce process: pre, in, and post-divorce. Each stage has important features and events that are unique and will impact the development of the child in various ways (Kim, 2011). Throughout these stages three factors proved to hold the most weight on the quality of divorce: co-parenting, communication, and involvement of the non-custodial parent.

Co-parenting.

Co-parenting has been established as an important aspect involved in the divorce stages of in and post-divorce (Kim, 2011). Research suggests that there is a connection between parent-to-parent relationships and child-to-parent relationships and adolescent functioning (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). For example, Amato, Kane, & James (2011) found that collaborative parenting, or co-parenting, following divorce aided in the adolescent's adjustment to the divorce, particularly when both parents remain positively and consistently engaged in the adolescent's life post-divorce.

In the event that amicable co-parenting cannot be established and maintained Amato, Kane, & James (2011) suggest that the adolescent will "suffer" and find no benefit from the co-parenting relationship. In fact, it is actually a detriment to the adolescent's wellbeing. Hakvoort, Bos, Balen, and Hermann (2011) emphasize the importance of the relationship between parents,

encouraging adaptive co-parenting to support the overall psychosocial development of the adolescent. Hakvoort, et. Al, (2011) found that post-divorce, high levels of conflict between parents create negative psychosocial development while positive regard and communication between parents allows for positive psychosocial development in the adolescent. These findings further demonstrate the importance of maintaining positive rapport and communication between parents. This parental communication promotes communication and rapport between the adolescent and the parents as the adolescent mirrors the dynamics of the parental relationship (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011).

Communication.

Parental communication plays an important role on the adolescent's experience of parental divorce. Positive and collaborative communication can start early within the divorce process, it is not limited to the "post" stage (Kim, 2011). By both parties actively participating in an amicable divorce, or dissolution, as opposed to a litigation process, the overall level of conflict is minimized and the communication maximized throughout the division of assets, living arrangements, and scheduling of joint custody (Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski, 2009). This can limit conflict, promote conversation, and minimize the overall psychosocial impact that the divorce may have on the adolescent (Bing, et al., 2009). Bing, et al. indicated that couples that sought dissolution as opposed to litigation reported more positive feelings towards their former partner, better communication regarding their adolescent, as well as increased rapport regarding household responsibilities and decisions (2009).

The importance of positive communication extends post-divorce as interaction and involvement of both parents within the adolescent's life continue to impact their functioning (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011). Amato, et al., found that positive regard and rapport encouraged frequent contact between parents and further engaged parenting over time (2011).

Involvement of non-custodial parent.

Involvement of the non-custodial parent in the adolescent's life is invaluable as this can establish a consistent and supportive environment. It can provide an unchanging relationship during a time when environment, education, socio-economic status, etc., may be changing. This support can be extended through relational engagement as well as fiscal support and responsibility by way of child support (Kushner, 2009). It has been suggested that it is not the custody arrangement, or the rate of interaction; rather, the resources that are available to the family that create a more beneficial outcome for the adolescent (Kushner, 2009). Kushner (2009) found that the provision of child-support or financial support was crucial to the overall success of the adolescent following divorce and an increase in adjustment can be sought through the implementation of joint custody. This study by Kushner (2009) was unique in this finding, highlighting this as a main support rather than a supplement. Despite Kushner's findings, highlighting the importance of fiscal support, the majority of research indicated that the success of the adolescent resided within the maintenance of relationships (parent-to-parent relationships and child-to-parent relationships).

Hakvoort, Bos, Balen, and Hermann (2011) found that that familial structure had little to do with the psychosocial functioning of the adolescent, rather the primary influence lying within the relationships that are maintained between the parents and the adolescent—therefore the authors advocate for joint custody in order to improve overall adjustment and development. Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood (2013) found that maintaining a relationship with both parents, custodial or otherwise, was essential to maintaining optimal psychosocial health and increased adjustment during the stages of divorce. Parental absence following divorce creates maladjustment and loss of security (Vanassche, et al, 2013). Vanassche et al. (2013),

goes on to state that joint custody creates the strongest relationship dynamic, as well as likened this to the dynamic present of non-divorced families.

Joint custody allows for the father, often the non-custodial parent, to remain actively engaged and live with their children frequently through the arrangement. It is essential for the non-custodial parent, often referred to as "father" in the literature reviewed, to live with the adolescent (Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2013). Otherwise, the relationship and previously established dynamic from parent to adolescent, established during the time of marriage, will diminish quickly (Vanassche, et al., 2013). Not only does frequent contact maintain the previously established dynamics, but also creates an increased level of well-being within the adolescent (Videon, 2002). Risch & Eccles (2004) echo this, finding that by the "father", or non-custodial parent, maintaining a consistent and engaged relationship with the adolescent that emotional distress and delinquency was minimized. Contrarily, Amato, Kane, & James found that frequent contact with the non-residential parent improves social functioning, however does not necessarily show increased levels of functioning in other areas (2011).

As a high rate of divorce occurs, often affecting adolescents and children of varying developmental stages, it is important to understand the impact that the pre and post-divorce hold on the psychosocial and academic functioning of the adolescent (Kim, 2011). Divorce is a unique experience unto each family. It is important to note that the success of the adolescent pre, in, and post-divorce is often dependent upon the positive and consistent communication and rapport established between the parents (Kim, 2011). As more successful transitions have occurred with improved parental communication, it is valuable to gain insight in different strategies to further ensure that the needs of the adolescent and the parent are met in order to facilitate positive and consistent communication between the parents, the adolescent, and the non-custodial parent. The

purpose of this study is to explore the current psychosocial and academic impacts of parental divorce on adolescents, and the variables that impacted these responses; focusing on the area of positive communication between parents, the psychosocial well-being of the adolescent demonstrated through academic performance, and the maintenance of positive relationships with both parents post-divorce.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the potential psychosocial and academic effects of parental divorce on adolescents from the perspective of social workers. The researcher interviewed licensed school social workers from the Twin Cities area using a pre-determined set of open-ended questions. The interviewer utilized content and thematic analysis, along with open and closed coding to examine the data collected.

Research Design

Sample.

The participants of this study included five licensed school social workers that have worked with adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. Participants were obtained from a list of members provided by The Minnesota School Social Workers Association (MSSWA) and are currently employed within a middle or high school within the Twin Cities area. The participants were contacted initially by email and those who indicated an interest in participating were contacted by telephone. Those that have experience with the aforementioned population and agreed to participate were included in the study. Individuals who have not worked with, or could not recall specific student examples of adolescents who experienced parental divorce were excluded from this study.

Protection of Human Subjects

To ensure the safety and privacy of all participants, a committee of mental health professionals as well as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of St. Thomas reviewed this study. This process ensures the IRB protocol was followed.

The participants of this study provided written consent to ensure understanding of practices, as well as potential benefits and risks. The participants signed the Research Information and Consent Form (Appendix A) that clearly outlined the procedure to ensure all participants' confidentiality as well as described all risks and benefits of the study. To ensure the privacy of all participants, the researcher followed the IRB approved protocol to hold participant data for three years on a password-protected computer (this includes the recordings from the in-person interviews conducted).

Data Collection

A semi-structured, in-person or Skype, interview composed of ten open-ended questions was conducted with each participant in the study. Each interview exceeded no more than 30-45 minutes in length.

The questions focused on the social worker's perception of their students' academic performance, psychosocial symptoms presented or enhanced by parental divorce, as well as self-reported psychosocial symptoms of the adolescent to the social worker (see Appendix B).

Data analysis.

The data was analyzed through the use of content analysis, thematic analysis, and open-coding/closed-coding. Content analysis was utilized to analyze the open-ended interview questions. This was selected as it is best-suited to transfer qualitative data, such as words, into a quantitative form through coding; creating categories to quantify verbal content (Monette,

Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). These categories were then further broken down from generalized themes to more specific ones.

Open-coding allowed for unrestricted themes to appear in the information that was collected through the qualitative interviews (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). These identified codes were then linked to themes and were modified throughout the coding process (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). As the coding process continued and several re-occurring/main themes were identified, closed-coding was then implemented in order to create a focused coding system. The coding was then focused on several identified themes within the data (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011).

Findings

This study was focused on exploring the psychosocial and academic implications of parental divorce on adolescents, as identified by school social workers. A review of relevant research on the effects of divorce indicated that both areas experienced significant impact during divorce (all stages) and the overall goal was the minimization of the disruption in these areas. A review of the data indicated an overall impact of positive communication and a supportive response from those around them (academic, community, etc.).

It was found that divorce has a psychosocial impact on the adolescent which then influences their academic performance. It is for this reason that findings will be presented in the aforementioned order: divorce (quality and communication), psychosocial impacts of divorce, and finally academic impact. Finally, it was found that the supports adolescents received influenced the overall psychosocial and academic impacts of parental divorce.

Four primary themes were found, many of which were supported by previous research: communication, demographic factors, effects of divorce, and supports extended to youth. *Communication* refers to the various forms of communication that take part within the divorce process that are of high-impact to the adolescent. This was divided into three sub-themes: Communication between parents, communication between parents and adolescents, and communication between parents and school/supports. *Demographic factors* include variables that influence the adolescent's response to divorce. This theme was divided into three subthemes: age, socioeconomic status, and length and quality of the divorce. *Effects of divorce* include the psychosocial and academic implications as they were reported by the adolescent to the social workers and/or observed by the school social worker. Finally, *supports* refer to the services that are offered to adolescents within the school system to assist in the transition of parental divorce. This final theme was again divided into three subthemes: individual, group, and community supports. These themes helped to explicate the adolescent's response to parental divorce and the supports that are available.

Communication

A major theme highlighted throughout the collection of data was the various forms of communication that occur between the different parties involved in the divorce. The styles of communication are often reflective of the dynamics that are present within the relationship and are highly influential upon the adolescent. The social workers interviewed revealed that open communication proved to be the most beneficial for adolescents when coping with parental divorce. Open communication was also helpful for the parental supports (school social workers, therapists, etc.) in order to assist in the transition and provide support during the time of change.

All school social workers interviewed addressed the importance of communication during all phases of parental divorce between all parties.

Communication between parents. All of the participants interviewed strongly advocated for open and positive communication between the parents during all phases of the divorce. Many believed that this was an important component to assist the adolescent in the transition of the divorce. One respondent stated:

“...I think if their parents had good communication and really tried to take responsibility for their part in the marriage, there was not as much negative talk about the other spouse, kind of help prepare their son or daughter for the divorce.”

A majority of the respondents found that the style of communication between parents held a significant impact on the overall coping ability and management of psychosocial impact for the adolescence: positive communication. One respondent provided their thoughts regarding the positive impact of healthy and open communication:

“...I think kids are more successful when their parents positively communicate and that those lines of communication are open.”

Communication between parents and adolescent. Communication between the parent and the adolescent is often an anchor within the transition of divorce. Open communication has proven to be helpful in providing information as well as a constant source of support.

Respondents advised promoting positive and open communication and noted how some parents struggle with what to say,:

“...I think sometimes it can be a little more open and if I could coach parents, I think parents don't listen to their adolescent. Parents are uncomfortable with the divorce,

some of the issues, they may be happy to be getting a divorce or ready to get a divorce, but they're not sure how to tell their adolescent about the divorce."

Communication between the parents and adolescent is not limited to active listening and engagement in conversation regarding matters of divorce, but extends to how the parents speak of the other parent in front of the adolescent.

"...if they remember to be parents first and to continue to parent and be respectful about how they talk about the other parent around the kid."

"...if the parents didn't have an amicable divorce and had negative comments back and forth and the students had a hard time not taking sides or getting overly concerned about it."

The tone that the parent sets regarding the other parent can often carry into the adolescent's relationship with their parents. Blaming language may start to take place and disrupt the dynamics that were previously held within the relationship, causing further change and transition.

"...they'll make comments about how mom didn't get child support or 'dad doesn't care about me cause he never calls me, I never see him.' Or sometimes they'll blame one parent for not treating the other parent nicely. And they'll blame one parent for the divorce. They get sorta caught up in kind of an unhealthy way in the whole thing."

The communication between parents and adolescents is a two way street. It is also important for the parents of the adolescent to be aware of manipulation that may occur by the adolescent out of frustration and hurt. Several respondents shared similar information regarding the intentional and unintentional manipulation of parents that may occur during this time.

“Sometimes there’s that issue where they might want to try to play their parents against each other. Sometimes not even aware of it, but it happens sometimes.”

Triangulation and boundaries. Respondents also shared that communication between parents can lead to triangulation with the child, which at times can create an uncomfortable dynamic for the adolescent, and places them in the role of the ‘messenger’ or the middleman between the parents. Triangulation, as defined by Buehler, Franck, & Cook (2009), is a “system process” which involves the parents including the child in the “conflictual interactions” between the parents. This is a by-product of this inclusion in parental conflict that the children often feel “caught...or torn between parents”(Buehler, Franck, & Cook, 2009).

All respondents noted that age or emotional development played an integral role in the overall response and engagement with their parental divorce. It has been noted by the respondents that this is demonstrated clearly through the triangulation and poor boundaries by the adolescent and parent in the engagement of the parental relationship and dynamic throughout the divorce process. It is not to say this is true of all parental divorce, however, this is often a trend with younger adolescents and non-amicable divorces within this specific population served by respondents.

“...some of the kids are triangulated in situations with parents who are in an ongoing battle.”

“Because some kids are treated as pawns. Or kept away from a parent. Between stressed emotions, when a parent gets alienated from their child. Or the child’s alienated from the parent. ...It just really throws kids to where they cannot concentrate and learn at school.”

Along with concerns of triangulation, adolescents often mimic the response of the parents:

“There tends to be a lot of internalizing and, you know, kinda seeing how the parents handle it. Sometimes they’ll handle it similarly. If their parent shuts down and doesn’t want to talk about it. Or if they’re really big and over-reactive. They tend to mimic one parent or the other.”

Often adolescents demonstrate an inability to remain within the previously assumed role of “child” during parental divorce. Some adolescents begin to fill bigger roles, often inappropriately. Lack of parental boundaries increased this response in adolescents.

Respondents did note that triangulation and decreased boundaries was not isolated to a specific stage of divorce, but more likely related to the age of the adolescent and their emotional stage of development. Another respondent stated that the role that the adolescent plays within the family, the overall emotional development, and the roles and boundaries that are maintained by the other members of the family, not the numerical age, that plays an integral role in the adaptation of the adolescent and overall psychosocial impact.

Some participants reported that younger students often found themselves becoming triangulated within the parental divorce dynamic, taking sides and blaming one parent over the other. Another school social work respondent shared their experience with parental boundaries and triangulation:

“Sometimes they’ll blame one parent for not treating the other parent nicely. And they’ll blame one parent for the divorce. They get sorta caught up in kind of an unhealthy way in the whole thing. Sometimes I think the boundaries are not really good. ...as they get into high school there are certain things that are appropriate to share, but then sometimes student have been known or privy to information that you ideally wouldn’t

want parents to share with their children. Kids don't need to know that one parent had drug issues or was unfaithful or this or that, I mean, not in great detail. I think that sometimes these parents have issues and the kids get too much sharing or inappropriate sharing, and just boundaries are not the best."

Respondents did share that when parents, despite emotional upset, were able to maintain age-appropriate boundaries with their adolescent that the adolescent was able to do much better in all venues.

Even if the parent is clearly upset, the kid will want to talk to them and help them. If they [the parent] leave it at "I'm just having a hard time, I can handle it." Then they do much better."

Communication between parents and school supports. Several of the social work respondents shared that a student coping with parental divorce is often an afterthought to those around them. It was noted that adolescents were often referred to school social workers by their teacher due to heightened behaviors in the classroom, not by a parent concerned about the impact of the divorce. One respondent reported the need to request information upfront in response to observable differences in the adolescent and their academic engagement.

"Some parents are very upfront. But a lot of times parents don't talk to me about that unless I ask explicitly."

Others discussed that some parents are proactive, notifying the school social worker during each step of the way. The involvement of the school is specific to each family's needs and what is communicated to academic environment.

“...a lot of times what will happen is that parents will contact us about the pending divorce. They want us to be aware of it, they don't want us to talk to the kid about it. They don't want to ruffle the feathers, they just want people to be aware that it's coming.”

School social work respondents also found value in collaborating with school staff by forming a united front through both parents and school, sending a consistent message.

“...sometimes...I may only be able to talk to one parent but the other parent isn't supportive. And they don't stop it, but they don't want to be a part of it. And that can be confusing for kids, too. If they're not motivated for it and they have a parent who doesn't want to work with me. “

Demographic Characteristics

All of the participants noted various demographic factors that influenced the adolescent's response to the divorce. These responses fell within four subcategories: age, gender, socioeconomic status, and length and quality of the divorce. Each school worker interfaced with a different category of student (upper/middle class, cognitive disabilities, low-income, etc). These factors were shared by the respondents in the initial contact, however, was not specifically named in respondents feedback. This allowed for the responses to represent a varied population. As many workers advocated for age, others were adamant that socioeconomic status was a main factor in the overall impact of the adolescent. Meanwhile other respondents were steadfast in their opinion that gender response and the length of the divorce proceedings were where the most weight was felt. Strong opinions and points were advocated for each subcategory.

Age.

The age of the adolescent appears to be connected to the adolescent's coping skills, the supports made available, emotional development, as well as the boundaries that they are able to maintain with their parents during this time. One respondent spoke on the trends that were noted amongst the younger adolescents that they served:

“Depending on their age and gender sometimes, they will act out more in school than they did before. It can be a clear trajectory of their parents separated around this time and moved out at this time and their behaviors increased and you can tie it to that.”

“With younger students it's more common for them to be concerned, or they sometimes feed into or can get in the middle...”

Research of literature as well as respondents indicated that the age in which the divorce occurred was crucial. An early divorce led to a smaller chance of psychosocial and academic implications as this became a norm:

“...many of the students that I've worked with in high school, the parents have been divorced for a while now. So they [the adolescent] have worked through some of those issues more, kinda set into their lifestyle.”

Socioeconomic status.

The literature reviewed for this study indicated the significant role that finances and socioeconomic status played leading up to the divorce as well as post-divorce for the parents and the adolescent. One participant reported on the financial difficulties that can occur as a result of divorce:

“...It can be a bigger issue, depending on the financial situation of the family, if the divorce results in like a middle class family kinda struggling economically. Because they now have two household to support instead of one. So that can be a real tough thing because you’re dealing with “We used to have this house and now we’re each living in an apartment and don’t have money for this, or this, or this, and we used to have”, so there’s that.”

Others referenced the positives and resiliency that were present within the students that have often lived through difficult economic times pre-divorce, hinting to a developed skill set and maturity that has developed as a result of coping with this stressor:

“...I was always amazed by my students who maybe have had different struggles throughout their lives, like economic struggles, had maybe not the most stable childhood and they would face the divorce seemed to be quite resilient to it. Like, they may struggle but kind of bounce back a little bit quicker or they would focus on maybe, the struggling part but then be able to find positives in it. Versus a student that I would meet with that hadn’t had a big upsetting event in their life happen. That would be a student that typically would really struggle with going through a divorce. ...they hadn’t struggled economically throughout their life or had anything really upsetting happen. To them, going through divorce, might be a really big change for them to get through.

Length and Quality of Divorce.

The length of the divorce was referenced on few occasions, however was not highlighted as a significant factor of impact. An element that occurred consistently throughout the collection of data was the theme regarding the length in which it took the divorce to occur. This is cumulative, meaning that this includes pre-divorce and the all elements that create a

dysfunctional and unhealthy environment in which the adolescent resides, leading up to parental divorce. The data suggests there is a relationship between the length of the divorce and psychosocial and academic impact on the adolescent. Respondents indicated that when the divorce process was lengthy the adolescent took longer to “rebound” from the divorce, as its results were ongoing.

“It’s families in transition, the fragmented families that are going through it. I think a lot of it has to do with how disruptive it is and how long, ongoing, it’s been. You know, kids who are going through 8, 9, 10 years of transition from you know, they’ve been going through the family strife, going through the divorce and now kind of ending up with the “new normal”. The shorter the period of time with that, the better.”

Effects of Divorce

The effects of the divorce were categorized into two sub themes: psychosocial and academic. The implications of these effects were reported by the adolescent to the respondents as well as observed by these school social workers.

Psychosocial. One respondent discussed the various coping mechanisms that can be utilized and have been observed within their work:

“...in high school and toward the end of middle school...kids are learning to manage their anxiety and depression in different ways. Some are really healthy and some are not so healthy. You know, alcohol and drugs can become an issue toward the end of middle school. Other psychosocial symptoms can be all the symptoms around anxiety and stress management...being anxious, being depressed, being sad. I think a lot of the kids that are using chemicals are making a connection, they may be trying to manage it. That can

be true to the case of eating disorders, 'My life feels kinda outta control, this is something I can control.'"

All shared the overall trends that were noted regarding depression, anxiety, and sadness that have been demonstrated by the adolescents served and connected this to the high level of transition and loss that is being experienced.

"...I get kids who are experiencing a lot of the symptoms of loss... being depressed about it [divorce], being sad about it."

"Kids talk about going from what used to be normal to a new normal....It's a period of transition. That's the hardest part, when it feels like it's unsettled. The rules are all changed."

"For the most part there's a lot of anxiety about appeasing both parents...it's confusing for them. So there's a lot of adjustment in figuring some of that stuff out...And sometimes there's depression, it's not so over, not like, 'I'm the reason my parents got a divorce!'" Nothing like that. But they'll wonder, "Did I cause fights, did I make things harder for them?" So that kind of stuff."

There were few positive impacts of parental divorce on adolescents, however respondents did consistently share similar information regarding the reported benefits. In marriages with a high amount of conflict and discord in communication between the parent and the adolescent, parental separation and divorce can help to alleviate the stress and provide a sense of relief for the adolescent. One school social work respondent shared:

“...the most positive effect is relief of the, you know, the fighting or the discord that’s happened in the family.”

Academic. All respondents noted an academic impact, regardless of the communication style that was present within the home. One respondent shared insight regarding changes in academic performance and school attendance being indicative of a larger systematic issue. They went on to share that some attendance issues (which then have a direct impact on academic performance due to the student’s inability to obtain, complete, submit school work) are linked to the back and forth between the different residences of the parents. One school social worker noted:

“There’s a definite impact. We have high achieving students, for the most part. But yeah, I would say without a doubt. I kinda talk about the iceberg theory. You know, the tip of the iceberg is attendance, grades, and behavior. When we see attendance change, behavior change, or grades change, that it’s related to something bigger. Kids I think, also, there are some attendance related things that are related to kids going back and forth with their parents.”

Another respondent commented that changes in academic performance were linked to distraction, disruption, and apathy. Schoolwork no longer becomes the priority as much larger issues are at play within the students’ life and therefore take the forefront of their attention.

“There is an impact. I think it’s so individual for kids. But I think most kids experience some disruption in their ability to um, you know, their homework schedules. There are just more things. You then just may be not caring quite as much. I get some of that. That apathy.”

Supports

An important piece that many of the school social workers referenced was the element of supports extended to the family and to the adolescent. These supports fall into three subthemes: individual, group, and community. Individual referring to the one on one or family support that can be received through professional services; group support refers to group therapies, support groups, etc. and community supports are those that are extended through community engagement, activities, and connections (coaches, pastors, priests, etc.). The subthemes were important and became defined within the data gathered as each element can appeal to different families and styles of receiving support as well as convenience as each family is moving through this transition. Regardless of the venue in which the support was received, it was made clear through the data gathered that support was necessary in aiding in the transition.

Individual. Adolescents often feel a sense of alienation from their peers. Half of the respondents shared that adolescents are often coached or encouraged to never share the “family business” with outsiders and to keep the discourse within the family.

“Sometimes the adolescents are coached, “We don’t share, we don’t talk to other people about this. This is our family business.” And that puts the adolescent in a tough spot. Cause if I’m struggling, as an adolescent, with my parents’ divorce, my parents may not be the best people to talk to about it because they’re involved and have their own perspective or bias.”

The difficulty with this is that all family members involved will have a subjective opinion of the matter, and there is no true “neutral” party, therefore the adolescent cannot receive an objective opinion or advice without emotional undertones from within the family.

“Sometimes it’s helpful for an adolescent to talk to someone who’s totally neutral. But I think that’s depending on the family dynamics that can sometimes be uncomfortable to break the family rules.”

One school social worker emphasized the importance of gaining an objective external support through family or individual counseling in order to minimize any animosity that may be present in the relationship in order to create a more healthful environment during the time of transition.

“...when parents are going through the divorce, they take the time to have counseling. Sometimes the student can have a little more insight into relationships, a little more insight into sometimes, marriages and relationships should they not work out and that it doesn’t mean we have to have all this animosity, that we’re still your parents and they can work together to parent me.”

Groups. Consistently throughout the data gathered, respondents shared strong and varying opinions regarding the impact that groups can offer adolescents. The respondents noted that the effectiveness of support groups is contingent upon the adolescent, their learning style, and the population served by the worker. One school social worker recommended a less direct approach in creating groups for adolescents. The strategy was to create a group using a “less problem-oriented” topic, which would allow for like-minded youth working through similar circumstances within the same space. While discussing less problematic issues, the element of parental divorce can then be brought up organically and processed together as opposed to being forced or pressured.

“You could have a really dynamic group, it’s kinda like classes and stuff where you can have a great combination in the class and it really works, in the group there has to be a trust level. And you’re sharing content that you wouldn’t in a class. But kids are fickle,

and middle school kids are fickle and don't want to be singled out, like "I don't want to be known as the kid who's parents are divorced." But if you get them together they would find out they have a lot in common and that could be really good. I think when you get them together around something that's less problem oriented and you talk about those issues, they'll say "Oh yeah, that's just like my family." That's much more effective than when you pull them out or singling them out...At high school they see an upsurge in kids attending the grief group because kids are realizing that they need that, and they're also getting out of class, so there's that double incentive."

Several respondents believed that the adolescent peer support carries more weight than that of a mental health professional or mentor by creating an opportunity for normalization and relatability within the group of adolescents and minimizing the feelings of isolation.

"I think with adolescents, sometimes, it's helpful for them in groups to talk to other adolescents whose parents are divorced or are getting divorced because sometimes a teenager will listen to another teenager before they listen to an adult. I think you can normalize that with a group. A group approach can be helpful."

One respondent shared their school's lack of providing supportive groups to the students was due to the perceived desire of students to attend. The respondent shared that there is a high need, however there are few students who are willing to be identified as participants and who are willing to give up their free time (as mental health groups are run during free hours in the middle school in which this worker is located). Within this setting academics are at the forefront and the school support staff creates a specific engagement plan tailored to the adolescent and the family based on communication or staff's knowledge of the adolescent.

“You know, there’s a lot of academic support pieces built in place, but specifically around that [divorce] we don’t have...like at the elementary school I know we did a divorce group or a transition group. At the middle school here, you know, nothing. I don’t think there’s anything at the high school either. It’s like, how would you go about doing that? But I think we provide a lot of triage services to students as needed. One of the things that happens, I think, as you go from elementary from middle school to high school is “Who’s gonna come to that group?” We do a grief group here at the middle school for kids who have lost a parent, but at the high school there’s a transition in kids’ feelings like “Do I want to go to the divorce group?””

“Depression, anxiety. Just trying to, it’s hard enough to adjust as an adolescent, let alone if your family’s doing different things. Sometimes they don’t want to talk about it with their peers, like they’re struggling and then they don’t want to talk about it even though half the kids they know are dealing with parental divorce. But they don’t wanna talk about it.”

This respondent went on to share that often a large number of new students transferring within the school year were engaged in some sort of transition related to their parents. These sentiments were echoed by several other respondents, voicing that despite a large number of students transitioning mid-year who may be in need of support, there was a lack of group resources targeted towards adolescents in “transition between parents”.

“...we’ll provide a lot of individual counseling, we provide lunch groups for some kids, sometimes our new student meetings for students that are new to the district, so that new

student group, includes students who are transferring from one life situation to another. When I was at the high school that was one thing that we found, 50% of the students that were new were in some sort of transition between parents. So, specifically I couldn't say we have any parental divorced focused interventions, we do more focused triage interventions. A lot of parental consultation on how to manage that."

Community. Respondents routinely shared the value of community supports for adolescents experiencing parental divorce. Particularly as these act as a neutral party that is still a trusted individual within the community and the family's lives. Respondents shared that the community resources offer objectivity to the adolescent where the parent could only offer subjectivity as they are too close to the divorce.

"If parents can be more open with it, talk to other adults who they trust, professionals or family members, people in the community who they're comfortable with and not keep it to themselves. ... I think recognizing that they themselves are compromised because of their own feelings and what they're going through. ...It is hard for people when they're close to something to take a step back and talk to their adolescent or child in an objective way. If you're getting divorced you're gonna have some feelings and it's gonna probably come out even when you don't want it to."

"...talk to other adults about it who may be school people or who have relationships with their children: synagogue, church, or wherever. But if they have people who are involved with their kids or family friends, adults that they trust, ...I think it's helpful. Kids just wanna be able to talk and not be judged."

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore different factors of parental divorce and their impact on the adolescent's psychosocial and academic development. The research sought to explore the psychosocial and academic implications that parental divorce has on adolescents and understand the different variables that contribute to the overall impact. Comparison of the literature and data gathered through interviews demonstrated many similarities. For instance, a similar progression of events that occurred with divorce as the instigator. Following the event of the divorce (including pre-divorce), the adolescent experiences psychosocial impacts, primarily expressed as feelings of depression and anxiety. This increased depression and anxiety then influenced the adolescent's academic performance. The data showed that there are several variables that were shared that can impact the adolescent negatively and positively: communication and supports. These two variables are able to intervene in the chain reaction aforementioned and influence the adolescent.

Respondents shared that when parents express themselves to their adolescent in an age appropriate manner by acknowledging the change and their child's feelings, this then allowed for a reduced level of anxiety in the adolescent. The adolescent may still experience anxiety during the divorce process, however, their role as "child" is secure and this adds an element of support during the occurrence of, what one respondent referred to as, "the new normal".

Communication

The communication that occurred throughout the stages of divorce appeared to hold significant weight in the overall psychosocial and academic development. The different styles of

communication were divided into three main areas: communication between parents, communication between parents and adolescents, and communication with school supports.

All of the respondents spoke heavily upon the importance of the communication styles held by the parents. Many shared the importance of parental communication remaining positive and engaging, not only between the parents but also being inclusive of the adolescent. Respondents shared the value of informing the adolescent and preparing them for the change that will be occurring, with consideration of age-appropriate boundaries. Communication was encouraged to remain positive and respectful between parents. As parental communication is observed by the adolescent and is often demonstrative of the overall dynamic and environment in which the adolescent resides and the environment that will develop as a result of the divorce.

The literature supports these findings, identifying that adolescents whose parents maintained open-communication and an amicable relationship had minimal disruption in their overall functioning post-divorce. For example, co-parenting or collaborative parenting was noted by Amato, Kane, & James (2011) as a highly influential aid in the adjustment of the adolescent to post-divorce. It was further noted that consistent and positive engagement of both parents throughout all stages of divorce led to a smoother transition and more positive outcome (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011).

Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski (2009) emphasized the stage in which the divorce proceedings occurred. They stated that by parents participating in an amicable divorce the overall rate of conflict is minimized and open communication is maximized (Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski, 2009). In order for the amicable divorce to occur, this means that positive communication must be established pre-divorce in order for an amicable divorce to be initiated and maintained. This then supports Bing, et al.'s finding that couples that sought dissolution

over litigation reported better communication regarding matters of their adolescent as well as more positive feelings towards the other party. Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski (2009) followed up with the point that the limiting of conflict and the promotion of conversation can support in the minimization of the psychosocial impact of the divorce on the adolescent.

Amato, Kane, & James (2001) also emphasized the value of positive communication extending and maintaining into the post-divorce relationship as the parent's communication and involvement in the adolescent's life continued to impact their overall development and functioning.

Overall, it appears that an amicable divorce that promotes positive communication between adults and age-appropriate conversation with the adolescent creates increased opportunity to process the change in events as they occur. By promoting and maintaining positive communication between and about parents, the adolescent is able to maintain positive language, observe respectful interactions, and reduce overall psychosocial impact. Self-discipline, self-awareness, and boundaries must be maintained to work toward this goal of positive communication.

Demographic Characteristics

Respondents provided data based on trends within the student populations that they worked. They were mindful to note that these are trends, not absolutes, within the students that they serve and that outliers do occur, as all adolescents have a different response to parental divorce based off of numerous variables.

Aseltine (1995) and Videon (2002) found in a review of literature that studies may have discovered differences in male and female response based on traditional gender roles and responses. Videon (2002) noted that females conventionally internalize their response while

males externalize this process. This was not found to be corroborated in the data that was gathered from the respondents. Information gathered was inconsistent and respondents held varying opinions on the topic, finding no true impact of student gender on adolescent response to parental divorce.

Respondents relied heavily upon age as a primary indicator on the adolescent's response to parental divorce. Strohschein (2005) found that the rate of avoidance and isolation occurring within individuals post-divorce was impacted by the age of the child, impacting adolescents at a higher rate. Several respondents supported this, stating that the age of the adolescent impacted their response to parental divorce. One respondent discussed the age differences in the anticipated responses, stating that elementary children often are saddened by the divorce while middle schoolers have difficulty communicating their responses and appear agitated or isolate themselves. This finding was supported by Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan (1995) who found that a divorce occurring during adolescence strongly impacts the connections that adolescents feel towards others.

Within the data gathered, few respondents touched on the impact of socioeconomic status. This was interesting as the literature leaned heavily upon socioeconomic status and its impact throughout all stages of divorce. A large amount of the literature reviewed states that marriages that maintain a lower socioeconomic status are predisposed to a higher level of conflict and stress, which can then cause strain on the marriage (Strohschein, 2005). This stress then extends past the dissolution of the marriage as the parents divide the income and adjust to a different standard of living, often with fewer resources (Kim, 2011; Lopez, 1987). The increased change and fewer resources then limit that adolescent in the progress of adjustment (Kim, 2011; Lopez, 1987).

Despite these findings, respondents shared a different perspective. There was no mention within any of the interviews conducted of marital stress or conflict pre-divorce due to financial difficulties; however, several respondents did make note of the adjustment and stressors that may occur post-divorce with the adolescent and family as a different standard of living occurs. One respondent stated that most of the clients they serve are lower middle class and the division of this tight and shared income often leads to a significant shift in housing as well as other needs being met. The data gathered for this study was consistent with the findings from research. In fact, moving a step further to make note of extra skills and coping mechanisms that may be present as a result of lower economic status.

It would seem that, unlike the literature, the respondents were privy to information regarding marital woes only when parents requested or when teachers requested the school social worker to intervene. This means that socioeconomic difficulties that may have been pre-existing were not observed by the social worker and taken into consideration upon the gathering of data.

A final element that was discussed was the length of the divorce proceedings. This theme was added when gathering data. There was brief mention of this in the research, however it was often discussed as different parenting methods, such as how they co-parented, the content and tenor of communication, and the amount of involvement of the non-custodial parent. The theory behind this is improved co-parenting and presence will create a more amicable divorce and therefore a shorter length of divorce and transition (Amato, Kane, & James, 2011).

Respondents shared the overall impact of the length of the divorce on the psychosocial and academic success of the adolescents that they worked with. Many shared that the frequent and drawn out period of transition leads to much unrest and anxiety, creating more challenging behaviors and the inability to focus academically or relationally with their peers.

Overall, an expedited divorce allows for a brief transition and minimal situational anxiety due to constant changing of environment, stimuli, custody arrangements, scheduling, etc. The minimization of transition allows for a set schedule to take place and a sense of routine and normalcy, which can allow for the adolescent to return to their childhood priorities of socialization, peer relationships, and academics.

Effects of Divorce

The effects of parental divorce on the adolescent were divided into two categories: psychosocial and academic. The literature reviewed demonstrated that there is a range of psychosocial responses of adolescents in regards to the onset of parental divorce: depression, anxiety, impaired social functioning, poor self-regulation, increased/decreased ego, as well as triangulation, individuation, and lack of intimacy in relationships (Ondruskova, 2013; Potter, 2010; Vousoura, Verdelli, Warner, Wickramaratne, & Baily, 2012; Johnson, & McNeil, 1998; Kim, 2011; Kushner, 2009; Guentherman & Hampton, 1992). This data was supported by the information gathered from respondents. Respondents reported on the presence of anxiety, depression, triangulation, decreased social functioning, as well as poor self-regulation among the adolescents in their schools who experience parental divorce.

Other notable behavioral and social responses have been identified within children whose parents are in the pre-divorce stage, such as lowered levels of social functioning. For example, difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships and participating in play with peers (Kim (2011). As the children grow into the adolescent stage, Strohschein (2005) found increased anti-social behaviors and tendencies of adolescents whose parents divorced, as opposed to their peers whose parents' marriage remained intact, with the exception of families with high conflict. Strohschein (2005) revealed that adolescents from high conflict families whose parents divorced

demonstrated decreased levels of antisocial tendencies, isolation, and avoidance post-divorce than adolescents from families of low-conflict.

The respondents supported Strohschein's findings by sharing that anxiety and isolation occurred in adolescents experiencing parental divorce, often as a result of depression. However, the adolescents who experienced high stress, conflict, or abuse in the home noted relief as a result of the divorce. One respondent noted that grief often occurred as a response to the feeling of relief for the adolescent. However, relief was the most emphasized emotion.

Again, respondents do not begin work with the adolescent until the teacher, school, parent, or adolescent deems it appropriate. Therefore, a lot of the behaviors that occur prior to the initiation of meetings with the school social worker go unnoticed. It is then that respondents shared observation of isolation, decrease in hygiene, lack of attendance, etc. when students were moving from one class to another in the hallways. Many of the school social work respondents reported that they were unable to maintain supportive sessions with the students, following the initial contact, unless the school or parent deems the sessions necessary. Often there is an academic impact on the adolescent as a response to the divorce. This occurs across all stages of parental divorce. Respondents shared that the adolescent is often distracted and grades will frequently, if not always, decline. However, respondents shared that parental engagement, rapport, and the rate of the divorce proceedings strongly influence this academic dip. Respondents noted a trend in long-term academic decline with higher conflict and more drawn out proceedings. However, when the divorce remains amicable and the parents are able to co-parent respectfully and resolve court proceedings quickly, the adolescent is able to fall into a schedule and resume academics, as they are no longer heavily distracted and/or distressed.

Supports

Another theme that emerged from the data collected was that of supports, which was divided into three subthemes: individual, group, and community. This theme emerged from the respondents in regards to communication, as well as support that the school provides.

Respondents shared different services that they recommend, internally as well as externally, from the school as well as discussed the importance of the family unit receiving support, not just the adolescent. Respondents shared the importance of having a “neutral” or “objective” party in order to ensure that the adolescent has an individual in which they can communicate freely and without judgment, as parents may personalize the accounts or feedback of the adolescent due to high emotions and personal investments. This can be through professional support or through a family member, family friend, or supportive adult (i.e. coach, pastor, etc.).

Respondents reported that community resources and support are invaluable to different families and individuals who are unable to otherwise connect with professional services or feel uncomfortable sharing with a professional counselor. Adolescents and their parents may feel more comfortable engaging with a member of the community with whom they have developed a relationship. For example, relationships through their church, athletics, or various clubs.

Seeking out individuals that are trusted and with whom consistent and supportive relationships have been maintained is helpful for the adolescent and the adult to receive insight and support.

Notably it can be difficult for a parent to reach out and engage others within very personal matters, however, the data gathered and literature reviewed reveal that supports with trusted adults and individuals is crucial when the adolescent is seeking a space to process emotions and frustrations regarding the changes that are occurring.

Individual support is indicative of therapeutic interventions that the adolescent and family can receive through and outside of the school and the school social worker (i.e. family therapy, individual therapy, trauma therapy, etc.). While group interventions are in regards to therapeutic and support groups that adolescents can become connected with through the school as well as outside within the community for long-term support.

Strengths and Limitations

By conducting an open-ended, semi-structured qualitative interview with six school social workers, I examined and compare the data collected. The qualitative interview allowed a more thorough look at the impact of divorce on the adolescent and the psychosocial and academic performance from the perspective of school social work professionals.

One strength of the study is that all of the participants have similar licensure and training. Another strength lies within the scope of the study. The questions are directed towards the specific experience of adolescents and represented a select population as opposed to a broad range of ages. By limiting the content and the age range of adolescents in which respondents can report upon, the data more efficiently represents the population in question, which allows for more accurate information to be compared to the literature reviewed.

The limitations of this study lie within the limited scope of participants that were interviewed, as well as the small number of adolescents that the interviewee's were able to report upon. Despite divorce affecting countless individuals yearly, this interview focused on a small sub-group located within a specific region of the United States, more specifically, the Twin Cities in Minnesota. There are also several variables within the divorce that will present inconsistencies in the data collected, i.e. length of the time of divorce, quality of the marriage, race, and age of student. There are also limitations within the population being interviewed

despite consistencies in training; the social worker's personal experience with divorce may create bias. The information obtained from the interviewees is also based upon memory offering a subjective perspective on the data collected. Finally, the data acquired is cross sectional, a limitation is created as questions will only be asked once. No follow-up interview will be conducted; therefore, no further clarification can be sought.

Implications for Social Work

There are several implications from the research completed. In regards to social work practices, the data collected has demonstrated a clear need for support and inclusion within the school system. Many of the "supports" that adolescents connect to (i.e. teacher, advisors, coaches, counselors, social workers, etc.) are within their school environment and may be the objective support that they seek while they are transitioning through their divorce process. In addition to individual support within the school, respondents also reported on the importance of group supports to provide peer support, camaraderie and the experience of a safe community to speak openly about their process.

Implications of these findings for social work policy are education and support around the outreach and trainings that school social workers and other school professionals may receive in order to recognize symptoms and signs of divorce related distress. This training can assist them in engaging with the adolescent to provide support or find appropriate supports as well as to advocate for the youth in order to have their needs met during the high stress time. Another implication for social work policy is advocacy to provide education for adolescents and their parents through groups that allow for support and education around communication across all platforms, as this has been demonstrated as an area of high importance.

The importance of communication and support should continue to be studied in social work research in order to minimize the psychosocial and academic impact of parental divorce on the adolescent. It would also be of importance to research and compare families from different socioeconomic groups, as well as trends among families of culturally diverse backgrounds. Particularly as these populations were often minimized in the research or described as being incomplete. This was mirrored in the feedback from school social workers that participated in this study, as they primarily worked with Caucasian families. However, socioeconomic status and other diversifying characteristics were present in the research.

Conclusion

Parental divorce is often a highly stressful process that can create long-lasting psychosocial and academic impacts for the adolescents involved. However, these findings and corresponding literature indicate that respectful and open communication between parents, clear boundary setting, positive communication with and around adolescents, as well as encouraging outside support for both parents and adolescents can minimize any short-term and long-term psychosocial and academic impacts related to the divorce. When divorce is imminent it is helpful to see the positive results that these variables can provide to the families and adolescents during this time of transition and emotional upset. These findings add to the knowledge base by reinforcing findings on positive and respectful parental communication as a means of minimizing psychosocial and academic implications on adolescents.

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Appendix A



UNIVERSITY of ST. THOMAS
MINNESOTA

Consent Form

Potential Psychosocial and Academic Implications for Adolescents that Experience Parental

Divorce: A Social Work Perspective

858918-1

You are invited to participate in a research study about investigating the potential psychosocial and academic implications that parental divorce has on an adolescent. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a member of the MSSWA. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a licensed school social worker employed in a Twin Cities area middle school, with previous experience with adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Brianne Wolf, Melissa Lundquist, MSW, Ph.D., and School of Social Work at the College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to identify the potential psychosocial and academic impact on adolescents who have experienced parental divorce. This topic will be explored by examining the perspective of social workers that serve this specific population within the school system. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with licensed school social workers placed in middle schools and high schools in the Twin Cities area. The questions will focus on the social worker's perception of their students' academic performance, psychosocial symptoms presented or enhanced by parental divorce, as well as self-reported psychosocial symptoms of the adolescent to the social worker. Information gained from this study can inform work with these students by helping identify potential psychosocial challenges and perhaps prevent academic decline that may be associated with parental divorce.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: to participate in a qualitative interview consisting of 10 open-ended questions over the span of 30-45 minutes, which will be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interviews may be conducted in-

person or via digital communication for ease of convenience, i.e. Skype or FaceTime. The interviews will be conducted in a time and place that is convenient for you.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

The study has some minor risks. You may experience some emotional distress when discussing the impact of parental divorce if you have experienced parental divorce as a child or adolescent and found it to be traumatic or upsetting. You can stop the interview at anytime if you are experiencing any discomfort or distress.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

Compensation

There is no compensation for participation.

Privacy

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. Interviews will be held at a time and location of the interviewee's choice.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include recordings, transcripts, master lists of information, and computer records. All digital records will be stored on my personal computer that is under password protection. I will have sole access to these documents. Any handwritten or hardcopy documents will be scanned and saved in my personal computer. The hard copy will be shredded and destroyed. If this is not suitable for certain items, due to data retention, the hardcopy will be stored in a locked file cabinet in my office at 2120 Park Ave, Minneapolis, MN 55404. All data stored digitally will be deleted May 1, 2019. I will personally transcribe the data on the audio recording to my personal password protected computer. The data will be transferred to my computer and deleted from the device. The audio from the interview will be deleted after 3 years, along with any other written data collected during this time. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the School of Social Work, the College of St.

Catherine, or the University of St. Thomas. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be utilized. You can withdraw by emailing the researcher with your name and intention to withdraw. No further steps need to be taken.

You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Brianne Wolf. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 815.608.7748 or by email at wolf9481@stthomas.edu. You may reach my advisor, Melissa Lundquist, at 651.962.5813 or by email at lund1429@stthomas.edu.

You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

Statement of Consent

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B

1. What are some psychosocial symptoms of adolescents that were self-reported?
2. During this past school year, talk about psychosocial symptoms that you observed that were not reported by the adolescent.
3. In your sessions with adolescents, what are the positive and negative effects of parental divorce that you have observed or that the adolescent disclosed?
4. What demonstrable academic effects have occurred due to parental divorce?
5. What supports are extended at school to adolescents experiencing parental divorce?
6. Of the adolescents that spoke about the divorce, were there any factors that made the outcome more positive or negative?
7. What are observable responses based on age, gender, and socioeconomic status?
8. Talk about how divorce impacts academic performance in students.
9. What is the primary communication style that parents of adolescents demonstrate (observed by yourself or reported by the adolescent)?
10. Of the adolescents that shared about their parents' communication, what was the difference in psychosocial and academic success of those whose parents communicated positively versus those who communicated with high conflict?