An Exploration of Parental Divorce and Separation on Emerging Adult Romantic Relationships

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Introduction

Emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) is widely recognized as a developmental stage marked by romantic relationship decision-making and increased questioning about finding a long-term partner (e.g., Arnett, 2024; Olmstead, 2020). During this period, many individuals engage in romantic and sexual exploration while maintaining ambitions and expectations for marriage (e.g., Willoughby & James, 2017). Scholars argue that the pathway to marriage has become increasingly ambiguous, with fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment (e.g., Stanley et al., 2017; Stanley et al., 2010). Research suggests that engaging in conversations to clarify relationship status can help emerging adults maintain long-term, committed relationships and reduce ambiguity (Sibley et al., 2024; Knopp, 2020).

Although many emerging adults (18-29 years old) have experienced instability in their caregivers' relationships, there is substantial evidence that emerging adults continue to have a strong desire to marry, and that marriage remains an important life goal (e.g., Willoughby & James, 2017; Willoughby, 2021). However, instead of marriage acting as a cornerstone in the lives of emerging adults, some scholars believe that many are now treating marriage as a capstone (Hawkins et al., 2022).

As reported by Paul Amato and Sarah Patterson, the intergenerational transmission of divorce "appears to be a real phenomenon—perhaps as well established as any finding in the social sciences… marital instability in the family of origin continues to be one of the most reliable predictors of adult divorce" (Amato & Patterson, 2017, p. 723).

Some studies report that emerging adults whose parents divorce have more negative attitudes about marriage and commitment, and in their own romantic relationships indicate: lower relationship satisfaction, more conflict, and less commitment (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2012; Whitton et al., 2008; Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011).

Method

Present Study
The purpose of this research study is to explore how parental divorce and separation impact emerging adults and their beliefs about commitment in romantic relationships and marriage. Research indicates that commitment is a vital component to the success of long-term romantic relationships (Stanley, 2010).

Participants
Twenty-five (12 men, 13 women) unmarried emerging adults at a large Midwestern university in the U.S. participated and data was collected through intensive interviewing. Sample diversity: 52% White, 24% Latino, 12% African American, and 12% bi-racial. Fifty-two percent of the participants were currently in a romantic relationship (7 with oppostite-sex partners, 6 with a same sex partner).

Research Questions
1. How do emerging adults construct meaning around their parents' divorce or separation, including their views on acceptable reasons for relationship dissolution and the communication of that decision?
2. How do emerging adults experience and navigate changes in family relationships (with parents, siblings, and step-parents) following parental divorce or separation, and in what ways do these relational shifts shape their orientations toward romantic commitment and marriage?
3. What processes do emerging adults use to develop resilience and intentional strategies for committed romantic relationships in the aftermath of parental divorce or separation?

Analysis

Preliminary analysis of the data utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2025). This approach allowed the researchers to understand and document how this cohort of emerging adults developed their own beliefs about commitment within relationships. The researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques before coding (Charmaz, 2025).

Initial coding in this ongoing constructivist grounded theory study revealed seven preliminary themes showing how emerging adults make sense of and respond to parental divorce or separation. Participants grappled with unanswered questions about the divorce while recognizing intergenerational patterns in their parents' own struggles. They described hesitancy searching for romantic partners, navigated complex and ambivalent feelings toward parental remarriage, and experienced variability in sibling and parent-child relationships that either strengthened or weakened. Positive commitment models from extended family and friends offered hope, while diverse coping strategies including religion, therapy, friends, substance use, and casual sexual encounters. Not all of these coping strategies proved to be beneficial. Despite these challenges, many maintained aspirations for committed partnerships and marriage, pointing to active processes of meaning-making and resilience. Focused and theoretical coding continues to develop these initial observations.

Results

Grappling with Unanswered Questions About Parental Divorce/Separation
"They didn't really tell me anything. It just kind of started happening around me. I put two and two together and no longer living with dad…And his cars just started slowly disappearing. And then she told me that we couldn't go on vacations anymore, and then it wasn't till a while later I found out that he had taken the money and used it to take his mistress and her daughter to Disneyland."

Recognizing Intergenerational Patterns in Parental Struggles
"Here's a funny thing. My mom's parents are also divorced. Their current marriage seems good. Yes. So, my mom's parents got remarried. I believe my dad's parents, I think that that's, I don't think that they ever got divorced. They seemed to have a very good relationship when I had contact with them. You know, they bicker like old people do, but that's because they're old. Haha. But no, now that I'm thinking about it, I, and it could also be you know, as ive gotten older, people vent more to me. So, I could just be hearing more and more about like, the negatives or like, just everyday strains."

Experiencing Variability in Post-Dissolution Family Relationships
"Out of the two of my parents, I'm probably closer to my mom. Just because I end up seeing her way more than my dad. But as how to- as how the divorce kind of like affected my relationship with both of them, I would say… I guess for my dad a little bit more distant. Just because, well I don't see him as much. So, I would say that kind of impacted it…I have no idea. I guess its like the way we were raised. I do love my parents but a lot of their advice for like emotional issues is like 'oh well its okay just try harder.' And stuff like that. Which is like well meaning but like its not what I wanted to hear. It's not a whole lot of like emotional comforting and stuff. We're also not like a super super physically affectionate family."

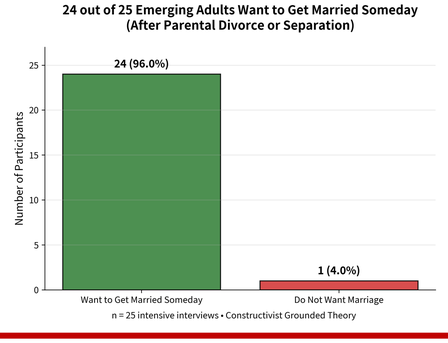
Navigating Complex and Ambivalent Feelings Toward Parental Remarriage
"I wouldn't say we are close but he's pretty cool I've met a lot of his family, and he has a lot of grandchildren and they really like me. Whenever they come into town, I play with them, but he's cool I wouldn't say he's also he doesn't abuse alcohol, but he is a drinker whenever there's occasions, so I don't like that he drinks but I have mixed feelings. Yeah, he's alright but I don't know, his jokes aren't really that funny. Haha."

Results

Exercising Caution and Hesitancy in Romantic Partner Search
"I'm very quick to say no. So, I guess there's the even just getting into a relationship feels to me like, I notice when I'm in a talking stage or whatever. I think I may be a little bit avoidant and like suddenly I'm like oh this is like too much. Like this is, why are you know cause like I'm so scared of like getting that relationship becoming such a big part of my life that when it turns bad because in my head like it definitely will even though I know that's not actually true. Then I can't get out, because I'll be so in love or whatever."

Employing Diverse Coping Strategies in Response to Family Disruption
"Find people who actually care about you and are willing to listen. Do not do what I did. Do not fall into peer pressure, do not do certain things that are not, not good to do. I'll put it that way…Yeah, drugs. Do not do that. Don't, just simply don't fall into peer pressure and don't fall into that trap. Yeah, and don't drink a lot either. Drink when you can drink legally, not younger…Even if you are of age, do not drink like a freaking maniac like some people are."

Drawing on Positive Commitment Models from Extended Family and Friends
"They still loved each other and did what they could to work things out. And so, they were always a two-of-them against the world sort of like…And my grandmother's the boss of the house. She always was. And my grandfather worshipped the ground she walked on. But that's not to say he was like a doormat, but it was just he had his things, but it was in a partnership service to his wife who had her own things going on, and she did her things and together they sort of like tag teamed life."



Conclusion

These preliminary findings from our constructivist grounded theory analysis highlight the active meaning-making processes through which emerging adults navigate parental divorce or separation. Participants described unresolved questions about the dissolution, hesitancy when entering romantic relationships, and complex feelings toward parental remarriage. Family relationships often shifted, sometimes strengthening and other times weakening, while many recognized intergenerational patterns in their parents' own struggles. Positive models of commitment from extended family and friends served as protective factors, and participants used varied coping strategies, including religion, substance use, and casual sexual encounters. A clear pattern of resilient commitment also emerged, with most participants expressing a strong desire for stable, long-term romantic partnerships and marriage.

These initial observations illustrate both risks and resilience in the intergenerational transmission of relationship patterns. They extend prior work on resilient commitment by showing how emerging adults actively construct meaning, draw on broader social networks, and develop strategies for intentional relationships despite family-of-origin instability. Clinically and educationally, the findings underscore the value of helping emerging adults process unanswered questions, navigate complex family emotions, and identify positive relational models. As focused and theoretical coding continue, future work will develop a substantive theory of how emerging adults shape commitment orientations following parental divorce or separation.

References & Interview Questions