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Parental Divorce: Social Workers Reflect on Long-term Effects for Young Adults

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Parental Divorce: Social Workers Reflect on Long-term Effects for Young Adults

Submitted by Amanda Vonbergen

MSW Clinical Research Paper

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 their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the long-term effects of parental divorce on young adults from the perspective of social workers who have worked with this population. In 2002, the U.S. Census Bureau documented that one out of every two marriages ended in divorce. As children with divorced parents reach young adulthood, major concerns include thoughts of betrayal, abandonment and the fear of not being loved (Conway, Christensen & Herlihy, 2009). Eight licensed clinical social workers were interviewed to identify the common problems, needs and interventions relevant to their work with young adults who may be dealing with the effects of a parental divorce. Findings showed that young adults from divorced backgrounds may have problems related to modeling, social skills and romantic relationships. Recommendations for future practitioners to guide their work with this population include: using a client-centered approach, and avoiding assumptions about clients.

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Introduction

In the last century, marriage has become institutionalized and does not hold the same strength it once did (Kenny, 2000). Once taboo, divorce has become socially acceptable in the United States. In 2002, the U.S. Census Bureau documented that one out of every two marriages ended in divorce. With 2,157,000 reported marriages in the United States in 2009, that would mean that over 1,000,000 of those marriages will end in divorce (Tehada-Vera & Sutton, 2010).

Divorce affects the couple who is ending their marriage, and affects their children as well. Approximately one million children are affected by divorce each year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Research has shown that parental divorce has many negative effects on children (Lewis & Sammons, 2001). Some of these effects include academic failure, poor peer relationships and a lack of commitment to personal relationships (Lewis & Sammons, 2001). During a time where their lives are drastically changing, children struggle to maintain relationships (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

These problems do not diminish overtime and continue throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Kim, 2011). As children with divorced parents reach young adulthood, major concerns include thoughts of betrayal, abandonment and the fear of not being loved (Conway, Christensen & Herlihy, 2009). Young adults who experienced parental divorce in childhood often continue to struggle in relationships and find it difficult to fully commit themselves to a romantic partner (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Ross and Wynne encapsulated the problem by stating that “divorce is not merely a single event, but rather is an element of a more complex series of transitions” (2010, pg. 4). Adverse effects on children have been shown to last years after the divorce occurs,

particularly as they reach young adulthood and begin to have serious intimate relationships (Kenny, 2000; Shulman, Scharf, Lumer & Maurer, 2001; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; Conway, Christensen & Herlihy, 2003; Segrin, Taylor & Altman, 2005; Cui, Fincham & Durtschi, 2011).

When researching young adults, Social Learning Theory has been used as a lens to discuss the long-term effects of divorce (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; Segrin, Taylor & Altman, 2005, Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Cui and Fincham, 2010). Social Learning Theory asserts that behavior is learned by observing models (Bandura, 1977). For children, a main model is their parents, and parents' interactions with one another influence how children will act in their own romantic relationships (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; Wolfinger, 2005; Segrin et al., 2005; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Cui & Fincham, 2010). Children who experience parental divorce have been found to be twice as likely to divorce themselves when compared to children from married parents (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Although the effects of divorce are shown to last well into adulthood, there are few resources that help practitioners working with this population. Much of the research addresses the parents, helping them to mitigate the effects of divorce on their children (Whiteside, 1998; Luepnitz, 1982; Lewis & Sammons, 2001). Few studies have discussed practitioners' direct practice with children of divorce (Whiteside, 1998, Rich et al., 2007) and only one study was directed at interventions to help young adults experiencing effects of parental divorce (Johnson, 2010). It is important as social workers to be able to work with various populations regardless of their needs. Social workers working with

young adults who may be experiencing the long-term effects of divorce need some wisdom and resources to assist them in their practice.

The purpose of this study was to examine the long-term effects of parental divorce on young adults from the perspective of social workers who have worked with this population. In gaining their perspectives, social workers were invited to identify recommendations for future practitioners, to guide their work with clients who may experience long-term effects of divorce.

Literature Review

Research on the effects of parental divorce have been completed for many years. While the majority of studies focus on the short-term effects of research, more recently long-term effects have been identified as well. The following review of the literature will discuss how parental divorce affects males and females differently; the short-term effects of parental divorce, including educational, emotional and relational effects and the positive short-term effects of divorce; the long-term effects of parental divorce, including Social Learning Theory as a lens, romantic relationships, views on marriage and divorce and the positive long-term effects of divorce; and finally interventions for helping children from divorced families.

Gender

Previous studies have shown differential effects for males and females who have experienced parental divorce. According to Mullett and Stolberg (2002), married couples where the woman had experienced parental divorce were 87% more likely to divorce than if both the man and woman had parents who remained married. However, when just the man experienced parental divorce, the couple was no more likely to divorce than a couple who both grew up with married parents (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). The following sections illustrate how males and females are affected differently by their parents divorce.

Males

In 1988, Amato found that married men from divorced families of origin were more likely to agree that divorce is the best option for marital problems compared to other married men. Nevertheless, Mullett and Stolberg found that men from divorced parents were no more likely to get a divorce than men from married parents (2002). They

also found that men from divorced backgrounds were less likely to be emotionally intimate and more likely to distance themselves from their partners during conflict (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Likewise, men in this study who experienced parental divorce were less likely to marry than their female counterparts (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Conway et al. (2003), found positive effects for male children of divorce. For example, male children of divorce had a higher score on a self-esteem scale than their female counterparts which researchers associated with being able to cope effectively with their parents' divorce (Conway et al., 2003). Researchers found that males seemed to show more adverse effects of divorce in adolescence (Conway et al., 2003). However, males were not without problems in young adulthood. Cui and Fincham found that parental conflict before divorce led to a high level of verbal and physical aggression from males towards their romantic partners in young adulthood (2010).

Females

Adult women from divorced parents were found to view marriage in different ways than their counterparts from intact families. Women from divorced backgrounds were shown to view the role of being a mother as more important than the role of being a wife (Amato, 1988). These women did not think that you needed to be a wife, in order to be a mother (Amato, 1988). Further effects of divorce on females were researched many years later. Mullett and Stolberg found that women from divorced parents were more likely than their male counterparts to have difficulties in their relationships due to insecurity (2002). Insecurities in relationships were found to be higher among the female

participants who did not have a steady father figure in their life (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Further issues arise for females, as they have been shown to have more sexual partners when compared to their male counterparts from divorced backgrounds (Conway et al., 2003). Although men were found to demonstrate increased verbal and physical aggression, females were found to exhibit more communication conflicts in relationships (Conway et al., 2003) and to demonstrate poor verbal and non-verbal communication (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Overall, women from divorced families reported being less satisfied in their relationships, which correlated with their decreased desire to get married (Cui et al., 2011).

Short-term Effects

Much of the research on the effects of divorce focuses on the immediate or short term effects it has on children. The main subjects discussed include the effects on education, emotions, and relationships. The positive effects of divorce will also be addressed.

Education

Many studies have shown the negative effects that parental divorce has on a child's education (Kenny, 2000; Martin, Specter, Martin and Martin, 2003; Jellinek, 2010; Kim, 2011). Kenny stated that children from divorced families had significantly lower scores in school than their counterparts from intact families (2000). In their study with high school students, Martin et al., found that children of divorced families were two times more likely to drop out of school than their peers who grew up in intact families (2003).

In 2010, Jellinek viewed the educational setback in children experiencing parental divorce as a normal adverse affect for children experiencing parental divorce. Jellinek attributed their decrease in academic achievement to their inability to concentrate on school work when such hardships were occurring at home (2010). In her overview of the effects of divorce for children, Jellinek noted that these educational problems should decrease after a year and should not be seen as a true problem unless the child did not increase their grades the following year (2010). Conversely, in her longitudinal study, Kim (2011) surveyed students each year beginning in kindergarten through eighth grade and determined that it was unclear if children with divorced parents were ever fully able to catch up academically to their peers from intact families.

Emotions

In addition to external effects of divorce on children, internal or emotional effects have been consistently documented as well. Children experienced feelings of self-blame after their parents' divorce (Zinsmeister, 1997). In his study surveying children in elementary school who experienced their parents' divorce, Zinsmeister found that approximately one fourth of participants blamed themselves for their parents break-up (1997). Likewise, children have many emotions that arise after the divorce, including anger, fear and hopelessness (Kenny, 2000). In his overview of child development, Galvin (2006), identified that when children experienced stress in one area of their lives it expanded into many other areas and affected their overall well-being.

In their interviews with undergraduate college students between the ages of 18 and 21, Ross and Wynne (2010), found that participants identified their parents' divorce as a highly stressful life event and reported experiencing anxiety and depression during

and after the event. Furthermore, the stressful event of their parents' divorce led these students to feel that they could not control the events of their lives and that they were controlled by others around them (Ross & Wynne, 2010).

Relationships

The emotional effects of divorce transcend into the child's relationships, resulting in relationship strain (Amato, 1988). During his interviews with family members about their attitudes regarding family relationships, Amato found that the most stressful relationship occurred between the children and the non-custodial parent (Amato, 1988). Further, the relationship between the custodial parent and the child became strained once remarriage occurred (Amato, 1988).

According to Zinsmeister, the majority of children live with their mothers with around half of them having no contact with their fathers for a year after the divorce (1997). This distance created a further relationship barrier in the children's lives. Mullett and Stolberg documented the importance of same sex relationships between parents and their children, noting that the negative effects of divorce are greater in children who lose contact with their same sex parent (2002). In her overview of issues related to children experiencing parental divorce, Kenny noted that strained relationships go beyond just the parents and include the children's teachers, peers and extended family members (2000).

The stressful and strained relationships that occurred for children after divorce may stem from insecurities about relationships (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Kim (2011), maintained that the dissolution of social relationships is the biggest struggle for children after their parents divorce, while things such as educational setbacks can be made up for, often times social relationships cannot mend as quickly.

Positive short-term effects

Through all of the negative short-term effects children experience after their parents' divorce, some positive effects have emerged in the research as well. Shulman, Scharf, Lumer and Maurer found that participants who had strained relationships after a parental divorce also felt a greater need to problem solve in order to maintain relationships (2001). Lewis and Sammons identified that participants' emotional and economic stability increased when both parents made an effort to continue playing a role in the child's life regardless of custody (2001). Likewise, Conway et al. identified numerous positive effects on children when both parents remained in the child's life including an increased maturity as well as increased empathy towards others (2003).

Long-term Effects

Although the main focus of research on the effects of divorce has focused on the short-term effects, researchers have also identified some long term-effects for children with divorced parents. Particularly these effects revolve around modeling, romantic relationships and views about marriage and divorce.

Social Learning Theory as a Lens

In studying the long-term effects of divorce, researchers have used Social Learning Theory to discuss the effects on children (Mullett & Stollberg, 2002; Kapinus, 2005; Segrin et al., 2005; Wolfinger, 2005; Cui et al., 2011). Social Learning Theory asserts that humans learn attitudes and behaviors by observing others and modeling them. Applied to children of divorce, the impact of behaviors and attitudes about relationships, has been shown in the literature.

In 2005, Kapinus used Social Learning Theory to explain why many of their participants who experienced parental divorce carried adverse views of relationships and marriage during adulthood. Likewise, Cui et al. (2011), used Social Learning Theory to assert that children form their attitudes and behaviors towards their own relationships based on observations of how their parents handled their relationship and the divorce process. To further show the logic behind Social Learning Theory, Segrin et al. (2005) explained their results by stating that when children view their parents' divorce as negative, they in turn develop negative views of marriage and avoid intimate relationships in the future. On the other hand, children from intact families may view marriage in a more positive way, leading them to view divorce as a negative thing and make efforts to avoid divorcing (Segrin et al., 2005).

Amato noted that an increasing number of children from divorced family backgrounds experienced a divorce in their own romantic relationships and that their children also experienced a divorce. Amato concluded that divorce had become a learned behavior modeled from parents to their offspring creating a cycle of divorce (1994). Other researchers have shown that how children interact in their relationships during young adulthood can be traced back to the influence of their parents' interactions with one another (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; Wolfinger, 2005; Segrin et al., 2005; Cunningham & Thornton, 2006; Cui and Fincham, 2010). According to Mullett and Stolberg, parental divorce exposes children to poor models of communication and conflict management, which in turn can lead them to develop poor communication patterns themselves (2002). Couples in which neither partner experienced a parental divorce have been shown to communicate more effectively and problem solve together,

which could be a reflection on the more successful modeling by their parents (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

The cycle of divorce occurs when children of divorced parents get divorced themselves and consequently their children get divorced as well; this cycle occurs generation to generation (Wolfinger, 2005). This cycle of divorce has been identified in results showing that the greater number of divorces in a person's background greatly increases their chance of getting a divorce (Wolfinger, 2005). Segrin, Taylor and Altman (2005), proposed that childrens' observations of their parents divorce may teach children that divorce is the best or most acceptable way to deal with conflicts in relationships. Consequently, children may learn that marriage is not a permanent commitment and that conversely it is a highly conflictual relationship that should be avoided (Segrin et al., 2005).

Observing models does not always just include behaviors, but can include attitudes as well. This has resulted in children having negative attitudes towards marriage, divorce and relationships in general (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006). Cui and Fincham (2010) proposed that observing conflicted interactions between parents models for children how to communicate and relate to a romantic partner. This observation in turn shapes how children interact with romantic partners in young adulthood (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

Social Learning Theory can be used as a lens to further understand how parental divorce effects children. Research examining the long-term effects of divorce has shown that views and behaviors related to romantic relationships are affected by parental divorce.

Romantic Relationships

Children may seem to be adjusting well to their parent's divorce, only to have problems later in life, particularly when developing romantic relationships (Kenny, 2000). For young adults who experienced their parents' divorce during childhood the main issue in romantic relationships is that of trust (Shulman et al., 2001). In their survey of college students between the ages of 19 to 29 who experienced parental divorce in childhood, Shulman et al. found that 82% of the participants felt that they could not trust their dating partners and that this dis-trust deterred them from seriously committing to the relationship (2001).

Similarly, in their study with undergraduate students who had been dating someone for at least three months, Mullett and Stolberg (2002) found that compared to their peers from intact families, participants from divorced families were more concerned about commitment. The concern about commitment correlated with participants' worries about partner betrayal (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). However, regardless of their fears, young adults from divorced backgrounds were more likely to be in some form of romantic relationship than their counterparts (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Fear of rejection and lack of trust in romantic relationships, may lead some young adults to self-sabotage (Conway, Christensen & Herlihy, 2003). In this context, participants self-sabotage meant ruining their own relationships on purpose in order to avoid being hurt by their partners at a later date and to stay away from the conversations about further commitment with their partners (Conway, et al., 2003).

Although, young adults from families with divorced parents were likely to be in some sort of romantic relationship, Segrin, Taylor and Altman (2005) found that these

young adults were 30% less likely than those from intact families to be in a relationship that they considered to be close and intimate. Again this lack of intimacy was attributed to the fear of commitment that long-term relationships require (Segrin et al., 2005). In a 14 week study examining relationships in college students and comparing those from divorced parents and married parents, Cui, Fincham and Durtschi (2011), found similar issues with commitment. Overall, participants who experienced parental divorce were less satisfied with their relationships and perceived that the relationships would eventually end (Cui et al., 2011). According to Cui et al., romantic relationships were viewed by this population of young adults as something that could be ended easily, with no incentive for a committed relationship (2011).

Marriage and Divorce

In addition to commitment issues, how children from divorce view marriage and divorce has been reviewed. In his interviews with young adults assessing their attitudes about family and relationships, Amato found that some young adults from divorced family backgrounds felt compelled to make a better choice in partners to avoid following their parents pattern of divorce and were no more or less likely to marry than their counterparts who grew up with married parents (1988). Although they were just as likely to get married, young adults who experienced parental divorce had more negative views about marriage (Amato, 1988). Burgoyne and Hames, found similar views as Amato in their study of college students (2002). The participants with divorced parents were no more likely to view divorce as positive than participants with married parents (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002). Both groups of participants viewed marriage as a life-long commitment that should be considered with great care (Burgoyne & Hames, 2002). Likewise, both

groups viewed divorce as a serious act that should be avoided at all costs and as an option that may be necessary if the relationship cannot be mended (Burgoyne and Hames, 2002).

Conversely, Shulman et al., found that young adults from divorced parents were more likely to have numerous sexual partners, marry at a younger age and get divorced, than participants whose parents were still married at the time of the study (2001). In a similar study with young adult college students, Mullett and Stolberg found that young adults from divorce were more likely to experience problems in their relationship and eventually experience a divorce themselves (2002).

Another study showed that children from divorced parents expressed a desire to get married one day, with the majority of participants believing that marriage was a commitment for life (Martin et al., 2003). However, although they had the desire to get married someday, over 50 percent of participants felt that they would never be prepared for marriage (Martin et al., 2003).

Furthermore, in 2003, Conway et al., found that their participants who were currently in grad school, preferred to cohabitate with their romantic partners and did not express a desire to marry in the future. When asked why cohabitation was their preference over marriage, participants reported that they did not believe marriages lasted a lifetime, so to avoid a future divorce, they preferred to simply live with their partners and avoid the commitment of marriage (Conway et al., 2003). Likewise, Segrin et al.'s participants from divorced backgrounds held more negative attitudes about marriage, such as viewing marriage as a pointless union, than other participants (2005). These same participants reported that they would not hesitate to get a divorce themselves (Segrin et al., 2005).

Finally, in 2011, Cui et al., found a number of factors that contributed to participants favoring divorce. Participants who identified their parents' divorce as decreasing conflict inside the home held a more positive attitude towards divorce. Similarly, participants who were happier after their parents' divorce held a positive view towards divorce (Cui et al., 2011). Overall, their study showed that ultimately their participants from divorced backgrounds held less favorable views about marriage and held a positive view towards divorce in conflictual marriages (Cui et al., 2011).

These studies demonstrate a lack of consistency in the research about the long-term effects of divorce on young adults. More research in this area is necessary in order to gain more consistent results to better understand the long-term effects of parental divorce and the factors that contribute to these effects.

Positive Long-term Effects

Not all long-term effects of parental divorce are negative. A few researchers found some uplifting outcomes for young adults who experienced their parents' divorce during childhood (Shulman et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2003; Cui et al., 2011). Shulman et al., found that although parental divorce caused some difficult relationship patterns in young adults, if their mother got remarried there were more positive outcomes (2001). Children whose mothers remarried were found to have fewer problems in their own romantic relationships (Shulman et al., 2001). Furthermore, these young adults were able to push past fear of commitment and find loving partners (Shulman et al., 2001).

Likewise, Conway et al., found that children from divorced backgrounds placed a higher importance on loyalty in relationships and felt that it was important to remain loyal to your partner (2003). Not all children from divorce experienced relationship

problems during young adulthood; all children have a different experience related to their parents' divorce and thus were each affected differently (Cui et al., 2011).

Interventions

When looking at possible ways to help children from divorced families, the research and resources are scarce. The main emphasis is on how to help children before and during the divorce, focusing mainly on the short-term effects divorce may have on children (Lewis & Sammons, 2001). These strategies and techniques for working with children are strongly focused on the parents and what they can do to help their children cope.

When young adults were asked about their parents' divorce, the majority of participants reported greater satisfaction after the divorce if their parents continued sharing parental responsibilities (Luepnitz, 1982). Likewise, Hetherington found that negative effects of parental divorce can be lessened when parents create a consistent and stable environment for their children (1999).

Some research was done discussing how practitioners working with children experiencing effects from their parents' divorce can help. In her overview of advice for counselors working with this population, Whiteside (1998) noted that practitioners should help parents frame their thinking after they go through a divorce. It is important for parents to understand the impact of their divorce on their children. Practitioners should increase parents' awareness and focus on helping the parents develop effective strategies for co-parenting in order to keep stability in the child's life (Whiteside, 1998). The focus on parental involvement correlates with Social Learning Theory; parents are models for their children (Bandura, 1977).

While some practitioners focus on the parents, it is also important to work with children in order to help them deal with the effects of the divorce. In one study, families who were experiencing a divorce participated in a 12-week group. While the parents attended a group to discuss the difficulties they were facing, children participated in their own group (Rich et al., 2007). At the start of the group, child participants identified that they felt like all of their peers were from intact families, so they could not understand what they were going through. Participating in the study enabled the children to talk about their feelings about the divorce with other children going through the same experiences (Rich et al., 2007).

Only one study was found that addressed the long-term effects of divorce on young adults. In this study a college course on intimate and family relations was evaluated. Students took questionnaires during the first week of the course, as well as the last week. The questionnaires dealt with issues related to the participants' attitudes toward marriage, relationship optimism and their family climate (Johnson, 2010). At the end of the course, researcher noted that relationship optimism and attitudes towards marriage are very difficult to change, however, the participants from divorced homes were more inclined to change their beliefs as a result of taking the course on relationships (Johnson, 2010). Researchers suggested that future practitioners focus on the development of healthy relationship skills and self-awareness, rather than attempting to change the individual's beliefs and expectations about relationships (Johnson, 2010).

Although the research shows that children are effected both short-term and long-term by parental divorce, it becomes clear that there needs to be more information on what practitioners can do to help their clients who may have these issues. Shulman et al.,

reiterated this need by noting in their study that little attention has been paid to the needs of young adult children of divorce (2001). Due to the gap in the literature for practitioners working with this population, this study will contribute to our understanding of how social workers address the challenges faced by young adults whose parents have divorced.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the long-term effects of parental divorce on young adults from the perspective of social workers who have worked with this population. In gaining their perspectives, social workers were invited to identify recommendations for future practitioners, to guide their work with clients who may experience long-term effects of divorce.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used for the purpose of this research is Social Learning Theory. Albert Bandura “approaches the explanation of human behavior in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive behavioral and environmental determinants” (1977, pg.15). Social Learning Theory moves away from other behaviorist models and approaches behaviors through a learning lens.

The main concept of Social Learning Theory is modeling. Modeling is the process of observing individuals attitudes and behaviors, then imitating them (Bandura, 1977). A child’s main model is their parents (Forte, 2007). As previously addressed, children observe their parents and subsequently model both their behaviors and attitudes on what they have observed (Mullett & Stollberg, 2002; Kapinus, 2005; Segrin et al., 2005; Wolfinger, 2005; Cui et al., 2011). Researchers have proposed that children observe their parents interactions with one another and imitate that behavior in their own romantic relationships during young adulthood (Mullet & Stolberg, 2002; Cui et al., 2011).

The concept of modeling will be used in this study in the questions asked of practitioners as well as in the data analysis of their responses. Practitioners will be asked to identify the 5 most prevalent presenting problems they have observed in their work with young adults, how often they assess a connection between a young adult client’s presenting problem and their parents’ marital status and how they approach those connections therapeutically (Appendix D). Based on these open-ended questions, the responses were analyzed to assess if the client’s presenting problem might have been characterized as an effect of parental divorce and parental modeling. Further, the questions regarding therapeutic approaches were analyzed to observe how practitioners

may be able to mitigate the long-term effects of divorce by modeling effective communication and other relationship skills to the client. Practitioners were also asked to describe any differences they have observed between young adults whose parents divorced and those whose parents were not divorced. These responses were analyzed using the concept of modeling to assess if practitioners observations correlate with previous research findings noting the differences between the two groups surrounding issues of communication, trust, commitment, conflict, marriage and divorce.

Methods

The purpose of this interview study was to examine the long-term effects of parental divorce on young adults from the perspective of social workers who have worked with this population. In gaining their perspectives, social workers were invited to identify recommendations for future practitioners, to guide their work with clients who may experience long-term effects of divorce.

Research Design

Sample

Study participants included 8 licensed clinical social workers who had worked with young adult clients who had experienced long-term effects from their parents divorce, regardless of presenting problem. Initially, participants were recruited from a list purchased from the Minnesota Board of Social Work, which included 200 randomly sampled Social Workers at the LICSW licensure level who had their license for at least 10 years and lived within Ramsey, Hennepin, Anoka, Washington and Dakota counties (Appendix A). After the mailing list was obtained and IRB approval was received, invitation flyers were mailed out inviting them to participate in qualitative interviews with the researcher (see appendix B). This form of recruitment did not yield any participants. The researcher submitted a protocol change request to the IRB in order to change the recruitment process for this project. Once approval was received the researcher used key informants to distribute invitation flyers in order to gain participants. This process resulted in 8 participants, 4 females and 4 males.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was reviewed by a research committee as well as by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Saint Catherine University prior to recruiting participants and collecting data. This review process ensured that all research processes protected the participants and used informed consent protocols.

Participants had two times to consent to being a part of this research. The initial consent was given when the potential participants responded to the invitation to participate by contacting the researcher to set up an interview. To further ensure consent, the researcher had each participant sign a consent form that clearly stated the purpose of the research and how their information would be used at the time of the interview (Appendix C). In order to guarantee that participants understood the consent form, three clarifying questions were asked at the beginning of the interview (Appendix D).

In order to keep participants' data confidential, the researcher took precaution to ensure protection. Both the interviews and transcription were conducted solely by the researcher. All data was kept on the researcher's password protected computer, with all paperwork such as consent forms kept in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home. Upon completion of the study, all data was destroyed no later than June 1st.

During transcription and write up in order to keep responses separated by participants, a number was assigned and used in place of participants' names. Further, no physical descriptions or other detailed information were used in any written reports. To protect participants, all personally identifying information was omitted from the transcript and the final written report and presentation.

Data Collection

Instrument Construction

For the purpose of this research a list of interview questions was constructed by the researcher. Before the interview questions, the researcher asked the participants 3 clarifying questions to ensure that they understood the study and the consent form components. After the clarifying questions, the interview questions were asked. The first set of questions asked the participant demographic items such as their current Social Work Licensure level, to ensure that the participants have their LICSW, as requested by the researcher. To further ensure that participants meet the research criteria, they were asked how many years they had worked at the LICSW level and if they had any other licenses.

Next, participants were asked what age range they associate with the term young adults. This was asked, so the researcher knew what age group the participant was describing when answering the remaining questions about their work with young adults. The next three questions addressed the participants' work with clients, identifying what presenting problems their young adult clients exhibited, whether these presenting problems had been shown to have a connection with the client's parents' marital status and how the social worker addressed those connections therapeutically. Next, due to results from previous research, participants were asked if they noticed any differences between young adult clients with divorced parents versus young adult clients with married parents and if so, what those differences were. The next question asked participants what work they had done with young adult clients surrounding relationship issues, as past research shows this is often an area of struggle for young adults from

divorced families. Finally, participants were asked to share their advice for future practitioners working with young adults dealing with issues related to childhood parental divorce. For a full list of questions, please see Appendix D.

All questions in the interviews were created by the researcher for the purpose of this study, due to this they were not tested for reliability and validity. However, the questions were reviewed by peers and committee members for face validity.

Data Collection Process

The first step to collecting data was mailing the invitations with the adapted recruitment process outlined earlier to potential participants to be a part of the study. Next, interested participants contacted the researcher to set up an interview. Participants then took part in a 45-minute audio recorded interview with the researcher. The interview began by asking the participants to read and sign the consent form, stating that they agreed to be a part of the research study. After the participant consented, the researcher asked the participants the three clarifying questions to ensure they understood the study and what they were consenting to. Finally, the interview was conducted by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis and content analysis were used for this study. Descriptive statistics were used for close-ended questions regarding participants' licensure level and years of experience.

Content analysis was used for open-ended questions to analyze the data. Content analysis is a thorough interpretation of material to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings (Berg, 2009, pg. 338). In this study, content analysis was used by transcribing participant interviews and noting main themes that emerged. Open coding was also used

to code for themes. Open coding is a process used to identify themes and topics in a systematic manner (Berg, 2009, pg. 228). In this study themes were identified by first grouping all participant's responses by question, then further breaking them down into common themes identified by three or more participants. Throughout this paper, participant's quotes will be identified with italics.

Strengths and Limitations

The use of qualitative interviews was a strength to this study. By interviewing social workers about their experiences with young adults, information was gathered through in depth commentary on the long-term effects of divorce. Interviews allowed for further clarification and understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences that quantitative research does not.

Another strength to this study was the collection of recommendations and techniques for new practitioners working with this population that was collected. There is very little research on how to help young adults who may be experiencing adverse effects from their parents' divorce. These recommendations will begin to help new practitioners working with this population and give them future insight into the struggles these young adults may experience. Further, the sample was chosen in order to gain insight from practitioners, as this method has not been seen in previous research.

There are some limitations to the study as well. The first is the size of the sample. By having only 8 participants in the study, limited perspectives are illustrated. Although participants may identify similar long-term effects or differences in the young adults they worked with, this information is relevant only to the experiences of the participants.

Another limitation to the study is the sample itself. By interviewing social workers, the effects of divorce are assessed second hand and not directly from the young adults themselves. The information gathered is opinion and observation based.

Results

Results from the qualitative interviews showed themes in the following areas: demographics, young adults presenting problems, modeling, relationships including relationship skills and romantic relationships, intervention for parents and young adults, and finally advice for new practitioners working with young adults. These themes are summarized in the following results section.

Demographics

As shown in Table 1., all participants had their masters in social work (MSW) as well as their clinical social work license (LICSW). Years working at the LICSW licensure level ranged in participants from 3 years to 22 years. Six of the participants had their school social work license along with their LICSW and one participant had another professional license. Thus, the primary perspective of the participants was from their role as school social workers with less than 10 years of social work experience.

Table 1. Demographics	Total
Social Work License	
MSW	8
LICSW	8
Years with LICSW	
1 to 5 yrs	5
6 to 10 yrs	2
11 to 15 yrs	0
16 to 20 yrs	0
20+ yrs	1
Other Licenses	
School Social Work	6
Other	1

When asked what age range they associate with young adults, participants gave a wide range of ages for young adults. While one participant saw young adults as being as young as age 10, another saw them to be as old as age 30. Participants had different

reasons for identifying their age ranges. The participant identifying age 10 as being a young adult stated that *It's not necessarily about the number, it's about what situations they have been through and had to deal with. There are some very "young" individuals who have been through some very "adult" situations.*

Another participant starting off giving a cap of young adulthood at age 21 and then quickly changing this to age 30 due to the fact that the participant had someone in mind who was in the 20's and the participant wanted to keep that person identified as a young adult.

Young Adults Presenting Problems

When asked to identify the five most prevalent presenting problems they encountered among the young adults they worked with, many respondents identified similar issues. As shown in Table 2., seven out of the eight participants acknowledged that many of their young adult clients have issues related to their family of origin. Further when asked if they assessed a connection between presenting problems and parent's marital status, all participants stated that they noticed this connection, seven stating that it was a strong one.

Table 2. Most Prevalent Presenting Problems

Family Problems	7
Depression	6
Low Self-esteem	4
Lack of Social Skills	3
No Sense of Direction	3
Low Socio-economic Status	3
Anxiety	2
Chemical Dependency	2

Six participants identified depression as a key issues in young adults. One participant stated

There is a lot of hopelessness. Like why bother to go to school, why bother to do anything. It's not going to matter. It's kind of like that hopeless, helpless overall sort of depressing state.

Although depression seemed to be a common presenting problem for young adult clients, this specific problem was not addressed again in any of the other interview questions by any of the seven participants who mentioned it as a prevalent presenting problem.

Another common presenting problem noted was low self-esteem. Participants noted that many young adult clients come to them with poor self-image and a very low self-esteem. One participant stated *Poor self-esteem. It's like they can't see anything good about themselves. Can't even name one thing that they might be good at.* This issue was again addressed by another participant when discussing the difference between young adults from intact families versus those from divorced backgrounds. *I would say it's [divorce] usually traumatic as far as their self-esteem and self-confidence. They oftentimes get played back and forth.*

While only two participants identified chemical dependency as a presenting problem, other participants identified chemical dependency as an issue they addressed with young adult clients in the course of therapy. Three participants addressed chemical health when comparing clients from intact families and clients from divorced parents stating that clients from divorced parents were more likely to have chemical health issues. *I know for some [young adults who have experienced parental divorce], chemical health use can be more prevalent.* Similarly another participant stated *I have also seen that there can be a lot more family issues related to drug and alcohol use in divorced families*

compared to [intact] families. Overall participants noticed a greater use of alcohol and other drugs by young adult clients from divorced families compared to those from intact families.

Modeling

The importance and impact of modeling emerged from participants' comments in many areas of the interviews. When asked if they noticed a difference between young adults from intact families versus those from divorced families, two participants responded that young adults from intact families often had better models growing up. One participant stated *I think that persons who are fortunate enough to come from a two parent family have an advantage, when it comes to role models.* Further, another participant identified *modeling* as an intervention when answering how they work with young adults from parental divorce. *I discuss with the client their lack of appropriate modeling and the importance for them to understand good modeling versus bad modeling [in order to help them have successful relationships].*

Modeling was further addressed when participants were asked how they approach issues of parental divorce therapeutically. Three participants indicated that they explore the young adult's past and present models. One participant described her process: *First of all I try to establish who are the significant adults. This is very important for the process.* The process indicated by the participant was the overall therapeutic process, acknowledging the importance she placed on role models in her work with clients.

Another participant had a unique view on modeling. Rather than addressing the poor modeling of their parents, this clinician focused on how to help the young adults gain new models. This respondent placed great importance on the staff at a school

working with young adults and the school's goal to model appropriate relationships and behaviors.

At school, it's a huge issues with all of our students so we are trying to emphasize that with all of our staff here modeling behaviors that kids can [emulate] when they come into school. You know whether that's in the hallway or in the classroom. Sometimes putting kids in classrooms that have good male role models [can help].

While this was the only participant who specifically tried to model appropriate behaviors and relationships with youth, other participants discussed teaching effective communication, which must be modeled to the young adult.

Relationships

When discussing the effects of modeling, many participants addressed the role modeling played on young adults relationships. Specifically, participants addressed the discrepancies in their young adult clients' relationship skills and the negative outlook their clients had on romantic relationships.

Relationship Skills

Relationship skills were first addressed when participants were questioned about the 5 most prevalent presenting problems seen in young adults. Three participants identified social skills as being a main problem. One stated *A lack in overall social skills. Not being able to read social cues or express themselves. An inability to interact appropriately.* Lack of social skills was again expressed when participants were asked how they help young adults from parental divorce to help them develop successful relationship skills. Four participants discussed their work in helping young adults develop good communication skills. One such participant addressed this by saying [after the

initial rapport building], *work on expression. If you want to communicate with someone you need to be able to self express...Then being able to communicate effectively.*

Along with communication, two participants placed an importance on teaching young adults how to be empathetic towards others. The use of empathy was then connected to teaching young adults effective relationship skills. *We talk about how do you show affection. That was one of the skills...You know its how do you show care for someone else and using that as a base for supporting kids and understanding the importance of a relationship.*

Five participants noted that they would start out discussing relationships by defining a healthy relationship. One participant stated *Just talking to them about how to have a healthy relationship and what a healthy relationship means. Even addressing that at one point their parents relationship probably was healthy and that for whatever reason it didn't work out.* Another said *I did a lot of retraining kids' definitions about what is a healthy relationship. What sort of treatment or behaviors should they expect from a dating partner or marital partner.*

While most participants addressed relationship skills in general, a few discussed differences between genders. One participant discussed how in her experience, females from divorced backgrounds tend to be more promiscuous whereas, males were not. Further, this participant and two others addressed that males from divorced backgrounds were more aggressive both verbally and physically. No participants discussed how they handled these gender differences differently.

Romantic Relationships

For many participants, the work with young adults on relationships did not end with definitions and communication skills. Five participants addressed the deeper issues that young adults experiencing affects from parental divorce have related to romantic relationships. A common discussion revolved around young adults from divorced parents lack of trust. One participant addressed trust when discussing the difference between young adults from intact families versus those from divorced families. *I would say definitely in the ability to trust others like to attach healthily in dating relationship. They [young adults from divorced backgrounds] may question someones being faithful and may have a hard time being faithful themselves.* Another participant described how this lack of trust effects the young adults overall view of marriage. *Sometimes I think they might also have a harder time making commitments or not believing in the longevity or value of marriage. I think young adults from happily married families are more likely to want to get married.*

Another participant who felt this negative view came from the knowledge from their parents that relationships don't last forever. *Seeing from their parents that relationships don't last forever. This has an effect on them and plays a role in their own relationship views.* Two other participants had similar views identifying that young adults from divorced parents seem to have a greater cynicism towards life compared to their peers from intact families. One participant stated, *I think they [young adults from divorced parents] tend to be more cynical about relationships.* Another said *There's always something and no matter how hard you try the kids do end up in the middle and I think they develop a real cynicism about relationships early in life.*

The view these young adults had on relationships led many participants to address this in their work with clients. Four participants discussed how they talked to young adults to acknowledge that simply because their parents got a divorce, does not mean it is inevitable for them as well. One participant discussed this cycle of divorce bluntly *They're [young adults from divorced parents] not getting modeled that working together. So they end up creating that same damn family their parents had. Assuming they even get married in this day in age. It's a perpetuating cycle.* This participant then discussed how her views were shaped by her own experience with divorce. Other participants discussed this cycle in light of trying to diminish it. *It's important to give them those messages that it's not their fault. That relationships can be different then what was modeled to them.* Another had a similar stance. *I have done a lot of talking with some of my clients about just because they come from a broken family doesn't mean they will necessarily have a broken family.* Participants felt that it was very important to impress upon their clients that not all relationships are the same and that if you work on them, romantic relationships can last a lifetime.

Interventions

All participants saw a strong connection between young adults presenting problems and their parent's relationship status. When asked how they addressed this connection therapeutically, two separate themes emerged. While most participants addressed working with the young adults themselves. Some identified that they started their work by addressing the parents.

Parents

Although the research was on young adults and practitioners work with them, a theme emerged with 3 participants who identified young adulthood as beginning at a younger age, related to the need to address the parents and work with them as well. One participant who identified young adults as starting at age 15 stated *I usually counsel the parents that we need to get beyond our own individual differences for what's best for the child.* Another participant had a similar statement. *I start with the mother and build a relationship there. You work with the kid too obviously, but I start with the parents. I identify what needs are being met and what supports are in place or what the family might still need to access.* As the main focus is the client, the majority of participants focused on explaining the interventions that they used while working with young adults.

Young Adults

Although a few participants addressed the parents primarily or at first, others worked with the young adults. Two participants indicated that they would separate the young adults from their parents' issues. One of these participants noted

I think a big part of it is working on that young adults individuality and working on separating their parental issues from their own. I think a lot of times it's easy for them to take that on. A big part of it would be working with the young adult to separate themselves from adult concerns.

While some participants felt that separating the young adult from their parent's problems was important, others commented on the importance of identifying where the young adult was currently at emotionally and psychologically. What areas were they struggling in and what their views were in various areas.

I ask them how they are reflecting on it [the divorce], how it has effected them. What was it like to grow up in two households? If they did or did not know the other parent. Just ask them their thoughts on it.

By addressing the divorce, participants felt that you would better be able to move past it and work on the underlying issues associated with the divorce.

Two participants reviewed the young adults past, including their norms. The first participant stated,

I guess I talk about a lot of the students' behaviors, or symptomology and beliefs based on their family of origin and what they have learned through their childhood. What has been modeled to them or what the norm is in their house.

While this participant felt it important to focus on the young adults past norms and childhood, another participant looked at norms by identifying where the young adults are currently at.

I think identifying what their norm is and identifying from where they are at at that time. I think that doing some back tracking to figure out where things may have gone wrong for them or what their misunderstandings are. It's a good place to start.

All of these interventions coincided with the participants advice for future practitioners working with the young adult population dealing with parental divorce. Each participant had unique techniques and tips for new practitioners.

Advice for New Practitioners

The final question that all participants were asked was what advice they would give to new practitioners who may be working with the young adult population who may be dealing with parental divorce. Although each respondent had something new to add to the advice, there were two main themes that emerged from these discussions. The first was to start where the young adult was currently at emotionally and psychologically. Four participants noted the importance of allowing the young adult client to express their concerns and needs before addressing their presenting problems. One client asserted *Starting where they [the young adult client] is at. If they are super anxious, you start with*

addressing this. Don't go off on something else, it's a slow process, but very important for the client.

Another participant addressed this in terms of the client's emotional state. *First start with them. How are they doing, how are they feeling. Oftentimes depending on how young they were when there was a [divorce] they internalize a lot of it.*

Three participants addressed the importance of never assuming anything about your clients. One participant was adamant that assumptions could be detrimental to your work with this population.

Number one and foremost is never ever assume what a child's family system is or was. So don't assume that they came from a mom or a dad, don't assume that they ever had a mom or a dad. Don't assume that they are from two moms or two dads. I think that would be the biggest thing because once you put up assumptions on that. Then if you're wrong, you have just taken ten steps back with the person because they will think you are going to judge them because they aren't who you thought they were.

Other participants also addressed the importance of never making assumptions. One admitted that it seems like an easy *no brainer* thing to do, but many people make assumptions without even realizing it.

Other advice that was addressed for new practitioners surrounded how to build rapport with clients in order to have a successful therapeutic relationship. One client addressed the need for open communication skills. *I think having open communication with them is key. Being able to show that they can talk about anything and that you will communicate with them as well. This helps a lot.* Another respondent discussed the importance of listening skills.

I think being a neutral source for them. Being a listening ear and letting them first share what their experience has been cause it's easy to jump to "oh your parents are divorced, this is how you feel about it" but you need to hear from them.

Finally, one participant felt that gaining trust should be the first step in the therapeutic process. *Gain their trust and work closely with that and then perhaps you can really start to deal with some of that pain [from the parental divorce] and start with other stuff as it comes up.*

Overall, participants addressed the importance of centering their work around the client, showing a client-centered therapy approach. In doing this the participants were able to work with their young adult clients on the overarching issues surrounding their parents divorce such as issues related to self-esteem, chemical dependency, relationship skills, and romantic relationships.

Discussion

Overall, the social workers who participated in this study identified issues presented by young adults from divorced backgrounds that were similar to those identified in the literature. Participants' background, presenting problems identified and common interventions will be compared with previous studies.

Demographics

Participants in this study included eight licensed clinical social workers, whose experience ranged from 3 years to 23 years. All participants defined distinct definitions of "young adults" based on age ranges from as young as 10 to as old as 30. This wide range of ages shows that there is not a universal understanding of what age classifies young adulthood and reflects the participants' perspective as school social workers. Overall, participants in this study represented the voices of school social workers, whereas previous research about the experience of young adults from divorced backgrounds typically included children and families at the time of divorce (Amato, 1988; Zinsmeister, 1997; Kenny, 2000; Shulman et al., 2001; Conway et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2003; Jellinek, 2010; Kim, 2011) , and a few that included young adults themselves (Luepnitz, 1982; Johnson, 2010)

Young Adults Presenting Problems

Family problems, depression, and low self-esteem were identified by participants in this study as being the most common presenting problems for the young adults they had worked with (Table 2). Further presenting issues included lack of social skills, no sense of direction, low socio-economic status, anxiety and chemical dependency (Table 2). Due to the lack of research on the views of practitioners, no previous research was found indicating presenting problems of young adults seeking mental health support. However, the literature has addressed educational difficulties and discrepancies in

relationship skills in childhood (Kenny, 2000; Martin et al., 2003; Jellinek, 2010; Kim, 2011) as well as problems in romantic relationships in young adulthood (Kenny, 2000; Shulman et al., 2001; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002; Conway et al., 2003; Segrin et al., 2005; Cui et al., 2011).

Modeling

Participants in this study identified modeling as a key component in their work with young adults experiencing effects from parental divorce. It was noted that the modeling of parents or significant adults in a young adults life can greatly affect them in various areas such as relationships and self-esteem. This relates to past literature that asserts that children form their attitudes and behaviors towards their own relationships based on observation of how their parents handled their relationship and the divorce process (Cui et al., 2011). Further, like in this study, numerous researchers have used Social Learning Theory, as a framework for their research (Mullett & Stollberg, 2002; Kapinus, 2005; Segrin et a.l., 2005; Wolfinger, 2005 and Cui et al., 2011).

Practitioners in this study felt it was important to help young adult clients understand that divorce does not need to occur and that they can have successful relationships regardless of what was modeled to them by their parents. A major shift in language occurred with most participants addressing this issue by discussing the effects of modeling, not using any definitive terms such as “cycle”. This shift was also noted in past research. Segrin, Taylor and Altman related intergenerational patterns of divorce to modeling noting that observations of parental divorce may teach children that divorce is the best way to deal with relationship conflicts (2005).

Relationships**Relationship Skills**

Relationship skills such as reading social cues and expressing themselves were identified by participants in this study as a discrepancy in young adults from divorced backgrounds. These young adults were unable to communicate effectively and participants noted their extensive work in helping these young adults learn better communication skills. Mullett and Stolberg found that parental divorce exposes children to poor models of communication and conflict management, which can lead to poor communication patterns themselves (2002). Further they supported this by stating that individuals whose parents did not divorce were shown to be better at effectively communicating and problem solving together (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

Gender differences were also noted in this study. One participant stated that young adult females from divorced backgrounds were more promiscuous than their male counterparts. Conway et al. (2003) also identified females as having more sexual partners than males after parental divorce. While young adult males from divorced backgrounds were not identified as having many sexual partners, two participants in this study noted them to be more physically and verbally aggressive. Past research by Cui and Fincham showed that higher levels of verbal and physical aggression were found in males. This was asserted to be due to high parental conflict before the time of divorce (2010).

Romantic Relationships

Practitioners who participated in this study have observed that young adults from divorced backgrounds often have issues related to trust in romantic relationships. They suggested that seeing their parents' failed marriage had an effect on how they themselves view relationships. Shulman et al. (2001) also identified trust as a main issue in young

adults' romantic relationships in their study surveying young adults between the ages of 19 and 29.

Participants acknowledged that in their experience, young adults from divorced backgrounds seemed to have a more cynical view of romantic relationships. Their young adult clients often felt that relationships would not last, so there was no point in trying or wanting to get married. In their study surveying graduate students, Conway et al. found that young adults from divorced parents preferred to cohabit with their partners because they believed that marriage did not last forever (2003).

Interventions

Parents

Participants in this study noted that while their clients might be the young adults, it was also important to work with the parents as well, when possible. These participants identified young adulthood at an age, where the clients would still be living with their parents. These participants further stated that parents need to still communicate with one another when it comes to parenting their children after a divorce. Past research coincided with this notion that practitioners should help parents frame their thinking after they go through a divorce (Whiteside, 1998).

Further, practitioners in this study discussed their experience in working with parents after a divorce, stating that young adults do much better if both parents remain in their lives. Luepnitz (1982) found that there was greater satisfaction in family relationships in the young adults when the parents continued sharing responsibilities. Likewise, Hetherington (1999), noted that a consistent stable environment could help mitigate the effects of parental divorce on offspring.

Young Adults

The main intervention identified by participants in this study was to help young adults separate themselves from their parents' issues related to the divorce. Participants suggested that a key to working with their clients on deeper issues such as relationship skills and attitudes was to help the young adults to gain an understanding that their parent's problems are not their problems. Johnson (2010), based on the results of a survey of young adults in a college marriage course, found that young adults from divorced backgrounds were less likely to change their opinions about marriage, but were willing to learn new things about relationships. Thus, Johnson asserted that practitioners should focus on the development of healthy relationship skills and self-awareness, and avoid trying to change the young adults opinions and attitudes about relationship issues.

Implications for Social Work

Practice

Based on this study, future practitioners working with young adults who may be experiencing effects from divorce should work with their clients to get past the actual divorce and focus on themselves. Further, practitioners should start their work with no predetermined assumptions about clients and their past. Going in with a clean slate allows the client/practitioner relationship to be based on trust, which is imperative in working with this population. Overall it is important to focus on the clients and help them work through their problems related to parental divorce.

Further, future practitioners should aim to use strengths based language when working with clients. Clients should not feel that being from a divorced family means that they are "broken" or no less a family than other people. In order to help the client

grow and be able to move past the divorce, practitioners must empower their clients, starting with how they talk about divorce.

Policy and Research

Throughout past research and in the participant interviews terms such as “cycle of divorce” and “broken families” were used. This language reinforces and perpetuates negative views of divorce and the families who experience it. As strength-based professionals, social workers have responsibilities to attend to their own use of person-first language. This stance will model for clients the possibility for change addressed in this study and the literature.

Future researchers should aim to gain further knowledge on the long-term effects of divorce. Due to the questions asked in this study, it is unknown if the effects discussed by participants pertained to young adults whose parents had divorced recently, or if they had divorced years earlier. Future research could resolve this limitation by adding specifiers when interviewing participants. The intent for this study was to interview practitioners with over 10 years experience, however this parameter had to be changed. Future researchers could interview more seasoned practitioners with the ultimate goal of gaining insights based on experiences over time.

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am sending this letter to request social work mailing labels. I would like a random sample of 200 labels of social workers who have had their LICSW for at least 10 years and who currently live in Ramsey, Hennepin, Washington, Anoka or Dakota county. Please send the labels to Amanda Vonbergen at *address*. If you have any questions feel free to call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email me at XXXX@stthomas.edu.

Sincerely,

Amanda Vonbergen

YOU'RE INVITED!

Have you worked with young adults whose concerns may have been influenced by experiences of parental divorce during their childhood, regardless of the presenting problem?

If yes, you are invited to participate in a research study!

I am a graduate student at the School of Social Work at Saint Catherine University and the University of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul. The purpose of this study is to examine the long-term effects of parental divorce on young adults from the perspective of social workers who have worked with this population. One of the goals of the study is to identify areas of practice wisdom you might have for future practitioners! Thanks for your consideration!

If you would like more information or would like to participate in this interview study, please contact Amanda Vonbergen
by January 15th.

Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX Email: XXXX@stthomas.edu

**Parental Divorce: Social Workers Reflect on Long-term Effects for Young Adults
RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study about long-term effects of divorce for young adults from the perspective of social workers. This study is being conducted by Amanda Vonbergen a graduate student at St. Catherine University and the University of Saint Thomas School of Social Work and supervised by Dr. Carol Kuechler, a professor at the school. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you were identified by the Board of Social Work as having your clinical social work license for at least 10 years. Please read this form and ask questions before you decide whether to participate in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to identify the long-term effects of parental divorce shown in young adults by interviewing licensed clinical social workers on their experiences working with young adults. The perspectives of experienced clinicians is absent from the literature and is an important source of practice wisdom. A goal of this research is to develop a set of practice guidelines for future practitioners to use in their work with this population. Approximately 10 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 45-minute audio recorded interview. The researcher will ask you questions about your work experience with young adults and what practice wisdom you may have for future practitioners in their work with young adults.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known risks and no direct benefits to your participation in this research study.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that could identify you will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented. No names will be included in the transcripts. The research results will be kept in a password-protected computer and the consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home. Only myself and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 1st and will destroy all original reports, recordings and identifying information that can be linked back to you no later than June 1st, 2012.

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University or the University of Saint Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships, and no further data will be collected.

Contacts and questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Amanda Vonbergen at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXXX@stthomas.edu. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, my faculty advisor, Dr. Carol Kuechler, will be happy to answer them at 651-690-6719 or cfkuechler@stkate.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact John Schmitt, PhD, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time and no further data will be collected.

I consent to participate in the study and I agree for the interview to be recorded.

Signature of Participant

Date

Print Name

Signature of Researcher

Date

Clarifying Questions

1. In your own words how would you explain the purpose of this study?
2. What can you do if you feel uncomfortable answering questions at any time during the interview process?
3. What happens if you decide to withdraw from the study?

Interview Questions

1. What is your current Social Work licensure level?
2. How many years have you worked at that level of licensure?
3. Do you have your MSW?
4. Do you have any other licenses?
5. When you think about young adults, what age range do you identify?
6. What are the 5 most prevalent presenting problems you have seen in young adults?
7. How often do you assess a connection between a young adult client's present problem and their parents' marital status?
8. How do you approach those connections therapeutically?
9. Researchers have identified distinctions between young adults whose parents divorced and those whose parents were not divorced. Have you noticed differences between these two situations? If so, how would you describe those differences?
10. Past research has identified distinctions between young adults who parents divorced and those whose parents were not divorced. Have you noticed

differences between these two situations? If so, how would you describe those differences?

11. What advice do you have for new practitioners in working with adults dealing with issues related to childhood parental divorce?