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# A Systematic Review of the Effects of Family Conflict: Focusing on Divorce, Infidelity, and Attachment Style

Jacob B. Borst  
*St. Catherine University*

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A Systematic Review of the Effects of Family Conflict:  
Focusing on Divorce, Infidelity, and Attachment Style

by

Jacob B. Borst, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
David Roseborough., Ph.D., LICSW, ACT  
Kurt Gehlert, Ph.D  
Brianna Loop, LICSW

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

In this systematic review, I explored the topic of family conflict, focusing on the conflicts of infidelity and divorce, and how these conflicts affect attachment style. The literature review provided information showing that family conflicts may increase the likelihood of children committing at-risk behaviors, have negative impacts on attachment style, and may even influence the success of future relationships. Positive outcomes can also occur from family conflict such as leaving an abusive environment or gaining secure attachment figures such as a stable stepparent. A focused literature search found 25 articles and two books that provided information regarding the effects of family conflict in this area. This research showed that trust and stable friendships during conflict impact attachment style and mitigate against the potentially negative effects of family conflict. Another theme found throughout the research was that there are generational patterns of conflict and that children often learn their behaviors from the generations before. The research supported the theme that attachment style can change over time and that when conflict arises it is important to develop effective repair techniques when communicating with others such as romantic partners or children involved in the family conflict. Lastly, children and adults can be highly adaptive and resilient when experiencing family conflicts and that strength may decrease negative implications such as higher likelihood of relational struggles and patterns of negative conflict.

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## Introduction

Over the past 30 years there has been significant academic and clinical study of family conflict and its effects on children and their future functioning as adults. These familial conflicts include divorce, absent parents, parental infidelity, inter-parental conflict, and other various family problems (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008). One of the primary causes of family conflict is divorce. About 50 % of American marriages end in divorce in (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008). Researchers have shown that spousal infidelity leads to 25% to 50% of divorces. Cross-culturally it is found to be the main reason for divorce (Lansford, 2009). Family conflicts may have significant impacts on the children involved. Also, parental infidelity, which does not always end in divorce, can have deleterious effects on children and their future interactions as adults. Family conflicts, such as parental infidelity and divorce, often lead to unhealthy and risky behaviors, poor attachment styles, and interpersonal relationship struggles at the present time and in the future for children in these families (Sori, 2007). This research used a systematic review in order to look at what is currently known about the impact of both divorce and infidelity on children, as two particularly prominent and powerful predictors in the family conflict literature.

Divorce is prevalent in the United States today as over 50% of marriages end in dissolution and 50% of children will be impacted by divorce (Lansford, 2009). Researchers have shown that divorce has important psychosocial effects on children, sometimes resulting in insecure attachment styles, behavioral problems, health-compromising behaviors, cognitive and social deficits, psychological distress, poor academic achievement, and poor self-concepts

(Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009). It is more likely that children who experience a family conflict such as divorce will become divorced as adults. Also, distress from divorce may cause implications in the future as some adult children have stated they became a different person after their parents divorced (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Family conflicts may lead to health compromising and risky behaviors in young adults.

There is a documented correlation between family conflict and health compromising and risky behaviors in children and adult children who have experienced family conflicts (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Health compromising and risky behaviors include a multitude of behaviors and interactions that may be excessive drinking, smoking, using illegal drugs, and engaging in risky sexual behaviors, such as having unprotected sex or sex with multiple partners (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Research has shown that adult children who came from divorced families tend to have higher unemployment, lower educational achievement, and higher likelihood of being diagnosed with depression and anxiety (Bachman, 2008).

Children in divorced families may have less supervision, in most cases, since they are being supervised by only one parent, and have less parental regulation for emotional support (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Children who are in primary custody of one parent due to a family conflict such as divorce, imprisonment, or death may be more likely to experience parental separation, which may lead to health compromising and risk behaviors (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Family conflict, especially divorce, can cause distress, anger, and anxiety. There is a possibility that these children are at an increased risk of developing poor coping strategies which includes using drugs, risky sexual behavior, and acting out (Lansford, 2009). When children are dealing with a loss or separation that may be caused by

parental infidelity, then they are more likely to develop insecure attachment styles and struggle with future interpersonal relationships (Lansford, 2009). According to Sori (2007), infidelity may impact children's risky behaviors. Older children may react to infidelity through externalizing behaviors, and, for adolescents or young adults, this may mean using alcohol, drugs, or sex to act out (Sori, 2007). Furthermore, there is a correlation between divorce and infidelity. There are many divorces that are caused by infidelities in the relationship, which may cause interpersonal struggles for children of the families involved (Lansford, 2009).

Not only can family conflict cause health compromising and risky behaviors amongst children and adult children, it can lead to interpersonal relationship struggles (Thorson, 2009). Research has shown that children's knowledge of an extra-marital affair causes changes in the way they communicate with others in their relationships and other peers. This may cause poor communication skills and poor boundaries may be developed (Thorson, 2009). Studies indicate that divorce and parental infidelity have caused offspring to develop more insecure attachment styles as compared to individuals who were raised in families with little family conflict (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009). In future relationships, adult children tend to have more distrust, dissatisfaction, anger, and ambivalence in their own relationships. These problems are characteristics of insecure attachment styles (Sori, 2007).

Furthermore, research has shown that individuals whose parents were in an extra-dyadic relationship, an affair, will be more likely to involve infidelity in their own relationships. This possibility is similar to the likelihood that an individual from a divorced family will more likely divorce in their own relationship (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). Additionally, there is a strong evidence of infidelity causing a family conflict such as divorce (Thorson, 2009).

Children who have experienced family conflicts, such as infidelity and divorce, are more likely



to learn maladaptive behaviors; be exposed to poor communication tactics, negative emotions; and less likely to achieve conflict resolution (Crowell, Treboux, & Brockmeyer, 2009). Overall, adult children who have experienced familial conflict such as parental infidelity will be more likely to have poor communication skills and future relationship struggles most likely due to their exposure to poor communication strategies, separation from a parent, and other factors. This is an important issue that applies to social work, in that social workers interface with families in conflict in a number of practice settings.

Social workers should be interested in how family conflicts impact children and adult children for multiple reasons. For example, research has shown that children are more likely to be anxious and act out when knowledge of a parental affair occurs (Thorson, 2009). They may act out with health compromising and risk taking behavior, such as participating in unsafe sex practices, use of illegal drugs, and consumption of alcohol (Sori, 2007). Family conflict such as divorce and infidelity may cause insecure attachment styles and increase interpersonal struggles. This behavior leads to poor communication with others and conflict in future relationships (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Social workers can help positively impact these relationships by gaining knowledge and understanding of family conflict.

Social workers may professionally encounter children dealing with family conflict since about 50% of children are impacted by divorce and; many other children are exposed to parental infidelity. Both parental infidelity and divorce cause shifts in dynamics which cause distress for the individual. It is important for social workers to be knowledgeable about family conflict and how divorce and infidelity, in particular, impact the children's' attitudes and future interactions. With this knowledge, the social worker can be more successful in working with clients in family conflict because social workers have gained knowledge about effective coping mechanisms and

treatment interventions. Social workers can educate the communities where they work about the importance of acknowledging family conflict when there is infidelity or divorce and help others to develop healthy coping strategies. More knowledge about positive coping strategies and interventions will improve the quality of service social workers provide to their clients. The research question being proposed is: What are the effects of family conflict for children and their future interactions as adults, using divorce and infidelity as two concrete examples and sources of such conflict. I am choosing both because they are often paired in the literature (Lansford, 2009). I am exploring this topic with the goal of finding more information about what potential interventions can be used for professionals working with youth and families in these situations.

The experiences of family conflict and infidelity tend to represent an attachment injury for an individual, couple, and sometimes child or adult who was exposed to parental infidelity and other family conflicts. There has been some research to show the effects of infidelity and family conflict on couples and families (Lansford, 2009). This systematic review reviewed current and relevant empirical research to look at what emerging themes and professional consensus transpire when working with families experiencing family conflict, especially the children affected. Existing research has focused on themes such as divorce and infidelity as independent variables or “causes” and their potential impact on: (1) current risk taking behaviors, (2) later adult attachment and relational problems, and (3) their influence on children’s fidelity in adulthood, as well as other relevant behaviors that may occur when a family conflict occurs.

## Literature Review

### Introduction to Attachment and Adult Attachment

By understanding the close emotional bond between parents and their children, researchers have been able to use the same assumptions and systems to study the emotionally intimate relationships of adults (Ehrenberg, Robertson, & Pringle, 2012). Attachment theory provides a theoretical framework to help understand relationships, interpersonal communication, and emotional satisfaction. Bowlby's research was focused on the primary relationship between infant and caregiver (Bowlby, 1980). Through the development of attachment research, different attachment patterns emerged. These patterns are secure attachment, anxious, avoidant, ambivalent/resistant, and disorganized attachments, which were developed by Bowlby's colleague Mary Ainsworth and impact attachment research today (Bloch & Guillory, 2011).

Eventually, research was done to see if and how attachment theory plays out in adult relationships. An example of this research was completed by Hazan and Shaver in 1987 (Shi, 2003). These authors learned that adult relationships and infant relationships share similar features. These features include feeling safe and secure when the partner is nearby, initiating close body contact, feeling insecure when the other is inaccessible, and a mutual fascination and interest in each other (Shi, 2003). Because of these implications, Hazan and Shaver argued that adult romantic relationships are similar to infant-caregiver relationships (Shi, 2003). Currently, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) is used to measure attachment insecurity in adulthood and how that style carries into adult relationships (Shi, 2003).

When there is a family conflict such as parental infidelity or divorce there is more likely to be less warmth, sensitivity, and less parental involvement overall with their children. The culmination of which may cause insecure attachments (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). It is important to know what interventions work best to treat individuals who have experienced family conflict and to be knowledgeable about what interventions are rooted in attachment theory. This is important as the increased knowledge and expertise can create better outcomes for individuals with attachment insecurities and will help therapists be more effective in helping individuals with attachment insecurities improve their relationships and increase positive interactions with others, which can lead to more successful relationship development.

### **Family Conflict**

The term family conflict did not emerge until the 1960's as psychotherapy was emerging as an acceptable treatment option for individuals and families. Many theories such as structural/functional theory emerged, describing families as a social institution and asserting that social order needed to be followed for a cohesive and supportive environment (Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, 2011). At times families struggle with a multitude of problems and distinctive issues such as mental health and physical health problems that may cause dysfunction. This dysfunction caused needs for interventions such as family therapy. These interventions helped to introduce the term family conflict (Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, 2011).

These emerging theories acknowledged that a person's behavior and are actions not always acted on due to their internal environment. Many theorists realized and agreed that the social environment was a powerful predictor of one's behaviors. This led to an increased interest in psychopathology and the importance of exploring social-environmental factors that lead to

specific behaviors (Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, 2011). The increased acceptance of emerging mental health practices led to the development of the term family conflict.

A family conflict is defined as any conflict that occurs within a family. This could include conflicts between husbands and wives, children, siblings, grandparents, and extended families. These conflicts vary immensely and can include conflicts such as death of a family member, illness of family member such as cancer or other life threatening disease, financial hardship, and transitions such as career transition or relocating to a new area (Schmidtgall, King, Zarski, & Cooper, 2000). Other conflicts include addition of new family members, children having issues in school, and other disagreements between household members.

These various family conflicts can cause tremendous stressors such as anxiety, long term health effects such as high blood pressure, suppression of the immune system, premature aging, increase the risks of mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). There are two conflicts that are inter-related; these conflicts are divorce and infidelity. These conflicts are known to cause higher levels of stress, behavioral problems in children, and may lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007).

### **Infidelity**

Infidelity can be interpreted in many different ways. It is defined as having sexual encounters with someone outside a monogamous relationship. It is also known as extra-dyadic involvement EDI (Allen & Baucom, 2004). Infidelity can cause family conflict and distress. It may lead to divorce, separation, and other familial changes that cause distress and anxiety in children (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

Many studies have shown that knowledge of parental infidelity does cause thought changes about relationships in children, which can impact cognitive processes. The thought changes that can occur include negative thoughts and perceptions about relationship successes. Children may struggle with maintaining friendships and romantic relationships into adulthood (Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Wetchler, 2008). Those cognitive changes are may make them more susceptible to having less positive thoughts about others and be less likely to trust and engage with others. Also, children exposed to parental infidelity are more likely to not engage in romantic relationships due to fear of being abandoned or of betrayal (Greeman & Johnson, 2013). Similarly, some individuals have poor coping strategies and increased anxiety. They tend to have lower levels of differentiation and a higher level of anxiety (Fish et al., 2012).

Other studies have shown that relationship stressors such as having children, new career opportunities, financial difficulties, and death of loved ones tend to reduce relational satisfaction. Other factors such as lack of income, lower education level, and exposure to parental divorce increase infidelity in relationships. Partners who have been betrayed by other partners are more likely to have higher bouts of anger and rage, may have fears of abandonment and increased depression (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Overall, there are many different factors that influence infidelity and the infidelity can cause negative outcomes for both the parents and children.

Lastly, a review of the literature points to the importance of exploring intergenerational effects of infidelity and divorce in families as some research shows that insecure attachments increase and cause risky behaviors in children and adult children who are impacted by parental infidelity and the resulting family conflict (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

## **Divorce**

There are many families impacted by divorce and many resulting implications occur because of this family conflict. Some of these implications include anger and resentment, financial hardship, children having difficulties maintaining friendships and other personal relationships, behavioral problems in schools, and other mitigating factors that cause distress within the family dynamics (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

The divorce process causes changes to a family's relational dynamics and can cause disorganization in the parental-child relationship. Fagen and Churchill (2012) state that there may be decreased emotional support, financial hardship, and an increase in other negative life events. For example, children in divorced families tend to live with one parent the majority of the time. Though there are some situations where the parents share custody evenly and share parental duties, research has shown that a majority of children live with their mother nearly full-time (Herzog & Cooney, 2002). The familial changes may cause children to respond differently to their parents and potentially react negatively. They may struggle to connect with their part-time parent, which may cause negative effects in the relationship into adulthood (Mone et. al, 2011). Also, divorce causes other familial changes especially in the situations where a remarriage occurs.

When divorced parents remarry there are many changes that impact the children involved. For example, they may gain another sibling in the form of a stepbrother or stepsister. Also, parental dynamics shift again as there is another parent involved, the step-parent. This new change can cause distress, anxiety, emotional problems, resentment, and anger. Sometimes, there can be positive changes as the step-parent can be a secure and stable support system that

provides encouragement, guidance, and additional emotional support. When there is family conflict such as death of a parent, the additional support of the stepparent can be helpful to one's emotional well-being and may become a confidant or accepted as a parent (Mone, et al., 2011).

Likewise, some research has confirmed that there can be many positive benefits for children and their development, because of divorce. These outcomes can be developmental outcomes such as cognitive and emotional maturity. A trauma such as a divorce may cause some negative emotional deficits. Children in environments of higher marital conflict are more likely to be exposed to inadequate parenting and erratic parenting. This can lead to difficulty forming healthy attachments with others. However, many children in environments exposed to higher levels of parental marital conflict show an increased emotional maturity and are able to more likely develop trusting relationships when divorces occurs, because the conflict exposure decreases ( Mone, et al., 2011). These positive relational developments in childhood lead to positive relational developments into adulthood.

### **Parental Divorce and Parental Infidelity Implications**

#### **Health Compromising Behaviors**

Currently, there is no clear consensus in the research evidence that shows that infidelity causes children to act out and engage in risky behaviors. However, there has been research that shows infidelity and family conflict increases the likelihood that children and adult children will engage in these behaviors (Platt et al., 2008). For example, adolescents who are aware of parental infidelity are more likely to try drugs and drink alcohol. Similarly, they are more likely to participate in risky sexual behavior such as unsafe sex practices and having multiple partners compared to their peers who do not share this awareness (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler, & Bercik,



2012). According to Sori (2007), once a child knows about a parental affair, their sense of security and trust is diminished.

There has been a correlation identified between increased depression and anxiety with infidelity exposure. Some adolescents may drop out of school or run away from their home. These children are more likely to engage in at-risk behavior as they do not see the world as safe or predictable. They may develop a pattern of conflicted relationships with insecure attachments in adulthood (Sori, 2007). Secondly, research has shown that some children are at less risk if they have positive supports and stability (Lansford, 2009). These protections and supports include having a positive support such as a family member that is not a parent, such as a grandparent or sibling, being able to identify with other adolescents that are experiencing similar conflicts, and outside support such as a family counselor or school counselor (Cartwright, 2006).

### **Parental Infidelity and Adult Children's Infidelity**

Research has shown that parental extra-dyadic behavior may lead children to believe that infidelity is an acceptable practice. Infidelity is considered a risky behavior. Sori (2007) observed that children with parents who have committed infidelity are more likely to have insecure attachments and commit risky behaviors, once they are aware of the infidelity. Platt et al. (2008) found that risky behavior in children may be attributed to modeling their parents. They found that children who knew their father had committed infidelity were more likely to commit infidelity in their future relationships. The research showed that this correlation was truer in young men and their fathers. There was no clear evidence that women were more likely to commit infidelity if they knew their fathers did in the past (Platt et al., 2008).

Other researchers have found results that indicate parental infidelity exposure increases the likelihood of committing infidelity in future relationships (Platt et al., 2008). Children who were aware of their parent's infidelity do report a higher likelihood that they have been unfaithful themselves. In future relationships, children are more likely to avoid pursuing relationships and communicate with romantic partners poorly, which increases the likelihood of relational dissatisfaction. Knowledge of parental infidelity can cause poor coping strategies and when unhappy they may pursue other relationships to rupture their current relationship. This is a generational pattern that risks reoccurrence..

### **Attachment Implications**

Research demonstrates clearly that family conflict and parental infidelity impact attachment style. When there is a major shift in family dynamics such as infidelity or divorce, a child's attachment style may change (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). Trust may be shattered and the understanding of intimacy may change. Factors could include a change in self-esteem due in part to the problems in parental relationships. Insecure attachments create uncertainty and cause doubts that one is lovable (Shi, 2003). Therefore, a family conflict such as parental infidelity or divorce may lead to insecure attachments as the adult child may fear abandonment and have a need for closeness. To the contrary, parental conflict and infidelity can lead to avoidant attachments such as low self-esteem, negative view of others, and lack of closeness to others (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

There have been multiple studies done to show how the intergenerational impacts of infidelity and family conflict can predict adult attachment style. One study found that adult children who thought their parents' divorce was caused by infidelity were more likely to develop

an insecure attachment style (Ehrenberg, Robertson, & Pringle, 2012). Another study found that there is some evidence that parental conflict can predict attachment style but it is not clearly defined (Platt et al., 2008). The study indicated that if there was parental conflict than it was more likely for child to have future relational struggles (Platt et al., 2008). Both studies had limitations as they only surveyed undergraduate students and the studies were not clear if they included individuals who had unfaithful parents who remained married.

### **Negative Effects of Divorce**

Divorce has been shown to impact the mental health of individuals involved. Many couples have noted that they have increased symptoms of anxiety and stress when marital problems are occurring. Divorced individuals experience lower levels of relational satisfaction with others and poorer self-concepts about future relationships, usually in after divorce occurs (Ciu & Fincham, 2010). Also, they experience a higher negative outlook regarding securing future romantic relationships due to past relationship failure. In general, divorced individuals are at risk for more health problems and higher mortality rates (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Not only can mental and physical health change for the worse from divorce; financial concerns tend to increase and income decreases (Cui & Fincham, 2010).

Financial hardships are a common stressor from a family conflict such as divorce. When a couple decides to end their marriage there tends to be some financial costs such as attorney fees, relocation costs, downsizing of home, and the loss of partner's income (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007). These financial changes can cause anger, resentment, and increased depression and anxiety. Subsequently these changes can cause significant and lasting effects on the children involved in this conflict (Schmidtgall, Kin, Zarski, & Cooper, 2000).

## **Effects on Children**

Many families are impacted by divorce and over a million children in the United States each year experience parental divorce (CDC, 2014). The effects of divorce on children includes struggles with peer relationships in a school setting and outside a school setting, the higher likelihood of committing unhealthy and risky behaviors such as drug use and alcohol abuse, and other mental health problems (Mustonen et al., 2011). In a school setting, children and adolescents who come from divorced families are more likely to act out in class and be referred to mental health providers for behavioral problems (Scott et al., 2013). This may be because of the stressors from the family conflict. Overall, divorce has long-term effects on children that can go unresolved into adulthood, but some individuals are able to recognize their maladaptive behaviors and seek guidance to repair thinking and negative outcomes. Some individuals are resilient and seek services when necessary.

## **Positive Outcomes**

There are many factors that are perceived as negative due to the conflict of divorce. However, there are times where implications of divorce can be positive. For example, if a family was dealing with the issues such as domestic violence and abuse, alcoholism, and other negative behaviors and divorced a spouse to leave this conflict may lead to better outcomes (Cartwright, 2006). Leaving these conflicts can provide safety, less disorganization, less stress, and more structure that may lead to better outcomes for the family overall (Layard & Clark, 2014). Also,

there are some treatment measures that have shown to be effective for treating maladaptive behaviors and negative thinking of the self that has resulted from family conflict.

These treatments are cognitive based therapy, family therapy, emotion focused therapy, and other therapeutic interventions. They have shown to help individuals lessen their negative and maladaptive beliefs, such as thoughts that include fear of being abusive like their parent or that they will end up divorced and unhappy like their parents (Cartwright, 2006). There are studies that indicate these interventions also helped individuals be more open about their personal issues and explore their emotions, which is helpful to decrease maladaptive thoughts and behaviors (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Overall, there are interventions that have shown to be helpful with overcoming the negative effects of divorce. Some of these interventions are used with families and children and others are used to help adult children that were exposed to divorce in childhood.

### **Effects on Adult Children**

Adults who have been exposed to parental divorce may have complications such as relational problems when in romantic relationships, higher likelihood of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, higher likelihood of fearful-avoidant attachment issues, and higher likelihood of divorce in future relationships (Volling, Notaro, & Larsen, 1998). These issues are very similar to the effects of parental infidelity, and divorce and infidelity tend to have strong correlations with each other (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Divorce in families may impact future relationship interactions.

Some adult children have reported that they struggle to trust others and struggle communicating with their spouse or partner their feelings, as they fear that they may be

abandoned or betrayed (Ciu & Fincham, 2010). About 50% of adults exposed to parental divorce become divorced themselves and remain unsatisfied with current relationships. They report stronger rates of depression and anxiety (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Furthermore, not only do adults exposed to parental divorces report higher rates of anxiety and depression, they report higher rates of fearful-avoidant attachments, especially women (Mustonen et al., 2011). Clearly, there are some correlations between gender and attachment implications. Research shows that women tend to have relationships that are more negative with their fathers when a divorce has occurred in childhood. Other research studies have shown that men have less negative reaction toward their fathers in adulthood (Mustonen et al., 2011). However, other studies show that there is very little evidence to support that men have less negative reactions as men tend to be interviewed less and less likely to participate in research studies (Herzog & Cooney, 2002).

### **Gender Response Differences**

Studies have shown that there are clear differences in gender responses toward family conflict, especially in adulthood. In general, adult women are more likely to have emotional reactions and negative outcomes from exposure to parental divorce (Mustonen et al., 2011). Divorces tend to have the same effects on children and their relationships in a school setting regardless of gender, but studies have shown that adult women have a higher likelihood of relational struggles, divorce rates, depression and anxiety, and attachment insecurities into adulthood (Mustonen et al., 2011). However, more women responded to the studies asking questions about the effects of divorce as children, so the research is impacted by that potential overrepresentation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, family conflict is a complicated event for children and adult children of divorced families. It can cause distress, financial hardship, anxiety, increased behavioral issues for children, attachment implications into adulthood, and many other mitigating factors.

A family conflict such as divorce correlates with negative outcomes for children and adult children that include higher likelihood of behavioral problems, health risk behaviors, attachment insecurity implications, and other negative outcomes. Some variables that improve the prognosis for children include the importance of a stable family environment, positive communication between both spouses after divorce, increased stability such as staying in one home, increased family supports outside of the parents including grandparents, aunts, uncles, family friends. Also, therapeutic interventions such as emotion focused therapy and family counseling have shown to be helpful towards children dealing with family conflicts (Cartwright, 2006).

Family conflicts may cause detrimental outcomes towards children exposed. Two “causes” of these conflicts in this systematic review that were explored are infidelity and divorce, and the impacts on risk behaviors, adult divorce and infidelity, and attachment outcomes as dependent variables. There are strong suggestions that family conflicts may contribute to some of these negative outcomes listed above and emerging evidence that cognitive based therapies and other interventions can help mitigate negative effects or increase the likelihood of more positive developmental outcomes. The family conflicts explored in this study are exposure to parental infidelity and divorce and the effects these conflicts may have on children involved during the present conflict and their future interactions into adulthood.

## Conceptual Framework

### Adult Attachment

The perspective of adult attachment is drawn from and based upon Bowlby's original attachment theory, which theorized that early relationships, starting at the beginning of birth with parental figures influence the emotional bonds between children and their relational developments with parents and peers (Bowlby, 1980). The adult attachment framework explores the impacts of attachment style and the impacts attachment has on relational developments amongst peers, romantic partners, and others. Some studies show that adult romantic relationships can be a reflection of a parental relationship (Fish & Paklov, 2008).

Also, individual differences in attachment style may influence what characteristics are desirable in a partner (Fish & Paklov, 2008). If the assumption is that adult relationships are similar to attachment relationships in childhood, then it is possible that children who had a secure attachment will produce a secure relationship with their partner, or vice versa, an insecure relationship in childhood may produce an insecure relationship with a spouse or partner (Fish & Paklov, 2008).

Attachment style can influence the organizational patterns of behavior. Some studies have shown that someone who has an insecure attachment in childhood is more likely to isolate from peers and may become disruptive in a setting such as a classroom or social peer group. This pattern of behavior can continue to grow into adulthood, as one who is insecure is more likely to



have relational development problems and commit risky behaviors such as alcohol abuse and drug use (Sroufe, 2005).

An individual with a secure attachment from past childhood is more likely to be able to self-regulate and adapt to complicated situations (Sroufe, 2005). This can translate into adulthood, as one is more likely to handle complex situations and stressors with less difficulty and with more perseverance than an individual who is insecurely attached. When family conflicts such as divorce, death of loved ones or infidelity in a romantic relationship occur, it is important to have a secure base for exploration, to feel safe and be reassured by other peers and social supports (Sroufe, 2005). These are all themes that are evident throughout attachment theory literature and have relevance to the literature being explored in this research study. It is important to explore the impacts of attachment development because attachment experiences are clearly significant in the development of an individual throughout childhood and carry forward into adulthood. The writer is operating from the perspective of attachment theory because of the information noted above.

## Method

### Research Design

In this study, a systematic literature review was conducted. Themes and ideas were identified regarding the effects of family conflict, focusing on infidelity and divorce as the two examples of such conflicts that were explored. The researcher gave particular attention to how these conflicts impact a child exposed to them and to the potential impacts on their health and risk behaviors, future relationships, and the implications on attachment during childhood and adulthood. The majority of the literature reviewed came from academic peer reviewed journals. The Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas did not need to approve this study as no human participants were be interviewed or asked questions during this research.

There are remaining questions suggested by literature about family conflicts and their effects on children and their relationships that emerge during adulthood that this study hoped to explore. The evidence that this study seeks is evidence of consistent themes within the current literature regarding impacts of family conflicts such as the effects these conflicts have on health and behaviors, future relational development, and impacts on attachment security. Secondly, this study noted potential clinical implications. With this research, the writer focused on family conflict and the importance of the impacts these conflicts have on children, especially about their future relational developments. The discussion section references therapeutic approaches (i.e. treatments and interventions) that are noted in the findings, which may offer practitioners potential resources related to client's situations represented in this research.

## **Objective**

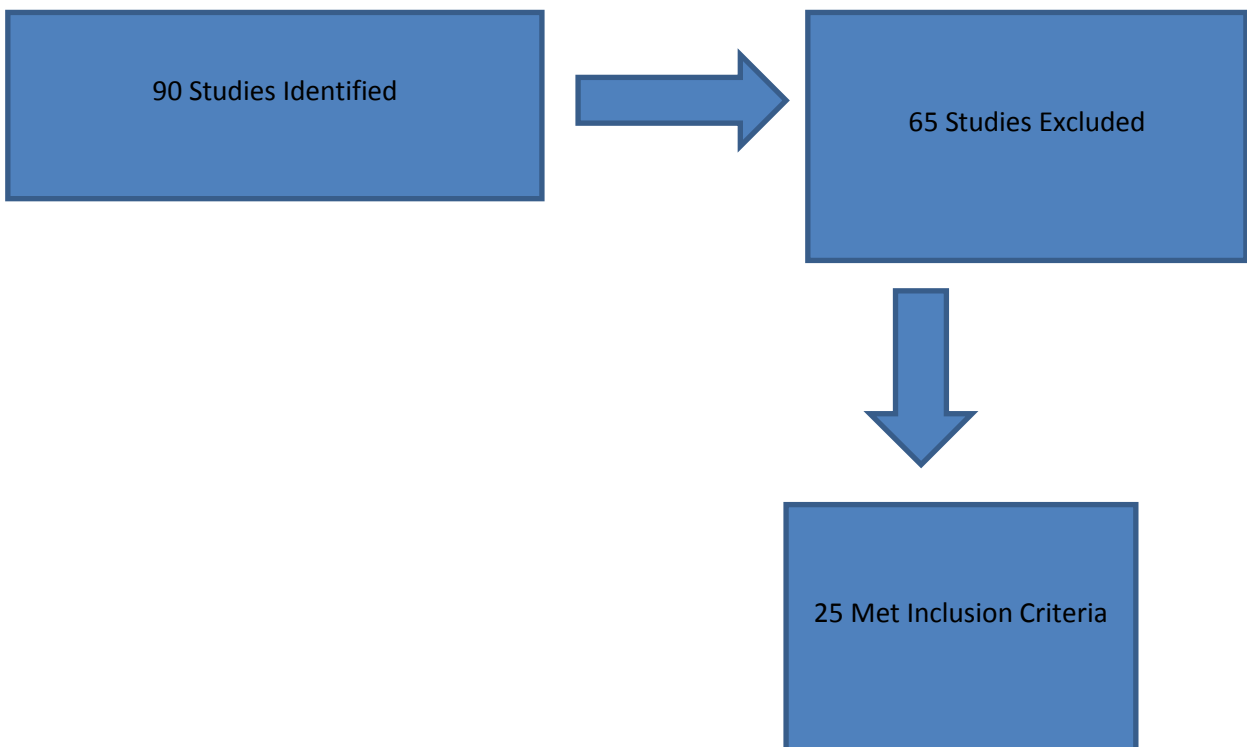
The objective was to review peer reviewed and published studies that explored family conflict, focusing on the conflicts of parental infidelity and divorce. After the studies were searched for and identified, they were then reviewed to determine if they should be included in the research. The first search terms that were used were family conflict, adult attachment, divorce, and parental infidelity. To be included the studies addressed, to some degree, family conflict, exclusively dealing with divorce and infidelity or the attachment impacts from exposure to divorce and, in particular, infidelity.

## **Data Collection**

The method of data collection explored different social work-related databases, including Social Work Abstracts to acquire articles and related literature. Some of the literature consisted of published works written by experts in the field. The databases explored were the *Social Work Abstracts*, *PsychInfo*, and *Psychosocial Abstracts*. An in-depth and comprehensive search in these databases was used to gather articles and information pertinent to the subject. Articles that address family conflict, effects of divorce, effects of infidelity, and adult attachment insecurity were searched. In addition to the “first search terms” listed above, the following search terms were used to limit the search: “parental infidelity” and “attachment”, “family conflict” and “divorce, “family conflict” and “infidelity”, “attachment interventions”, “divorce” and “risk behaviors”. Also, the researcher used search terms such as “both” which helped narrow the available articles. There were numerous articles that were discovered. A coding process such as separating the articles into different categories by their themes was completed to determine

which articles were chosen to be presented in the research. The researcher only used the most current literature available in this area, consisting of literature across the period of 1998-2014.

The articles needed to meet the designated definitions of family conflict, divorce, infidelity, and adult attachment implications. The researcher determined if articles met the definitions of family conflict that pertained to the two types of family conflicts being studied: parental infidelity and parental divorce. There were many articles excluded, as they did not meet the criteria due to being overly specific or not pertaining to the focus of this research. The researcher traced the process and included a flow chart to illustrate how the research inclusion process was completed. Please see flow chart below:



The articles that were included in the study were from 1998-2014 and all came from peer reviewed journals and books. The researcher included these years because this was the time period that much of this research has been written. In addition, some texts were included in this study Attachment processes in couples therapy by Sue Johnson and The science of trust by John Gottman. The researcher chose to include works by these authors because they have written many articles and their literary works pertain to the research focus. The articles similarly give attention to both development and attachment. The topics include adult attachment interventions and interventions used when working with families that have experienced infidelity. The types of research studies that were used included qualitative and quantitative research, theoretical and conceptual writings, and case studies.

### **Data Analysis**

After the articles meet the inclusion criteria, they were then accessed to see which components of family conflict and the effects are most relevant to this study. There are three categories that the researcher used to code these articles. These categories are health and risk behaviors, impacts on future relational developments, and attachment implications. The articles were coded and included in the findings. For example, if an article addressed exposure to divorce increased the risk of alcohol use and sexually promiscuous behaviors, then that article was most likely coded into the category of risk behaviors. The researcher used a flow chart to illustrate the coding process, which was referenced in the final method section of the paper. A table for each category is represented in the final results to support the researcher's narrative. Research articles that did not pertain to adult attachment or the effects of family conflict were excluded .

## **Strengths and Limitations**

There are some particular strengths of this study. One, in particular, is that a systematic review only used scholarly peer reviewed journal articles and literature by leaders in this field. Secondly, there are many research studies that cover the topic of adult attachment and family conflict that may allow more variability and support for the research findings as many of the studies may have similar themes and consensus. Thirdly, systematic reviews are used to identify, combine, evaluate, and summarize findings of studies that are relevant to the research. Since there are numerous research studies about family conflict and adult attachment, it is important to explore how they correlate with each other and clearly define family conflict, as there are many different types and definitions. For example, family conflicts can be parental divorce, death of a parent or child sibling, a diagnosis of a health compromising disease such as cancer, and other traumatic events. However, there are some experiences that one may not consider a conflict such as moving to a different state or dealing with a family member completing a life transition, whereas, others may consider those events conflicts. Having a clear definition will help to contribute to clearer definitions and to an improved understanding in each of the principal areas being explored.

The limitations of this research are that some studies that are highly regarded and provide important information were excluded due to not meeting criteria in the coding process. Also, the researcher did not interview adult children who have been exposed to family conflict directly, which may have produced different themes and information that has not already been represented in previous research. Because of this, the study will not represent many firsthand

accounts, which may have led to richer themes and missing components that would only be heard by way of qualitative, first-hand accounts.

The individual's voice may not be represented. In addition, there is potential for bias in using a systematic literature review as the researcher included only articles that pertained to attachment, infidelity, and divorce and other groups or variables may not be represented. There may be other themes that were missed that could be important in the research using this process. For example, not all children were raised by two parents, so single family accounts were less represented. Secondly, many GLBT families were not included as the research mainly consists of literature including families raised by parents who report themselves as heterosexual. Also, families where parents are not married were less represented as much of the research regarding infidelity is about the relationships of married couples.

### **Time Frame**

The research was completed from September 2014-April, 2015. A proposal was submitted to the committee on 11/17/2014. Articles were gathered and selected to be included in the data. Once the articles were gathered, they were then examined for common themes and similarities. The researcher has included these findings in the results. A final presentation will be given on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

## Findings

Throughout the research process, the researcher was able to find many themes that related to how family conflicts, concentrating on divorce and infidelity, impact children and their outcomes in adulthood. The research suggests that there is a correlation between the experience of family conflicts and how that experience influences the likelihood of engagement in health compromising and risky behaviors, such as substance use in adolescence and risky sexual behaviors in adulthood. In addition, there are implications that suggest that divorce and parental infidelity do affect attachment style in children and their attachment style in adulthood.

Secondly, it suggests that the attachment style and conflict exposure may influence future romantic and non-romantic relationships. The themes that have been drawn from this systematic review include impingement of trust, the importance of friendship when dealing with conflict, how generational patterns impact attachment style and future relational developments, the likelihood of attachment style changing over time, the importance of effective repair techniques to be utilized during conflict, and suggest that individuals dealing with conflict can show immense adaptability and resilience.

This researcher drew themes from the works of Sue Johnson and John Gottman, authors who are experts in the fields of family conflict and marriage counseling, and from Alan Sroufe's attachment research. These authors helped frame the themes that are presented in this systematic review. The reason they were chosen was due to their strong emphasis of the importance of secure attachment in childhood and adulthood.



**Trust**

Trust is a theme that was prevalent in the majority of the literature reviewed. It was referenced concerning attachment style, how relational patterns are formed, ability to maintain positive relationships, and the likelihood of relational success (Johnson, 2003; Sroufe, 2005; Cooney, 2010). Gaining one's trust takes time and effort in most relationships. One has to prove to the other that they are trustworthy and worthy of gaining another individual's trust. Trust is naturally established between parents and children, spouses, partnerships, and friendships (Johnson, 2003). Some studies have shown that trust in relationships with parents may influence future health and relational developments (Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Frank, 2007; Sroufe, 2005). Please see the table below regarding themes of trust found in the literature.

Study	Theme	Relation to
Johnson, 2003	Trust	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Sroufe, 2005	Trust	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Cooney, 2010	Trust	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Burns & Dunlop, 2002	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors
Franks, 2007	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors
Rossmann, et al., 2005	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors, Attachment style implications
Shilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors
Gottman, 2011	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors and Attachment implications
Cooney, 2010	Trust	Health & Risk Behaviors
Volling, Notaro, & Larson, 2001	Trust	Attachment implications and future relationship implications
Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011	Trust	Future Relationship Implications

Table 1. Themes of Trust in correlation to Health & Risk Behaviors, Influence On Attachment Style, Future Relationship Implications, Positive Outcomes

One 30-year longitudinal study that was prominent in the literature is the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES). This study sampled young adults and children from urban areas, who came from low-income socio-economic backgrounds and experienced adverse experiences, such as abuse and neglect. The study showed that children who experienced conflicts such as abuse and neglect or experienced familial conflict, such as divorce, were more likely to develop depressive symptoms, and had a higher likelihood of substance abuse, and increased antisocial behavior (Shilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

Consistent with this, Gottman describes a Harvard study that was completed by George Valliant. The research began in 1952, asked adult children from that graduating class about the amount of warmth they had experienced with their father and mother and met with the participants again in 30 years to talk about their physical health and current relationships. The levels were described as (1) Very close, (2) warm and friendly, (3) tolerant, and (4) strained/cold. The participants who described their parental relationships as lacking warmth and closeness were 45 percent more likely to have developed a serious medical illness in mid-life. The participants who reported lack of warmth and closeness with both parents were all diagnosed with serious medical illnesses in mid-life. Unfortunately, the total number of participants was not referenced (Gottman, 2011). These studies are important to consider as they suggest that lack of trust and adverse experiences, such as family conflict, contribute to unhealthy outcomes in the future and that the levels of trust in family systems may have critical consequences during the lifespan for both parents and children.

When individuals have lack of trust with their parents, they may be less likely to engage in relational developments with other children. Per Johnson (2003), it is important to have a secure base to go to for support and attention when one is distressed and unstable. It provides the ability for one to explore cognitive processes. It helps to develop the ability to reflect on one's self, behavior, and mental state. A secure base offers security and support to help one cope with conflict and stress.

When a parent is unable to be that secure base for a child, they may turn away and develop maladaptive responses. These responses may be behavior problems in school, inappropriate social responses, and inability to engage with others (Johnson, 2003; Cooney, 2010; Volling, Notaro, & Larson, 2001). Not only may this lack of trust cause these immediate

problems, but also it may have future impacts, such as lack of social supports, friendships and patterns of long-term relational problems in adulthood. It is important to consider the ability of the child to build trust (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). Individuals build trust by showing that they have the ability to recognize one's negative affect and respond to that affect. When individuals feel attuned with each other and comfortable discussing conflict and stress and remain responsive to the negative affect if present, then they start to build trust with each other. Trust establishment is important for couple relationships, parent and child relationships, and friendship development (Gottman, 2003; Burns & Dunlop, 2002; Platt, Nalbone, Casanova, & Welcher, 2008).

Much of the literature reviewed regarding family conflict supports the importance of friendships and the impacts friendships have toward a child's development. This impact was found in the following articles: Pulling On The Heart Strings: An Emotionally Focused Approach to Family Life Cycle Transitions, Adult Children's Experience with their Parent's Infidelity: Communication Protection and Access Rules in the Absence of Divorce, Childhood Emotional Abuse, Adult Attachment, and Depression as Predictors of Relational Adjustment and Psychological Aggression (Dankowski, 2001; Thorson, 2009; Riggs & Kaminski, 2010).

When a child is exposed to conflicts, such as divorce and parental infidelity, they may develop lack of trust and struggle to become friends with others, which may cause lack of social support in the future.

## **Friendship**

Friendship is a theme that appeared in the literature (see table 2). Friendships are helpful in providing emotional support, assistance during conflict, and can be a secure base for

individuals. When children are exposed to conflicts, they may turn to their friends and other supports outside of their family system, if available (Johnson, 2003). When a conflict arises, changes may occur that can cause stress, feelings of uncertainty, and inadequacy. Children dealing with the conflict of parental divorce may blame themselves for the relationship ending which causes extreme feelings of guilt and shame (Rogers, 2004; Vidal, Testor, Guardia-Olmos; & Iafrate, 2010). Parents may be unavailable to provide their children with adequate support during this crisis, which could cause long-term effects such as lack of trust (Johnson, 2003).

When a child has friends and supports outside of their family system, then they are more likely to remain resilient and not develop maladaptive behaviors and responses to the conflict (Johnson, 2003; Gottman, 2011). The power of friendship has not been studied thoroughly but the research does show that the ability to develop friendships and utilize them for support and a secure base can have positive impacts when experiencing family conflict (Rogers, 2004; Johnson, 2003). Furthermore, the ability to develop friendships may stem from learning from parents or parental figures (Dankowski, 2001; Riggs & Kominski, 2010).

Study	Theme	Relation to
Johnson & Whiffen, 2003	Friendship	Attachment Style and Future Relationship Outcomes
Rogers, 2004	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors
Vidal, et al., 2010	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors
Johnson, 2003	Friendship	Attachment and Future Relationship Implications
Gottman, 2011	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors

Dankowski, 2001	Friendship	Future relationship implications
Lansford, 2009	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors
Sori, 2007	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors and Attachment Implications
Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011	Friendship	Attachment and Future Relationship Implications
Chen, et al., 2007	Friendship	Future Relationship Implications
Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors, Attachment and Future Relationship Implications
Cherry, 2013	Friendship	Health & Risk Behaviors

Table 2. Theme of Friendship in correlation to Health & Risk Behaviors, Influence On Attachment Style, Future Relationship Implications, Positive Outcomes

### **Generational Patterns**

There are many studies that referenced generational patterns of conflict (Gottman, 2011; Sroufe, 2005; Sori, 2007; Fish, Pavkov, & Wetchler, & Bercik, 2012). For example, when conflicts occur in families, it is likely that child will be exposed to maladaptive communication styles and experience future relational struggles according to the literature reviewed. The exposure may cause immense changes to occur. This result is especially true in the conflicts of divorce and infidelity in terms of their impact on children. The child may develop less trust and change their communication styles. They may become less social and more irritable toward others and begin to struggle in school.. The changes that may occur include moving to a new location, increased stressors such as being enrolled in a different school, change in support systems, and change in emotional responses to conflict. These changes may not be positive and may cause negative long-term effects.

For example, research shows that children who come from families where divorce has occurred are more likely to develop depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Gottman, 2011; Sori, 2007; Lansford, 2009; Sroufe, 2005). Also, in adulthood they are more likely to have poorer health outcomes. Research has shown that parents tend to copy their own parents' behaviors, and children tend to copy their parents' behaviors. When a parent has unresolved psychological problems, then it may cause difficulty to be loving, sensitive and provide a base for security for their children (Sroufe, 2005; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011).

Some research (Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011; Cartwright, 2006; Herzog & Cooney, 2006) has shown that patterns of conflict can occur in many family systems because of social learning. Per Cooney & Herzog (2002), young adults exposed to parental conflict reported poorer communication between themselves and their romantic partners and in non-romantic relationships. Some examples given are children who were exposed to divorce or infidelities are more likely to be in relationships where infidelity and divorce occur (Sori, 2007; Lansford, 2009). Per Chen (2007), adult children, who experienced parental divorce, had increased negative views about romantic relationships and marital disruption was more likely by 70 % for them.

Some researchers attribute these poor attachment relationships with parents and because of this poor attachment relationship, the child struggles to trust others, may become antisocial, may develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, and risks developing a dismissive or avoidant attachment pattern when communicating with others (Sroufe, 2005; Sori, 2007; Chen, et al., 2007). The individual may have learned negative communication styles from their parents and utilize those types of communication tactics when responding to others. This research indicates

that there is a correlation between exposure to parental divorce and infidelity and increased likelihood of negative outcomes in future romantic and non-romantic relationships.

These patterns do not occur with every individual who had a poor attachment relationship with their parental figure, but there is support that indicates it is more likely for individuals who had a parent with an insecure attachment may develop an insecure attachment themselves. Because of this history, the individual will more likely become dismissive or avoidant during conflict, may struggle to communicate with others about their emotions, struggle to trust others, and may be more likely to develop depression and loneliness (Sroufe, 2005; Johnson, 2003; Sori 2007; Lansford, 2009). These patterns may cause an increased likelihood that individuals with insecure attachments are more likely to have struggles with personal/intimate relationships with others and may develop generational patterns of family conflict such as divorce and infidelity (Gottman, 2011). Interestingly, a generational pattern correlates highly with exposure to trauma and the attachment injuries that occur from trauma experiences (Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007, Saini, 2012; Johnson, 2003). Per Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore (2007), in most conflictual families there is a pattern of conflict and abuse. The parent tends to learn behaviors from their own parents, and these behaviors may be maladaptive and negatively affect their children's' behaviors and development, which may cause destructive coping strategies that are used in future communications with romantic partners and others.

Adolescents who were abused and neglected are at high risk for continuing the pattern of abuse and neglect. They are at higher risk for a negative sense of self, low self-esteem, and lack of trust toward others. Abused children are more likely to enter into relationships where they are victimized or become self-injurious; this is statistically significant among women. Young men exposed to trauma and abuse may be more likely to become abusive themselves (Johnson, 2003;



Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007). When an individual's sense of trust has been compromised, they may feel more entitled to treat others poorly and negatively or have such low self-esteem. They think that they should not be treated fairly or with respect (Johnson, 2003; Sori, 2007).

However, with effective repair techniques such as therapy, the adolescent may not develop these negative outcomes. For example, when a perpetrator of abuse acknowledges the abuse they caused, the victim is more likely to feel less blame toward themselves and less shame. This realization can lead to interactions that promote respect, trust, and commitment. When traumas are not addressed, they may cause the individual continued mistrust, guilt, shame, and resentment (Johnson, 2003, pg. 209). Because of generational patterns, it is important for individuals to develop effective repair techniques that increase the likelihood of healing in the family system. Overall, family dynamics can change over time and impact attachment style and development (Cherry, 2013). See the table below:

Study	Theme	Relation to
Gottman, 2011	Generational Patterns	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Sroufe, 2005	Generational Patterns	Attachment Style and future relationship outcomes
Sori, 2007	Generational Patterns	Health & Risk Behaviors, future relationship implications
Lansford, 2009	Generational Patterns	Health & Risk Behaviors
Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011	Generational Patterns	Future Relationship Implications
Cooney & Herzog, 2002	Generational Patterns	Future relationship implications
Chen, 2007	Generational Patterns	Future relationship implications

Johnson, 2003	Generational Patterns	Health & Risk Behaviors and Attachment implications, future relationship
Shilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007	Generational Patterns	Future relationship implications
Cherry, 2013	Generational Patterns	Attachment style implications

Table 3. Generational Patterns: Influence on Attachment Style, Future Relationship Implications, Positive Outcomes

### **Attachment changes over time**

Some studies that assessed attachment style change have shown that attachment style is mostly stable throughout the lifespan (Lewis, Feiring & Rosenthal, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011). This finding means that for many individuals without intervention, such as therapy, attachment style does not change significantly over time. Individuals who have been exposed to stressful situations and conflicts may develop insecure attachments. Because of this exposure, individuals with an insecure attachment may continue to struggle to develop positive relationships. According to Johnson, Sori, Sroufe, and others, an increased likelihood of insecure attachment styles results from associations with negative life events that include parental divorce, illness, abuse, trauma, and maternal depression (Weinfield & Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Sori, 2007; Sroufe, 2005). Attachment style could change to secure with an improvement of childcare and an increased understanding of family functioning when a family is experiencing conflicts such as divorce or infidelity. Other research has shown that changes in attachment occur because of transitions and changes and, depending on how the transitions are

handled, will result in a more secure or insecure attachment( Beaton, Norris,& Pratt, 2003; Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001).

Secondly, some research exploring effects of divorce has shown that individuals leaning toward a more insecure attachment style in adulthood are more likely to be resistant to change or accept support when it is offered (Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001). They may view the support attempt as spiteful or inappropriate and become defensive toward the attempt. They are less likely to engage in therapy and may respond insensitively toward others who are trying to be helpful (Johnson, 2003).

However, attachment styles can and do change throughout the lifespan because of different experiences and exposures. These experiences may be positive or negative. The transitions and stressors throughout life may cause an individual to change how they respond to others and how they exhibit their emotions. It is important to understand what techniques are effective in causing positive communication and collaboration to help heal emotional ruptures and despair. The researcher found that knowledge of effective repair techniques are important increase collaboration amongst families and couples when dealing with conflict. Please see the table below regarding the findings for attachment changes overtime.

Study	Theme	Relation to
Feiring & Rosenthal, 2000	Attachment changes over time	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Sroufe & McIntosh, 2011	Attachment changes over time	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Johnson, 2003	Attachment changes over time	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Weinfield, et al., 2000	Attachment changes over time	Health & Risk Behaviors
Sroufe, 2005	Attachment changes over time	Health & Risk Behaviors
Beaton, et al.,2003	Attachment changes	Attachment style and future

	over time	relationship implications
Iwaniec & Sneddon, 2001	Attachment changes over time	Attachment style and future relationship implications

Table 4. Theme of Attachment changes overtime in correlation to Health & Risk Behaviors, Influence on Attachment Style, Future Relationship Implications, and Positive Outcomes

### **Negative Conflict Responses and Effective Repair Techniques**

Gottman and Johnson both discuss the importance of effective repair techniques regarding family conflicts such as parental divorce and infidelity. Gottman references effective repair techniques among couples and Johnson discusses effective repair techniques amongst the whole family system (Gottman, 2011; Johnson, 2003). Gottman's research suggests that when couples are dealing with conflicts they may engage negatively or constructively. A typical negative response to a conflict is to disengage and withdraw and not be emotionally present. This response may be ignoring someone when they are trying to help or walking away from someone when a conflict occurs. When responding constructively, this positive response could be just listening to a partner's concerns or trying to change a behavior that is bothersome or frustrating.

This dynamic can occur in couple relationships and in parent- child relationships. When an attachment figure withdraws from a conflict, that isolation may be traumatizing and upsetting for the child or partner. Children may learn that it is normal to run away from conflict and develop avoidant responses to conflict, which may have important implications in their future relational developments (Sroufe, 2005).

In couples, ineffective repair techniques may lead to individuals feeling insecure and to the development of anxiety and low self-esteem. They may become anxious when talking to their

partner about their emotions or withdraw from communicating with their partner about their feelings to avoid conflicts. Some examples of poor repair techniques are ignoring an individual's emotions, not looking out for partner's interests, and becoming defensive, putting an individual down by insulting them, or by using derogatory language, and stonewalling, which is withdrawing from conversation and not being present when needed (Gottman, 2011).

With children, some parents may be utilizing poor responses to conflict without knowing it. When responding to a child's emotional cues, they may dismiss their children's emotions by not acknowledging their feelings, such as anger or sadness. They may encourage the child to remain positive instead of sad or angry by making statements such as "it's beautiful outside, you have no reason to be mad, look how beautiful it is!" or making statements such as "get over it." These types of emotional dismissive responses minimize negative feelings that can escalate into resentment and anger (Gottman, 2011; Iwanic & Sneddon, 2001).

An effective repair technique that is successful with couples and families is when one is empathic when negative emotions occur and acknowledges the negative emotion. The emotion is tolerated and talked about instead of being ignored. An understanding of why the feeling is occurring is discussed. These types of techniques are used in therapy modalities such as Emotion Focused Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Sroufe, 2005). Effective repair techniques help individuals increase cohesion and understanding and help to decrease conflict and resentment (Johnson, 2003; Gottman, 2011; Solomon, 2009; Frank, 2007). See the table below regarding the theme of effective of repair techniques.

Study	Theme	Relation to
Johnson, 2003	Effective repair techniques	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Gottman, 2011	Effective repair	Attachment style and future

	techniques	relationship outcomes
Sroufe, 2005	Effective repair techniques	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Iwanic & Sneddon	Negative conflict responses	Attachment style and future relationship outcomes
Frank, 2007	Effective repair techniques	Health & Risk Behaviors, future relationship outcomes
Solomon, 2009	Effective repair techniques	Health & Risk Behaviors, future relationship outcomes

Table 5. Effective Repair Techniques and correlation to Health & Risk Behaviors, Influence On Attachment Style, Future Relationship implications, Positive Outcomes

### **Adaptability & Resiliency**

Lastly, one of the most prevalent and important concepts found throughout this research is the amount of resiliency and adaptability that children and adult children exhibit throughout family conflicts. Many studies indicate that family conflict, including divorce and exposure to parental infidelity increase the likelihood that children will struggle. These struggles include emotional disengagement with others, such as lack of trust, and an increased likelihood of completing at risk behaviors, such as promiscuous sex and substance abuse, and an increased risk of relational difficulties in adulthood (Sroufe, 2005; Cooney, 2010, Johnson, 2003; Sori, 2007; Lansford, 2009; Gottman, 2011). However, exposure to conflict will not always result in negative behavior and outcomes.

Research has shown that children exposed to family conflicts can become resilient and highly adaptive (Johnson, 2003; Saini, 2012; Cartwright, 2006). Children exposed to family conflict are more likely to develop negative outcomes, but that is not always the case. Sometimes parents, who have an increased understanding of attachment style, may be better attuned with their children and recognize certain behaviors. Parents who are less reactive to emotions and

more proactive are more likely to decrease insecure attachment and increase autonomy, and trust (Cooney, 2010). Also, families that engage in therapeutic intervention when conflict occurs are more likely to have positive family changes overtime and decrease insecure attachment processes (Johnson, 2003; Gottman, 2011; Cherry, 2013; Carbone, 2010; Dankowski, 2001).

Many children who have supportive systems outside of their family system are exposed to positive influences and role modeling. These systems could include families where there is a supportive stepparent or instances where divorce is a better outcome for a family than as the conflict may decrease (Sroufe, 2005; Herzog & Cooney, 2002). Sometimes, other factors such as abuse and stress are occurring. When a divorce occurs and the child escapes the cycle of abuse, the outcomes are more positive (Gottman, 2011; Johnson, 2003).

Other support systems may be an after-school program, a friendship with a teacher or mentor, social support systems, and inclusion with extra-curricular groups, such as a sports team or music group (Cartwright, 2006; Lansford, 2009; Bachman, 2008). Furthermore, some children exposed to conflict are not impacted as negatively as compared to other children. These children tend to be able to adapt well to change because they have positive supports during transitions (Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Mustonen, et al., 2011). In adulthood, exposure to positive coping strategies and appropriate role modeling during childhood, increase the likelihood of positive relationships and responses to stressors in adulthood (Rasheed & Rasheed, 2011). See the table below regarding the theme of adaptability and resiliency.

Study	Theme	Relation to
Sroufe, 2005	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & risk behaviors, future relationship implications

Sori, 2007	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & risk behaviors
Cooney, 2010	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & risk behaviors
Johnson, 2003	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & Risk Behaviors, future relationship implications
Cartwright, 2006	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & Risk behaviors
Saini, 2012	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & Risk behaviors
Lansford, 2009	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & Risk Behaviors, Attachment style implications
Mustonen, et al., 2011	Adaptability & Resiliency	Health & Risk behaviors, attachment and future relationship implications
Rasheed & Rasheed, 2011	Adaptability & Resiliency	Attachment style and future relationship implications

Table 6. Theme of Adaptability & Resiliency in correlation to Health & Risk Behaviors, Influence On Attachment Style, Future Relationship Implications, Positive Outcomes

In closing, this systematic review has provided insight and understanding regarding the effects of family conflict on individual's attachment style in childhood and throughout adulthood. The research highlights that conflict can change one's trust in and understanding of relationships. An individual may lack trust and be more reluctant to pursue romantic relationships in adulthood because of their exposure to family conflicts. In addition, they may gain a secure attachment through a romantic relationship or friendship that improves their trust and attachment style.

Friendships are shown to be important in the development of a secure attachment as solid friendships help improve trust and create a secure base for support and understanding. When conflict does arise is it important to use effective repair techniques, which include clear communication and understanding with family members and romantic partners. Ultimately, when individuals are experiencing conflicts, the research indicates that individuals can remain



adaptive and resilient. The conflict may not have a negative impact on their attachment style, when support from others is present. The individuals may have developed positive coping strategies from mirroring their parents or other social supports. Some changes because of conflict cause positive impacts as well.

## **Discussion**

### **Process**

During this research, the researcher compiled many articles and literature that pertained to family conflict, focusing on the conflicts of divorce and infidelity and their effects on attachment security. There was immense information available on family conflict and a multitude of articles on attachment insecurity and adult attachment security. Throughout this process, the writer was able to narrow the scope of articles to 25 articles and two primary literary resources: books written by Susan Johnson and John Gottman. These sources focused on attachment, family conflicts, divorce, and parental infidelity. Through the review of the articles and literary resources, there were many themes found. The articles had similar theoretical frameworks; many of these articles based their research on attachment theory. There were some differences as well and implications for future research were found through this systematic review.

The majority of the articles were cross-sectional qualitative studies that explored an individual's attachment style and how that style affects their romantic relationship. Other research studies were longitudinal and interviewed participants for a 30-year period (Sroufe, 2005). Third, some of the articles spoke of therapy modalities that were effective and helpful when dealing with family conflict. The participants identified in these articles included children,

adolescents, adults, married couples, non-married couples, victims of abuse and violence. Some of the articles talked in depth about the negative consequences of family conflict, and some spoke about the negative effects of family conflict on attachment style and how that affects future relational success.

Other articles talked about the positive consequences of family conflict and how the conflict in some instances creates positive changes. There were few longitudinal studies found compared to short-term qualitative studies. Many of the participants in these studies were women or heterosexual, Caucasian couples. Many of the articles talked about the positive effects of psychotherapy when dealing with insecure attachments and others mentioned the importance of positive social supports and the importance of supports helping to establish a more secure attachment. Overall, the findings produced some interesting results.

The findings produced six major themes. The themes found were: the importance of being able to establish trust with others, importance of being able to gain and maintain friendships, the prevalence of generational patterns of communication and relationship styles, how attachment style changes over time, negative conflict responses and effective repair techniques, and the theme of adaptability and resilience among individuals who experienced family conflicts. All of these themes provide important knowledge about the effects of family conflict and their implications on individual's future relational outcomes and styles.

Many of the articles talked about the importance of trust and how trust in others helps individuals continue to develop appropriately mentally and physically during adolescence. Both Johnson (2003) & Gottman (2011) made it very clear that trust in others leads to positive relational outcomes, secure attachments, and less likelihood of physically illness and depression.

Many of the research articles spoke to this as well and to how lack of trust leads to riskier behaviors and poorer health outcomes. This was very interesting to see in the findings as the researcher had hypothesized when one does trust others than they will more likely to have secure attachments, positive relational outcomes, and overall be a happier individual which would lead to a healthy and fulfilling life. Other research articles in the review reiterated this finding as well. The ACES study spoke to how childhood adversity can cause risk problems with physical health and mental health in adulthood (Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007). These findings provide insight into the importance of attention to development in early childhood.

This finding is closely tied to attachment theory, as the basis of attachment is a trusting and loving relationship with an attachment figure in infancy that leads to expectations and reactions toward others in future interactions. The importance of trust was not the only interesting and important theme that was found throughout the research. The theme of trust highly correlates with another theme found which is the importance of friendship. Some research articles reviewed indicated that when one lacks trust and has adapted poor communication styles in childhood and adolescence, then they will more likely struggle to gain friendships and positive supports (Gottman, 2011). The researcher found this finding intriguing and important to utilize in schools. It suggests that educators should continue to encourage peer-to-peer exercises in schools to improve engagement skills and help children to establish friendships and supports in their school. The finding points to the importance of schools having funding available to staff school social workers and psychologists who are trained in facilitating positive social interactions and encourage social supports. In addition, it was interesting to see the research show lack of trust and friendships leads to poorer health outcomes such as increased depression and anxiety (Sori, 2007; Gottman, 2011).

Many of the articles reviewed mentioned generational patterns. Researchers have defined generational patterns as learned behaviors that were developed in childhood that can be attributed to relational developments in adolescence and adulthood. The articles talked about how many children who were around parents who fought with each other or who were often verbally abusive would mimic their parents' behaviors when they interacted with others in adolescence. These behaviors were described as bullying, being verbally abusive, physically confrontation such as fistfights or shoving (Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007; Johnson, 2003).

Also, in adulthood, many of the articles reference how learned behaviors from parents helped establish the communication style that individuals have in their intimate relationships. For example, if one were exposed to a parent who would often avoid conflict and shut down emotionally, then they would often shut down emotionally when conflicts between their intimate partners occurred (Schilling, Aseltine, & Gore, 2007). This theme was interesting to see in the research and shows how important it is for parents to teach and show their children positive and effective communication patterns. Children, clearly learn behaviors from their parents. This theme closely correlates with the theme of negative and effective repair techniques.

Johnson (2003) clearly explained the definition of an effective repair technique, which is to identify the conflict issues occurring, identify unnamed emotions and communicate those emotions and feelings to others, taking steps to decrease negative feelings and emotions, and work with others to change negative responses and maladaptive behaviors. Johnson uses emotion-focused therapy (EFT) as her main intervention to treat conflict issues, especially for individuals who have an insecure adult attachment. Johnson's research helped the researcher have a better understanding of these cycles and their effects. There were many definitions of what facilitates a negative cycle or technique. Johnson and Gottman both talked about negative

patterns of behavior that included consistently ignoring others, not acknowledging others' feelings, walking away from conflict instead of talking with others about the conflict, and having a pattern of maladaptive responses such as name-calling, fighting, raising one's voice (Johnson, 2003; Gottman, 2011).

The researcher found in reviewing this literature that maladaptive behaviors and patterns would most likely increase the likelihood of individuals struggling to maintain positive relationship and decrease conflict. In addition, it is important to note, as stated above how exposure to these negative cycles as children most likely lead to learned behaviors that increase the likelihood of these children as adults having insecure adult attachments and negative relational developments.

The researcher found the two themes of attachment style changing over time and the adaptability and resiliency of individuals exposed to family the most compelling themes in the research. Many of the articles spoke to the negative effects of family conflict. The conflicts explored the most throughout this research process were parental divorce and infidelity. It was surprising to read about how much the effects of conflict attributed to higher risk behaviors in adolescence such as substance abuse and increased likelihood of depression and anxiety (Johnson 2003; Sori, 2007; Gottman, 2011; Lansford, 2009). Fewer studies talked about the positive impacts of family conflicts. These positive changes could be a child being removed from an unsafe situation such as being around an abusive or dangerous parent, or the relational development of a positive parental figure such as a stepparent when parents remarry, and the communication changes that occur from effective treatment techniques such as Emotion Focused Therapy (EFT) and other therapy modalities (Johnson, 2003).

Second, there were articles talked about how attachment style changes over time. The articles that did discuss this theme, attributed change in style to having exposure to more positive attachment figures such as a positive intimate relationship, a supportive family member, or friend who represents a parental attachment figure (Sroufe, 2005). The research talked about how one may have an insecure attachment but that does not mean they will never be able to change their style to a secure attachment style. Some of the ways that this style can be changed is through effective therapy intervention, positive life changes, or the ability to be resilient when dealing with conflict. Iwaniec and Sneddon (2001) note that some individuals' attachment style is not affected by family conflict and they are able to have secure attachments with others. This was an important theme to note as not all conflict leads to negative outcomes nor does it always cause insecure attachments. Everyone goes through negative and positive life situations, which may account for changed attachment styles. It is important as a clinician to note that attachment style can change from insecure to secure and it is not abnormal for an individual to appear to have an insecure attachment when dealing with conflict.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the fact that only three databases were used to research articles, the Psychological Abstracts, Psychinfo Abstracts, and Social Work Abstracts. Only 25 articles were used throughout the research results. The researcher did find some articles that met some inclusion criteria but did not provide enough information to be included in the research. In addition, there were few longitudinal studies included in the research as only few longitudinal studies have been completed that link attachment style and exposure to family conflicts.

The systematic review provided the researcher with information and knowledge about the effects of family conflict. The research showed how conflict could account for attachment style changes and relational outcomes for children and adults over time. Some of these outcomes were negative and some were potentially positive. The research study did have some other limitations. These limitations included studies that surveyed mostly Caucasian, heterosexual couples. Many of the respondents in some qualitative research studies that were included in this review had more female respondents as compared to male. It is important to note that not all populations were adequately represented in this study. The populations that were not well represented were gay couples and non-traditional families, and there was a general lack of minority respondents. However, many of Gottman's research participants were adequately represented as he interviewed many minorities and non-traditional family units that included gay and lesbian couples and minority populations such as African American couples.

### **Implications for practice and for future research**

Social workers will experience working with many individuals who are experiencing or have experienced past family conflicts such as parental divorce and infidelity. As a social worker, it is important to understand these conflicts, how they may influence children, and how the conflict experience may cause them to develop negative behaviors and communication styles that could affect their future relationship developments in adulthood. Life events do change over time and it is important to understand the potential effects, both positive and negative. The research indicates that experiencing family conflict during childhood can cause the child to develop an insecure attachment, but many children are resilient and adaptable when change occurs and remain having or go on to create a secure attachment.

Learned behaviors and experiences do correlate with the likelihood of developing an insecure or secure attachment in adulthood and the success of future relationships. If an individual was exposed to negative repair techniques and maladaptive communication responses, then they are more likely to mirror that learned behavior from their parents and continue to adopt those negative behaviors in their own relationships. As a social worker, it is important to recognize these maladaptive behaviors and communication strategies, and help clients change these behaviors. This review showed that few longitudinal studies have been done in this area. If there were more longitudinal studies completed then it is more likely researchers would have a clearer understanding of why some children are more resilient than other children are in relation to these developmental threats. Also, it would be important to explore conflict in families that never officially marry, as this population is underrepresented in current research.

Lastly, the research did show a strong correlation between traumatic experiences such as physical and sexual abuse and insecure attachment style; however, few studies have been done to replicate the importance of this finding. This finding was surprising and an important finding to consider for future attachment research. Johnson noted that many of her clients who have been abused or experienced other traumatic events reported many symptoms of insecure attachment styles (Johnson, 2003). Other researchers indicated that traumatic experiences caused more distrust toward others, lack of social integration, fewer friendships, and increased likelihood of anxiety and depression (Lansford, 2009; Sori, 2007).

Overall, it is important as a clinician to understand how family conflict affects individuals and why some are more likely to develop higher risk behaviors as compared to others. It is important to know what techniques, strategies, and psychotherapeutic approaches are most effective for treating individuals with insecure attachments. Also, more research about adult



attachment style should be done such as more longitudinal studies that are completed over 20-30 year periods, as that will take into account the role of other and later major life events. The research indicates that attachment style highly influences an individual's future relational developments and success.

It is important to have a clearer understanding of what interventions work the best in relation to individuals and families experiencing family conflicts that impede attachment style. Two of the main interventions found throughout this review were the use of Emotion Focused Therapy and supportive family therapy to help increase better communication and understanding among family members. Clearly, having an increased understanding and clear definition of what family conflict is and how it does influence attachment style will improve many social workers' scope of practice. Lastly, Gottman and Johnson's research primarily focused on treating conflict in couples. It is important to understand how marital conflict and affect the needs of children and adult children involved.

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