Adult children's experiences following mid to late life parental divorce

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ADULT CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES FOLLOWING
MID TO LATE LIFE PARENTAL DIVORCE

by

Joleen R. Loucks

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1980s, there has been an increase in the number of studies looking at the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children. Most of the studies focus on the parent-child relationship, while no studies assess the adult sibling relationship. This dissertation was designed to provide a better understanding of how and why family relationships, including the parent-child and adult sibling relationships, may be affected by a mid to late life parental divorce.

Using data drawn from in-depth interviews conducted with 40 adult children of divorce (ACD), this study focuses on the ACD’s interpretation of the parental divorce experience. The ACD were grouped into categories depending on whether or not they reported being negatively affected initially or not. Characteristics and patterns associated with each of these two groups are explained in great detail, along with plausible explanations as to why some ACD struggle initially while others do not.

The interview focused on the parent-child and adult sibling relationships in the context of the parental divorce. Patterns concerning the parent-child relationship were analyzed, assessing factors that made it more likely for an ACD to have reported a strained parent-child relationship. The conceptual framework of intergenerational ambivalence (Luscher and Pillemer 1998) was utilized to better understand how and why a mid to late life parental divorce has the potential to affect parent-child relationships.

Similarly, patterns based on the data revealed that there were certain factors that made it more likely for the ACD to report a strained adult-sibling relationship. The conceptual framework of intragenerational ambivalence (Connidis 2005) was used to analyze the overall patterns of the adult sibling relationship in the context of the divorce.
The final results chapter highlights some of the themes that emerged as ACD reflected on their own personal experience. Positive and negative long-term implications were included along with advice to other young adults who might be going through a mid to late life parental divorce. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of the theoretical, practical, and clinical implications of the results of this study.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

As the rate of divorce among younger cohorts has begun to stabilize, the rate of divorce has increased dramatically for couples that have been married for fifteen years or more (Lang and Pett 1992; Brubaker and Hennon 1992). According to Brubaker and Hennon (1992), divorce has been affecting increasing numbers of older couples each year since 1980. More specifically, approximately 175,000 people age 45 years or older are granted divorces each year (Brubaker and Hennon 1992). They also project that the number of mid to late life divorces is likely to increase in the next 40 years or so since individuals of the young adult population are less likely than older people to hold more conventional and conservative values about marriage and divorce (Brubaker and Hennon 1992). Thus, Brubaker and Hennon (1992) argue that we may be witnessing a cohort effect as the numbers of individuals that are projected to divorce in mid to later life is expected to increase in the near future.

Data from the National Center for Health Statistics show that of the 1.2 million divorces granted in the United States, over 20% ended marriages that had lasted for at least 15 years (Cooney 1988). Even though most mid to late life divorces occur after children are young adults and have moved out of the parents’ home, research on how they are affected by this untimely family event is warranted. Cooney (1988) notes that unlike early life divorce (when children would be minors), the exact number of ACD cannot be estimated since divorce records do not require the names and ages of offspring over the
age of 18. However, Fintushel and Hillard (1991) estimate that in the 1980s, the number of ACD between the ages of 18 and 40 was around 2.5 million.

There are many reasons why research on this population is warranted. First, the percent of midlife and later-life individuals who will eventually divorce is expected to rise (Lloyd and Zick 1986). In addition, the rate of divorce among this population is likely to increase in the future due to a decline in mortality rates at earlier ages (Weingarten 1988). Also, divorce is seen as more acceptable in American society and remarriages are more likely than first marriages to end in divorce. Furthermore, the economic independence of older women is projected to lead to higher divorce rates among this generation (Weingarten 1988). Lastly, research shows that divorced individuals are more likely than married individuals to experience financial problems and/or health problems (Lloyd and Zick 1986). With such high projections, it is imperative to study not only the population directly involved in mid to later life parental divorce, but also the children of these divorcing parents.

As the rates of mid to late life parental divorce continue to increase, so does the interest in research on this topic. Nearly four decades of empirical literature demonstrate the implications of parental divorce on children. There is an abundance of empirical research focusing on how parental divorce during childhood affects children and adolescents, with an emphasis on both the short and long-term effects. Much of the literature in family sociology focuses on the potential negative effects of parental divorce on children, particularly children under the ages of eighteen years of age (Amato 1988; Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White 1984; and Wallerstein 1985).
Since the early 1990s, there has been an increase in the literature on the phenomenon of mid to late life parental divorce, occurring when children are 18 years or older. Researchers have shown that although there are general similarities experienced by children of divorce, the experience is different depending on the age of the children at the time of the divorce. Previous research has minimized the negative effects of such a marital dissolution on adult children of divorce (ACD), assuming that they are minimally affected since they are in the process of leaving the parental home, completing their education, entering the workforce, and beginning their own marriages and families. Also, ACD have presumably achieved a level of ego maturity which enables them to cope satisfactorily with this change in their family system. However, others argue that it is precisely because the transition to adulthood for these ACD is such a complex and challenging time that research in this area is needed (Pett, Lang, and Gander 1992; Cooney 1995). Furthermore, some researchers such as Cooney (1986;1988) argue that ACD have such a difficult time dealing with their parents’ divorce because of the complexities of this stage in life.

Much of the research on mid to late life parental divorce compares the experience of adult children of divorce to children whose parents divorced during childhood or adolescence, as opposed to adulthood. Although mid to late life parental divorce is a fairly new research topic to the family sociology literature, there have been numerous quantitative and qualitative studies on this phenomenon. Much of the research focuses on issues such as how this family situation impacts family holidays and rituals, adult children’s own lives, and help exchange between parents and adult children. An underlying theme concerning how family life changes after a mid to late life parental
divorce is the altered parent-child relationship. A neglected aspect of the literature is how adult sibling relationships are affected. Further investigation into the perception of the experience from ACD would give a better understanding of the processes and meaning involved concerning the parent-child relationship as well as the adult sibling relationship before, during, and after the parental divorce.

In the next chapter, I review two extensive and comprehensive literatures. First, I review the literature that deals with the effects of parental divorce on children. Specifically, I briefly review research on the effects of parental divorce on children under age 18; then I review research that examines the longer-term effects of an early parental divorce. I next review the literature on how parental divorce affects sibling relationships in childhood and adulthood. Most importantly, I then review in great detail the research on the increasing phenomenon of mid to late life parental divorce and its effects on adult children, including their relationships with parents and siblings.

Second, I review the research on intergenerational adult relationships in general, concentrating on themes and patterns that emerge from the literature. In particular, I highlight research findings focusing on issues of gender differences, help exchange between the generations, caregiving by adult children to parents, contact and proximity, and instrumental and financial assistance. Most importantly, I review research that assesses relationship quality between the generations, focusing on research that evaluates the impact of parental divorce on parent-child relationships.

Finally, I review the theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks that have been used to understand and explain intergenerational relationships. I briefly review both the solidarity and conflict perspectives that have dominated research on aging and
families for the past twenty years or so. Furthermore, I highlight the limitations of these two perspectives in explaining the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on intergenerational adult relationships. I then introduce the conceptual framework of intergenerational ambivalence, providing a very comprehensive review of the theoretical, conceptual, and measurement issues associated with this fairly recent conceptual framework. In addition, I provide examples of empirical research that has utilized the conceptual framework of intergenerational ambivalence in order to support my argument as to why this conceptual framework is best suited for my particular research interest.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology for this study, including a rationale for choosing qualitative methodology. The sampling procedure along with validity and reliability issues are discussed. In addition, the interview protocol, including the operationalization of intergenerational ambivalence and related concepts is discussed. The chapter concludes with an overview of the process and ethical issues related to the current study.

The presentation of my results begins with Chapter 4 which focuses on the overall general experiences of a mid to late life parental divorce as interpreted by the ACD. The chapter begins with an overview of common themes that were experienced by the ACD during the initial stages of the parental divorce. Then, I present the categorization of the ACD into one of two groups: “Affected Initially” and “Not Affected Initially” and discuss characteristics that were shared by many of the ACD in each of these categorizations.

Chapter 5 describes the parent-child relationships in the context of the parental divorce. First, I present the experiences of ACD whose parent-child relationships were
reportedly negatively affected by the parental divorce. I then present the conceptual framework of intergenerational ambivalence and argue that it is a useful perspective to help better understand how and why parent-child relationships are affected by a parental divorce. I then discuss the experiences of the ACD who reported that their parent-child relationships were unaffected by the parental divorce. I also bring attention to the theme of the evolution of the parent-child relationship over time. I conclude with a discussion of the ACD’s interpretation of whether or not their parents’ remarriage or dating status had any effect on their parent-child relationships.

Chapter 6 focuses on the adult sibling relationships in the context of the parental divorce. First, I review previous theoretical and empirical research that has focused on adult sibling relationships during and after a parental divorce. I then discuss themes and patterns from the current study, including whether or not the ACD believed their sibling relationships were affected by the parental divorce. I suggest that the new concept of “intragenerational ambivalence” (Connidis 2005) be utilized to better our understanding of why certain family events like a parental divorce have a potential to alter sibling relationships. I conclude with a discussion of the evolution of sibling relationships.

In Chapter 7, I provide an overview of what the ACD reported as they were looking back and reflecting on their own personal experience. I discuss positive and negative long-term implications of the parental divorce, as reported by the ACD. I also present the advice that the ACD offered to future ACD to help them successfully deal with the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce. I conclude with a discussion of how intergenerational ambivalence was negotiated by some of the ACD. Chapter 8 is a concluding discussion of the dissertation that includes a summary of my findings,
contributions to the literature, limitations of the current study, as well as theoretical and practical implications, along with suggested directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON EFFECTS OF PARENTAL DIVORCE

Effects of Childhood Parental Divorce

Short-term Effects

There exists much research showing a correlation between parental divorce and children’s social and psychological well-being. Although it is difficult to establish causality, there is substantial evidence to believe the relationship is causal and not spurious. Many of the studies control for various factors including socioeconomic status, age, and gender; in addition, most of the studies compare children from divorced families to children from two-parent families, bolstering the conclusion that parental divorce has adverse effects on children. Although there is a vast literature dedicated to documenting and understanding the short-term effects of parental divorce on children, only a few areas are highlighted since this is not the particular focus of this research project.

Upon review of research in the 1990s, the small gap between mean scores for well-being of children from divorced families and their peers from two-parent families remained constant into the late 1990s (Amato 2000). In addition, even several years after the parental divorce, both boys and girls may exhibit more behavior problems than children from two-parent families (Wallerstein 1985; Cherlin et al. 1991). Nonetheless, some studies show that children’s problems decline as the time since parental divorce increases (Jekielek, 1998); still others find no improvement (Cherlin et al. 1998)

A review of the research on the consequences of divorce for children has consistently shown that children with divorced parents score lower on standardized
academic tests than children from two-parent families (Amato 2000; Wallerstein 1985; Cherlin et al. 1991). However, it is important to keep in mind that it may not be the divorce process per se that causes poor academic achievement in children from divorced families; there may be additional factors such as parental conflict or other stressors present in the family. Nonetheless, there remains a correlation between family structure and academic achievement; whether the correlation is a result of the divorce itself or other factors is a subject for further study.

Furthermore, research finds that parental divorce has negative effects on parent-child relationships (Booth and Amato 1994). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) found that divorced custodial mothers were less affectionate toward their children than mothers from two-parent families. In addition, they found that the relationships between mothers and sons remained strained over time (Hetherington et al. 1982). One of the most consistent findings is that divorce has the most negative effects on the relationships between noncustodial fathers and their children (Aquilino 1994a; Cooney & Uhlenberg 1990; Rossi & Rossi 1990). Aquilino (1994a) found that custodial parents (both mothers and fathers), compared to noncustodial parents, enjoy positive relationships with their children even into young adulthood. However, it is important to note that most studies assessing the effect of parental divorce on parent-child relationships focus on relationships when the children are adults, as opposed to children.

Long-Term Effects

In addition to the surplus of research on the immediate or short-term effects of parental divorce on children, there is also an abundance of research focusing on the long-
term effects of parental divorce, once children of divorce reach adulthood. Much of the rationale for studying the long-term effects of parental divorce that occurred during one’s childhood has to do with the research agenda of parental divorce; namely, researchers are interested in the impact of parental divorce on children. Thus, it is no surprise that researchers are interested in finding both similarities and differences in the short-term and long-term effects of parental divorce on children. Research on the long-term effects of a parental divorce on children focus on the following issues: marital quality and divorce rates; psychological and mental health problems; economic strain; intergenerational support; adjustment to college; parent-child relationships, and adult sibling relationships.

Much of the research focuses on the marriage and divorce rates for children whose parents have divorced, comparing them to adult children of two-parent families. Many studies find that children from divorced families are more likely to see their own marriages end in divorce than adults from two-parent families of origin (Amato 1988; Amato and Booth 1997; Cherlin et al. 1991; King 2002). Booth and Edwards (1990) found that young adults who experience a parental divorce during childhood are more likely than those from two-parent families to be prone to divorce themselves, and more likely to have marital disagreements and marital problems. In addition, adult children of divorce are less likely to trust their intimate partners and are more hesitant to make the commitment to marriage (King 2002; Amato and Booth 1997).

Other research emphasizes the psychological and mental health problems of adult children of divorce. Amato and Booth (1991), using a national sample of adults, compared individuals who experienced parental divorce during childhood to those who did not experience marital dissolution. They found that individuals from divorced
families scored lower than those from two-parent families of origin on measures of psychological and social well-being (Amato and Booth 1991).

In addition to lower marital well-being and an increased risk of psychological and mental health problems, young adults from divorced families are also affected economically. Several studies found young adults of divorced families to have lower educational attainment, lower income, and a higher likelihood of receiving government assistance as adults, when compared to young adults from two-parent families (Amato 1988; McLanahan and Bumpass 1988).

Intergenerational support is another area of the family relationship that is affected by parental divorce during childhood. Many studies using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (Bumpass & Sweet 1991; Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990; White 1992) find that there is less instrumental and economic support exchange, less emotional support exchange, lower parent-child contact, greater geographic distance between parent and child, and lower perceived relationship quality with adult children whose parents divorced during their childhood.

Grant, Smith, Sinclair, and Salts (1993) were interested in the impact of parental divorce on college students. Using a sample of 341 freshmen students, they found that there were no significant differences among student’s college adjustment scores based on the parent’s marital status. However, interestingly, the age of the child at the time of the divorce was a variable found to affect adjustment to college (Grant et al. 1993). More specifically, individuals whose parents divorce while they were pre-school age reported significantly higher college adjustment scores than those whose parents divorced later in childhood. The findings support other research that concluded that children who
experience parental divorce at an early age are more likely to overcome the negative
effects of parental divorce (Hetherington, Cox, and Cox 1978; Kulka and Weingarten
1979). However, it is important to note the limitation of using a sample of college
students. That is, perhaps those individuals who are experiencing the most difficulty
adjusting to their parents’ divorce may not attend college at all.

Most importantly, there is much literature that focuses on the parent-child
relationship during the adult years in the aftermath of a childhood parental divorce.
Research has shown that young adults from divorced families feel less affection for their
parents and have less contact with them (Booth and Amato 1994; White 1994). A
consistent finding among most researchers is that parent-child relationships are altered as
a result of a parental divorce, with especially negative implications for the noncustodial
parent (Aquilino 1994a; Booth and Amato 1994). Nonetheless, in a meta-analysis of
research on issues associated with adult children of divorce, Amato and Keith (1991)
found that parental divorce was significantly associated with poorer relationships with
both parents, although the effects were slightly larger for fathers. Other studies found
that recollections of parental marital happiness, not only parental divorce per se, had
negative effects on parent-adult child relationships, including decreased contact and
reports of lowered relationship quality (Amato and Booth 1991; Fine, Moreland, &
Schwebel 1983; and White, Brinkerhoff, & Booth 1985).

In addition to the parent-child relationship being altered as a result of a childhood
parental divorce, sibling relationships are also affected. There are both theoretical and
practical reasons for turning research attention to adult sibling relationships, especially as
they are affected by parental divorce. According to Milevsky (2004), although there has
been a growing interest in the long-term effects of parental divorce on adult children, one outcome that has not received much theoretical or empirical attention is the influence of a childhood parental divorce on sibling relationships. As Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) explain, the overall quality of the sibling relationship, particularly the perception of sibling supportiveness, may serve as a buffer as siblings deal with the stress and conflict associated with parental divorce during childhood.

The underlying theoretical foundation for research on the influence of parental divorce on sibling relationships consists of two frameworks (Milevsky 2004). First, there is the buffering hypothesis which suggests that children will seek out sources of support in times of familial conflict or a parental divorce. For instance, during the process of a parental divorce, when parental emotional or psychological support is lacking, the buffering hypothesis would predict that sibling bonds would be strong (Milevsky 2004). Thus sibling relationships may become closer and more important to children who experience a parental divorce, as siblings look to each other for support during this family crisis (Riggio 2001). Contrary to the buffering hypothesis, arguments based on social learning theory (Bandura 1977 as cited in Milevsky 2004) would suggest that children of divorce, lacking an appropriate model for developing the social skills necessary for a positive relationship, would have difficulty in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships.

The limited research that does look at the influence of parental divorce on sibling relationships has mainly focused on sibling relationships during childhood (Milevsky 2004). Milevsky (2004) argues that there are structural and functional differences between the sibling relationships of children and the sibling relationships of adults.
Therefore, Milevsky (2004) argues that it is important to study the long-term impact of parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. In addition, Milevsky et al. (2005) argue that studies assessing the descriptive nature of sibling relationships have not examined the nature of this relationship using more qualitative methods.

Only a few studies to date have assessed the impact of parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. Riggio (2001) administered the Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale (Riggio 2000) to a sample of 264 young adults who had experienced parental divorce during late childhood. She found that young adults who experienced parental divorce during late childhood were more likely than young adults from two-parent families and those who experienced parental divorce during early childhood to report less positive feelings toward their most important sibling relationship, defined as the relationship which has had the “greatest impact on your life, positive or negative” (Riggio, 2001:73). One limitation of Riggio’s research is that only parental divorce rather than parental marital conflict was assessed.

Complementing Riggio’s (2001) research, Panish and Stricker (2001) found that both parental marital conflict and divorce were associated with sibling conflict in young adults. However, they did note that marital conflict compared to two-parent family structure was a better predictor of sibling conflict (Panish and Stricker 2001). Using a sample of 305 young adults, Milevsky (2004) measured general sibling closeness, communication, and support in addition to measures of specific sibling relations. Milevsky (2004) found that young adults from divorced families perceive their overall sibling relationships as being less close and less supportive than the sibling relationships of young adults from two-parent families; in addition, young adults from divorced
families communicate less often with their siblings than those from two-parent families. In addition, the findings suggest that perceived parental marital hostility is linked to conflict among siblings. Thus, Milevsky’s (2004) findings are supportive of the social learning theory’s view on sibling relationships. Furthermore, unlike Riggio’s (2001) findings, Milevsky (2004) did not find any differences in sibling relationships based on the age at the time of the parental divorce.

Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) also studied the impact of childhood parental divorce on young adult sibling relationships. They interviewed 30 undergraduates between the ages of 17 and 24 years using the Adult & Divorce Sibling Relationship Interview (designed specifically for this study; it consists of a series of open-ended questions designed to assess participants’ perceptions of their sibling relationships in the context of family transitions.) The main goal of their exploratory study of young adult sibling relationships was to take a step towards understanding how divorce affects sibling relationships over time, and how siblings perceive their relationships to have developed or changed as a result of such transitions. Thus, a qualitative approach was selected to achieve this goal.

Many themes emerged from the work of Bush and Ehrenberg (2003). First, most of the participants said that their parents’ divorce had an impact on their relationship with their siblings, with more than two-thirds noting that their parents’ divorce had brought them closer. In addition, many of the young adults who were reluctant to discuss the divorce with their parents and friends felt that their sibling was the only person who would understand them. Also, many noted that the parental divorce provided the siblings with something in common, facilitating the individual coping to this family transition.
However, not all changes in the sibling relationships were positive (Bush and Ehrenberg, 2003). One-third of participants reported an increase in conflict at the time of their parents’ divorce, although the conflict diminished as time passed. Some of the participants noted an increase of maturity resulting from the divorce. Interestingly, one-half of the participants stated that the divorce created an unbreakable bond between the siblings—an experience that brought them closer and had a deep impact. Some of the relationships were brought closer together as a result of a caretaking role that was taken on by an older sibling. However, when a sibling was perceived as being too much of a “parent,” there was conflict in the sibling relationship.

The sibling relationships also changed over time (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003). One common theme was that divorce-related issues kept the siblings connected over time. For instance, the siblings commonly noted fears about their own intimate relationships which could be discussed with their siblings since they had been through the same issue. In sum, although research is limited, there seems to be evidence that parental divorce may influence sibling relationships, although most of the research has focused on childhood sibling relationships. No research to date assesses the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult sibling relationships, although there are many studies that look at the topic of mid to late life parental divorce on adult children in general.

Thus, it is important when considering the long-term effects of parental divorce to distinguish between parental divorce that occurs during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. While it is important to recognize that there are long-term implications of a childhood parental divorce on the parent-child relationship in later years, the effects are different if the divorce occurs when the child is making the transition to young adulthood.
In sum, consistent with the research themes providing evidence that parental divorce during childhood has many immediate negative implications for children, research also finds that parental divorce has long-term effects lasting throughout adulthood.

**Effects of Mid to Late Life Parental Divorce on Adult Children**

In this section, I discuss some of the general topics from the research focusing on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children including the transition to young adulthood, interpretation of parental divorce by ACD, conflicting loyalties, impact on family rituals and holidays, effect on young adults’ marital and family attitudes, psychological and emotional problems of ACD, and parent-child relationships in general.

Young adulthood is a highly transitional period for all young adults, as they strive to maintain independence from their family of origin (Cooney 1988). During this time individuals are expected to assume roles of increasing responsibility and to experience various societal role transitions including departure from the parents’ home, completion of schooling, entrance into the work force, marriage, and parenthood (Cooney 1988). Only by assuming these roles are young adults considered productive, independent members of society (Cooney 1988).

Not only do young adults change individually during this transition to adulthood, but their relationships with parents also change (Cooney 1988). As young adult children leave their parents’ home, it is assumed that they are achieving greater material and emotional independence from their parents. Instead of remaining nearly 100% dependent upon their parents, their new roles of independence are characterized by increased
reciprocity in emotional and instrumental exchanges with their parents (Cooney 1988). For instance, upon completion of educational pursuits and the launching of a new career, the young adult is expected to become less dependent financially on their parents. In addition, young adults are now expected to support their parents in other ways, if called upon, since they will now have the resources and independence to reciprocate with their parents. However, research does show that during young adulthood, parents tend to remain primarily providers of help and support, rather than givers of such support (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Thus, such findings lend support to the argument that the transition to a productive life of young adulthood is not clear cut.

Mid to late life parental divorce is an unexpected family event for many ACD. Lang and Pett (1992) argue that later life divorce is not a planned family event, like most retirements or children leaving home; this type of parental divorce “is considered all the more difficult and undesirable than expected transitions, as it requires more adapting with the least preparation” (1992:123).

Cooney (1988) argues that parental divorce that occurs while young adults are attempting to become independent from their parents upsets the expected role changes. She explains that divorce may disrupt the balance of a parent’s needs and resources at a critical point in young adulthood for the children (Cooney 1988). Just when young adults are attempting to achieve independence from their parents, they are called upon to become key social support systems for their divorcing parents (Cooney 1988). Such an imbalance is unexpected and unplanned by the ACD, leading to much strain in the parent-child relationship. Although ACD may feel it is their obligation to help their parents through this tough time, the ACD may feel overwhelmed by the reinstitution of
interdependency that they are attempting to escape from at this time in their lives. Thus, ACD have difficulty coping with the unexpected need of parents during this very complex time in the life stage known as young adulthood.

Summing up some themes from the interviews with ACD, Cooney (1988) notes, “just as they are attempting to establish their own adult lives, few young people are likely to have the ready reserves of free time, emotional, and financial resources that their divorcing parents may demand” (1988:811). Cooney argues, “it is the transitional nature of early adulthood that makes the impact of parental divorce a decidedly important issue for social scientists to consider” (1988:807).

However, it is important to keep in mind that this is only one set of possible outcomes. Whereas Cooney (1988) focuses on the processes in which the parent becomes more dependent on the adult children, it is also possible that the parent may become more detached or distant due to establishing a new relationship or due to family conflict as a result of the divorce.

Cooney (1988) is hinting at the experience of ambivalence as experienced by ACD going through their parents’ mid to late life divorce. Although the concept of ambivalence was not introduced or applied to intergenerational relationships until more than a decade later, she makes the argument that timing and sequencing are critical aspects of transitions within the family (Cooney 1988). For instance, children are more likely to expect to have a dependent parent at age 50 than age 25. She explains that family transitions that occur off-time or out-of-sequence are considered more difficult and undesirable than events that follow expected schedules (Cooney 1988). According to
societal norms and demographic rates, children assume if their parents have made it through 20 or 30 years of marriage, their marriage will last.

**Interpretation of Mid to Late Life Parental Divorce by Adult Children**

In Cooney’s (1988) nonrepresentative sample of 39 college students ages 18-23, she found that divorce is an especially upsetting family transition because it is largely unexpected in the normative sense. Furthermore, even for those who grew up in conflict-ridden homes, divorce at this point in their parents’ marriage was still unexpected (Cooney 1988). For ACD, later life parental divorce is an unplanned event in their already challenging lives. In Fintushel and Hillard’s publication *A Grief Out of Season: When Your Parents Divorce in Your Adult Years* (1991), they address the grief process that adult children go through as they cope with the loss of their family as they had known it and the loss of their parents as a couple.

Upon a review of the few studies that do look at the impact of parental divorce on ACD, most of the findings consistently focus on the negative effects of parental divorce on ACD. In her qualitative study of both parents (N=6) and ACD (N=5), Campbell (1995) found that both the parents and the ACD have a tough time in dealing with this transition. As noted by Campbell, “Divorce is a phenomenon that is ‘forced’ upon adult children with an expectation to not only survive it without scarring but to heal the wounds of their parents, a task too great to be achieved” (1995:200). In other words, parental divorce at mid life is a family affair (Campbell 1995).

Common responses to first finding out about their parents’ divorce included shock, disbelief, anger, and a sense of loss (Cain 1989; Cooney 1988; Lang and Pett
In Cain’s (1989) sample of 48 college students, the ACD felt a different sense of responsibility for their parents’ divorce. In contrast to research on minor children (Wallerstein 1985), ACD felt little responsibility for their parents’ divorce (Cain 1989). However, they tended to blame themselves or hold themselves responsible for their parents “sticking it out” so long when they were so unsatisfied with their marriage and family life (Cain 1989). In addition to feelings of anger, many of the young adults questioned the moral ethics taught by their parents, especially in instances of adultery and lying to family members (Cain 1989).

The college students from Cooney’s (1988) sample reported similar findings, along with another important theme concerning peer support. College students, in particular, had few friends who could understand what they were going through at this time (Cooney 1988). More specifically, since college is a time of transition concerning friends, many good friends are left back home, while new friends are being made at college. Nonetheless, many of the ACD in Cooney’s sample felt that they had few friends who could understand why they were so distressed (Cooney 1988).

The most common theme expressed by ACD in qualitative studies was the issue of parentification or role reversals. Lang and Pett (1992) identified many critical repercussions that later-life parental divorce had for adult children. They found that many of the adult children had to assume the roles and tasks that were previously managed by mothers, including maintaining family traditions, holidays, and birthday gatherings when the mother was not present (Lang and Pett 1992). Many of the females (more often than males) expressed a feeling of being overwhelmed and overburdened with such role changes (Lang and Pett 1992).
Campbell (1995) noted similar findings of parentification, in which the children now worried about their parents’ well-being along many dimensions. As young adults, such role reversals were unwelcomed at such an early stage of life. When parents divorce mid to late-life, adult children are often expected to assume the role of caregiver, mediator or confidant in relation to their parents (Campbell 1995). Often such role changes take a toll on their own family lives, as ACD attempt to balance the parenting of two families. Similarly, individuals who are single feel overburdened. Cain (1989) also found that the young adults in her sample took on aspects of parentification; many of the ACD were stressed out and overburdened by their parents’ sudden neediness or dependency at this point in their lives.

Although Jurkovic et al. (2001) did not control for age of child at the time of the parental divorce, they looked specifically at the consequences of parentification on adult children of divorce using a multidimensional analysis on data from 382 college students comparing adult children of divorce to children from two-parent families. They concluded that 50% of the participants from divorced homes showed no evidence of destructive parentification, generally defined as unreciprocated or unacknowledged caregiving tasks that are not typical for a child or adolescent. Nonetheless, Jurkovic et al. (2001) acknowledge that their analysis is cross-sectional, not longitudinal.

In Campbell’s (1995) study, a key theme among the ACD was a rejection of the assumption that since they were older, they could isolate their reactions to their parents’ divorce and get on with their own lives. In contrast, many of the respondents expressed concern about interruptions to their own education or careers due to a change in living arrangements or a change in financial support toward educational pursuits.
In a New Zealand qualitative study of 16 ACD, Pryor (1999) found similar results, as her respondents often found themselves in the position of parenting their own parents before, during, and after the separation. They found that demands were made of them that are not usually made on younger children and often at a time when they themselves needed support from their parents. The adult children were often pressed for advice and for practical and emotional support at a time when they were dealing with their own troubled lives.

Lang and Pett (1992) asked ACD about their perceived reasons for the divorce and which parent they felt was responsible for the break-up. Common responses included interpersonal problems between the parents (lack of communication, incompatibility, lack of common interests, and different values, goals, and personalities); financial difficulties; and/or personal problems of one parent (alcohol abuse, emotional problems, career or employment difficulties) (Lang and Pett 1992). When asked who they felt was responsible for the dissolution of the marriage, some ACD said mothers were to blame because they wanted independence and or personal growth; the majority blamed fathers who were emotionally distant, had extramarital affairs, or who had alcohol or emotional problems (Lang and Pett 1992).

Conflicting Loyalties

Another common theme as expressed by ACD is a feeling of pressure from parents to take sides, resulting in great stress. Cooney (1986) found that women were more likely than men to report a concern over taking sides with parents. Also, she found that women were more likely than men to discriminate between their parents as the
targets of their anger (Cooney 1986). In addition, the adult children experienced emotional triangulation with their parents and the demands of parents for assistance with legal issues or property division (Campbell 1995). In addition, there was the continual stress of acting as mediator between the parents over various matters (Campbell 1995; Pryor 1999). A common theme of Campbell’s (1995) respondents was that it was emotionally difficult to see one parent happy at the other’s expense due to the divorce process and the resulting conflicts.

In Lang and Pett’s (1992) study of ACD, they found that when choosing to take a side with one parent over the other, reasons included: feeling that one parent was responsible for the divorce; anger directed toward one parent for various reasons; or conflicted relations with one parent over legal issues associated with the divorce. Nonetheless, time was an important factor; three years after their parents’ divorce, the majority of ACD felt that they either remained or had come to feel neutral towards both parents (Lang and Pett 1992).

Another activity that became burdensome to the ACD was visiting the parents, especially when there were loyalty conflicts involving the child. In Pett et al.’s (1992) study, many of the ACD expressed stress over organizing separate parental visits along with the fear that one parent will call while the other is visiting which could lead to an interrogation over loyalty between the parents. In a similar study by Cain (1989), with 48 college students who had experienced parental divorce during their college years, 50% of the sample experienced loyalty conflicts. In particular, 50% of the sample blamed one parent while feeling compassion toward the other, resulting in strained relationships with their parents. In addition, many adult children expressed concern about the less frequent
contact of their own children with their grandparents due to the (grand)parental divorce (Lang and Pett 1992).

**Impact on Family Rituals/Holidays**

Many researchers found that ACD were negatively affected in the sense that many aspects of family life were disrupted, including changes in family rituals, celebrations, and activities. In an exploratory study of 115 adult children whose parents had divorced in later life, Lang, Pett, and Gander (1992) found that family rituals were altered as a result of the parental divorce. For the purposes of their study, family rituals were operationalized to include family celebrations, traditions, important family life cycle events, and day-to-day contact that, prior to the divorce, had involved both the divorcing parents and adult children. When asked to list and discuss such family rituals, ACD listed specific family activities such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays, vacations, recreational activities, and everyday family contact such as family dinners. Most of the change was due to the loss of a parent’s involvement, especially by the father (Pett et al. 1992).

Much of the kinkeeping surrounding such holidays was delegated to the daughters (Pett et al. 1992). Although most daughters accepted such a role, they did so with resentment at times due to the increased stress and strain related to organizing such times. Prior to the divorce, these were activities that were shared by the family together; now they became stressful occasions that required much negotiation and accommodation with the parents. Keeping family traditions alive was particularly difficult immediately following the parental divorce; however, even three years later, such gatherings were still
stressful for the ACD (Pett et al. 1992). Lang and Pett (1992) argue that although coparenting is assumed to stop once the children reach age 18, we often forget that even divorced families are reunited at weddings, graduations, funerals, etc.—all situations in which there is a lack of social guidelines about how to interact after a mid to late-life parental divorce.

Campbell (1995) found similar results in regard to special occasions. She notes that parents who have divorced in later years find it difficult to continue to mark special occasions with family members since the old way is no longer comfortable or appropriate; yet a new way has not been implemented. Just as Pett, Lang, and Gander (1992) concluded, Campbell (1995) found that adult children prematurely become the middle generation in assuming responsibility for organizing such family celebrations.

Effect on Young Adults’ Marital and Family Attitudes

As a result of seeing their parents’ marriage end after such a long duration, many ACD’s attitudes toward marriage and commitment changed (Campbell 1995; Lang and Pett 1992; Cain 1989). In interviews with mid to late life divorced parents, Campbell (1995) found that a common theme from both mothers and fathers concerned the long term impact on their children regarding romantic involvement and their willingness to trust.

Lang and Pett (1992) found that many adult children responded that they had learned something positive from their parents’ divorce, such as how to handle their own marriage situations. Cooney and Kurz (1996) found that young adult women from
recently divorced families were significantly less satisfied than those from two-parent families with their relationships with intimate partners.

Kozuch and Cooney (1995) argue that it is important to study the marital and family attitudes of young adults who had recently experienced a mid to late life parental divorce because it is during this stage of their life when marriage is more seriously considered and the developmental task of intimacy formation versus isolation is usually confronted. In a random sample of never-married, White young adults ages 17-23, divided into two groups: those with recently divorced parents (n=231) and those with married parents (n=213), Kozuch and Cooney (1995) found that parents’ marital status had a limited impact on young adults’ marital and family attitudes. More specifically, they looked at the influence of family conflict, parental conflict, and parents’ marital status on young adults’ attitudes (Kozuch and Cooney 1995). They concluded that interparental conflict seems to have more negative effects than family conflict or parents’ marital status on young adult children’s marital and family attitudes (Kozuch and Cooney 1995). Parental divorce at any age during their children’s life affects their marital attitudes; however, it is important to keep in mind that it may not be divorce per se that leads to such attitudes.

Psychological/Emotional Problems for ACD

Many ACD have been found to have a higher incidence of psychological and emotional problems that result from dealing with their parents’ divorce. In the first exploratory qualitative study on ACD, Cooney et al. (1986) found that vulnerability and stress was a key theme that emerged from interviews with ACD. They found that the
prevalence of emotional problems was high for both men and women, especially at the initial stages of dealing with the parental divorce (Cooney et al. 1986). Stress was exacerbated because this stress was in addition to their distress at dealing with the new transition to college (perhaps first time away from home, need to make new friends, etc.). This was a key distinction between the experiences of adult children and minor children.

In a sample of 485 white young adults ages 18-23, Cooney and Kurz (1996) found that ACD reported higher levels of depression in the 2-3 year period immediately following parental divorce and a greater need for professional help than age peers from two-parent families. However, there were no significant differences between young men with recently divorced parents when compared with young men from two-parent families (Cooney and Kurz 1996). In addition, poor parental marital quality (as perceived by ACD prior to the divorce) was predictive of depression in young women, but not in young men (Cooney and Kurz 1996). Explanations of the sex differences, according to Cooney and Kurz (1996) include the following. First, young women may show greater awareness of and responsiveness to internal family dynamics than males. Second, women may have a greater sensitivity to relationship dynamics and involvement in relationship monitoring than men. Lastly, daughters are more likely than sons to mediate family conflicts (Cooney and Kurz 1996). Nonetheless, after controlling for marital conflict, Cooney and Kurz (1996) conclude that it is not divorce per se, but family processes in the form of poor parental marital quality that more directly predicted depression in females.

Similarly, although some research has begun to document how the parent-child relationships are altered when parents divorce when the children are adults, most of the
studies are limited by their quantitative nature (Amato and Booth 1996; Aquilino 1994a; Booth and Amato 1994) focusing on ratings of relationship quality. In addition, the few studies that take a qualitative approach (Bonkowski 1989; Fintushel and Hillard 1991; Foster 2006; Pryor 1999) fail to encompass the many dimensions of the intergenerational relationship including relationship quality, help exchange, financial transfers, and the change of the relationship over time. A major limitation of current research is that many studies conclude that the parent-child relationship is affected by mid to late life parental divorce without exploring how the relationship changes or the meanings that ACD attach to this altered relationship. It is imperative to take a closer look at how and why the relationship changes as a result of this untimely event from the perspective of ACD.

The consistent theme that emerges from this review of literature is that there are many negative effects of parental divorce on children, regardless of whether the divorce occurs during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. Since mid to late life parental divorce is the most recent research interest in the divorce literature, we know the least about this phenomenon in comparison to the research on parental divorce during childhood. Thus, further research in this area is warranted to help better understand the complexities of this family event.

Intergenerational relationships are especially important as longevity continues to increase. Furthermore, with the rising divorce rates, particularly among marriages of longer durations, future research on the changing parent-adult child relationships after a mid to late-life parental divorce is warranted. To better understand how and why parent-child relationships change after a parental divorce, it is first necessary to review the
patterns and themes that emerge from research on intergenerational relationships in general.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE ON INTERGENERATIONAL ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Themes and Patterns

Research on intergenerational relationships has surged throughout the past couple of decades for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, increased longevity has lengthened the number of years that parents and children can expect to have a relationship together. According to Pillemer and Suitor (1998), baby boomers will spend thirty or more years of shared lifetime with their parents as adults. There are both negative and positive ramifications of this increase in time spent together. On one hand, older parents have more time for positive family involvement; however, it also increases the likelihood that baby boomers will have to spend a greater length of time caring for disabled elderly relatives. In addition, with increased longevity, there is the issue of adult children caring for parents during the later years. In response, researchers are interested in the impact of the increase in longevity on parent-adult child relationships.

Pillemer and Suitor (1998) note that intergenerational relationships in families are seen as perhaps the only truly stable and reliable relationships; however, they explain that intergenerational relationships are more voluntary than in previous generations. Relationships between parents and children are more voluntary than in the past due to the
fact that in contemporary society adult children are dependent on the labor market for their livelihood rather than on their parents (Pillemer and Suitor 1998).

Lye (1996) conducted a very extensive literature review on parent-adult child relationships and found that relationships between adult children and parents are constructed by two conflicting sets of norms: norms of obligation and norms of independence. She explains that norms of obligation mandate that adult children and parents should assist and care for each other throughout their shared lifetime (Lye 1996). On the other hand, norms of independence mandate that adults should assume responsibility for their own well-being (Lye 1996). Such a conflict between norms means that maintaining intergenerational relationships at times can be challenging.

Since parents and adult children maintain relationships for longer periods of time than in previous decades, they continue to influence one another in many ways, including mental health status. Sustaining and maintaining any relationship, including intergenerational ones, can be rewarding or straining at times. Umberson (1992) provides a theoretical framework to explain how parent-adult child relationships affect adult children’s and parents’ psychological distress levels. According to Umberson (1992), the basic idea is that the parent-child relationship is important to children and parents throughout the life course. Drawing from Durkheim’s work on social integration (1896/1951 as cited in Umberson 1992), Umberson explains that marital and parental relationships are particularly important sources of social integration.

More specifically, the parent-child relationship is a particularly strong and unique source of social integration for parents and adult children for the following five reasons (Umberson 1992). First, the relationship is generally permanent and involuntary.
Second, children are initially dependent on their parents for survival during childhood and are strongly affected by this dependence. Third, societal norms strongly encourage the continued social identity of parents and children with one another throughout the life course. In addition, parents and children tend to share many social values and attitudes for a variety of reasons. Lastly, the lifespans of parents and children are overlapping more now than in previous generations (Umberson 1992). Thus, there is good reason to believe that intergenerational relationships are a very important aspect of an individual’s life.

Intergenerational relationships begin at birth and endure as long as both parents and children are living; however, there are certain times during the life course that the intergenerational relationship is challenged. Of particular interest is how the intergenerational relationship changes as the child makes the transition to adulthood. Applying Umberson’s (1992) theoretical framework, Knoester (2003) assessed the impact of transitions in young adulthood on the relationship between parent and adult children’s psychological well-being. Knoester (2003) argues that examining the effects of changes associated with the transition to young adulthood on both parents’ and adult children’s well-being is significant because it is a time of great adjustment for both parents and children. Furthermore, he suggests that the psychological well-being of parents and their adult offspring may be linked due to shared life events that affect both generations (Knoester 2003). Examples of shared life events may include adult children leaving the parental home; adult children getting married and/or starting a family; an adult child’s divorce; or a parental divorce. Such events are not isolated situations and affect all members of the family.
Employing data from the Marital Instability over the Life Course dataset (Booth et al. 1998 as cited in Knoester 2003), Knoester (2003) obtained a sample of 1,077 married individuals and their offspring. Cross-sectional and longitudinal data analyses revealed that change in one generation’s psychological well-being has an impact on the psychological well-being of the other generation (Knoester 2003). Knoester notes, “perhaps what is relevant in influencing the other generation’s feelings of well-being is not simply the occurrence of major problems and life transitions, but the interpretations of the significance of these events by both generations” (2003:1454). Such a finding provides evidence that parents and adult children are not only connected throughout the life course by shared life events, but are psychologically affected by them as well. Whether or not the shared life events improve or strain the intergenerational relationship is a matter of perception by members of each generation.

Upon review of the research on intergenerational relationships in general, there are many themes and patterns that emerge. Most of the research focuses on one or more of the following themes: help exchange between the generations, contact and proximity issues, reciprocal instrumental and financial assistance between parents and adult children, caregiving to parents, and relationship quality. A consistent finding among all of the aforementioned themes is the emergence of gender differences.

**Gender Differences**

Rossi and Rossi (1990) argue that gender is a major organizing factor in intergenerational relationships. In emphasizing the great significance of gender they argue, “Gender of parent and child is a highly salient axis of family life and
intergenerational relations. On topic after topic, we have found that ties among women were stronger, more frequent, more reciprocal, and less contingent on circumstances than those of men. Women’s ties to women, as mothers, daughters, sisters, or grandmothers, provide social and emotional connecting links among members of a family and lineage” (1990:495).

Gender plays an extremely important role in shaping the bonds between parents and children. Beginning during childhood and continuing throughout adolescence and adulthood, children’s relationships with their parents are distinguished by gender differences. Adult child-mother relationships are closer than adult child-father relationships, and the mother-daughter dyad has consistently been found to be much closer than any of the other parent-adult child dyads (Lye 1996; Rossi and Rossi 1990; Umberson and Slaten 2000).

Many studies find that adult children feel closer to mothers than fathers and mothers perceive stronger ties to their children than fathers (Connidis 2001). In addition, mothers report closer ties to both sons and daughters than do fathers, while daughters report closer ties to both fathers and mothers than do sons (Connidis 2001). Rossi and Rossi (1990) note the especially strong bond between mothers and daughters. They believe this strong bond begins in childhood and continues to be very close throughout the entire life course (Rossi and Rossi 1990). They note that contact by visiting or phoning is more frequent with mothers than with fathers, due to the fact that more women have more daytime hours for such contact, especially with their daughters (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Connidis (2001) found similar results and explains that in cases in which the mother and daughter are not close, they probably never were.
What accounts for the gendered differences in intergenerational relationships? In explaining this finding, Rossi and Rossi (1990) argue that this is a result of the gendered parenting and gender socialization during early childhood. They explain that the cross-generational transmission of gendered roles and patterns is significant, noting continued traditional differentiation in the rearing of daughters compared to sons, with the housework still viewed as women’s work (Rossi and Rossi 1990). In addition, they also found children and parents often have different perspectives on how their past experiences from early family life shape their intergenerational relationships in the present (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Unlike parents, adult children are more likely to be influenced by what happened years earlier (for example a poor relationship, parental divorce, etc.) (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Also, Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that the greater the age difference between fathers and children, the more intimate the relationship with daughters, but the less intimate the relationship with sons. However, some research argues that these gender differences are not global and should not be exaggerated (Logan and Spitze 1996).

Since parenting may be a different experience for mothers and fathers due to different gender roles and expectations, the intergenerational relationships are affected by the parenting that takes place during early childhood (Umberson and Slaten 2000). Umberson and Slaten (2000) explain that the rewards and stress of parenting change over the family life course, with the relationship improving as children get older. They also found that mothers report greater closeness, more frequent contact, and more parental satisfaction in intergenerational relationships than do fathers, and relationships between mothers and daughters are especially resilient (Umberson and Slaten 2000). However, it
is important to note that although there are average differences between mothers’ and fathers’ experiences of intergenerational relationships, there is much overlap as well.

Chodorow (1978) explains that adult gender differences in relationship orientations are derived from early childhood experiences, assuming that mothers were the primary caretakers of infants and young children while fathers were working in the paid labor force. From the time children are born, mothers take on the primary responsibility for child care even if they are employed (Umberson and Slaten 2000). Thus, the parenting of young children has a greater impact on the psychological well-being of mothers than fathers even though the employment of the mothers has little effect on the quality of relationships with young children (Umberson and Slaten 2000). These early childhood relationships seem to benefit mothers more than fathers, as they lead to closer and more positive relationships between adult children and mothers later in life (Umberson and Slaten 2000).

**Gender Differences in Intergenerational Relationships Post- Parental Divorce**

Research consistently finds that mother-adult child relationships are less negatively affected by parental divorce than father-adult child relationships (Nakonezny et al. 2003; Shapiro 2003; Cooney 1994; Lang and Pett 1992). When parents divorce when the children are young, most often the negative effects on the father-child relationship are attributed to custody issues. Existing social research on the effects of child custody arrangements on the quality of parent-child relationships appear to favor the mother-child relationship, whereas, the father-child relationship is the most negatively
affected. However, with adult children, there is no custody issue; therefore any change in the parent-child relationship is presumed to be the result of divorce itself or pre-divorce family dynamics.

Similar to research on young child-parent relationships, much research on mid to late life parental divorce has found that divorce appears to put fathers at greater risk than mothers for problematic relations with their offspring. Most importantly, the mother-daughter relationship is most resilient while the father-daughter relationship is most vulnerable (Booth and Amato 1994; Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1991; Cooney et al. 1995; Foster 2006; Fintushel and Hillard 1991; Aquilino 1994b).

Cooney (1994) provides a few plausible explanations as to why fathers’ relationships with adult children are more negatively affected than mothers’ relationships with adult children. First, Cooney (1994) suggests that fathers may lack interest in and concern for their children after the divorce because they are not kinkeepers, a job gender-designated for females. Second, fathers may desire contact with their adult children, but may be dealing with obstacles related to the divorce such as ongoing conflict with the ex-spouse, personal problems, as well as geographic distance (Cooney 1994). Third, most fathers lack the necessary relational and kinkeeping skills that are necessary to maintain relationships with adult children (Cooney 1994). Due to gender socialization and other factors such as employment, many fathers depended on the mothers to act as mediators for their relationships with their children (Cooney 1994). Lastly, adult children of divorce may choose to sever ties with their father, especially if the ACD felt he was responsible for the parental divorce (Cooney 1994). If this is the case, the argument that fathers are more negatively affected is bolstered. However, it is important to keep in
mind that if ACD choose to sever ties because they feel that one of the parents is responsible for the divorce, then mothers would also be negatively affected if ACD felt their mother was to blame.

Some research has tested the assumption that father-child contacts may be more frequent if the parental divorce occurred after the children were 18 years or older, since they had ample time to build and maintain a meaningful parent-child relationship (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990). Using data from the 12 year longitudinal study “Marital Instability over the Life Course” (Booth et al. 1994), Booth and Amato (1994) found that divorce is most disruptive to later father-child relations when it occurs when the children are young.

Cooney and Uhlenberg (1990), using two waves of the NSFH, looked at the effect of parental divorce on father-adult child relationships after parental divorce from the father’s perspective. Results from regression analyses indicated that divorce has a drastic negative effect on the frequency of fathers’ contacts with adult children and also significantly reduces the probability that fathers will turn to their adult children for social support (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990). Furthermore, fathers with more education were less likely than those with lower levels of education to have no contact with at least one adult child (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990). In addition, time since the parental divorce was significantly related to fathers’ relations with their adult children (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990). It seems that as time goes on, the likelihood that fathers lose contact with adult children increases (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1990).

In a similar study by Cooney (1994), she found that recent parental divorce was predictive of reduced intergenerational intimacy and contact, but only for fathers and
children. However, it was only daughters in the divorced group who reported lower levels of affective closeness to fathers when compared with their two-parent family peers (Cooney 1994). Reduced contact with divorced fathers was found for both sons and daughters though (Cooney 1994). Such a finding is important, as Cooney (1994) notes, because it appears that low levels of postdivorce contact often noted between fathers and young children cannot be attributed solely to maternal custody. In another study by Cooney (1986), ACD reported a drastic decrease in contact between fathers and daughters with over twice as many women reporting reduced contact with fathers as mothers following the divorce.

Similarly, Lang and Pett (1992) found that in their sample, the mother-daughter bond appeared to be the most resilient, even strengthening in some cases (Lang and Pett 1992). In addition, when the mother-adult child relationship was reported to have been adversely affected by the parental divorce, it was often related to the mother’s increased dependency on adult children. The ACD noted feeling overburdened by their mother’s need for support and frustrated at their mother’s inability to move on with her life after the divorce.

Lang and Pett (1992) found that relationships with fathers were more emotionally distant than mother-adult child relationships both before and after the parental divorce. Also, fathers were less likely than mothers to receive emotional or instrumental support from their adult children. For many adult children it was difficult to create a supportive relationship with their fathers when one did not exist prior to the divorce. Also, there was a decrease in the amount of contact with fathers after the divorce. Negative changes included never or seldom seeing the father. In many cases, it was the father who had
decreased contact, either by remarriage or a change in lifestyle. For some ACD, it was anger or a lack of respect for their father that led to decreased contact. Gender differences were evident though the father-son relationship appeared to be the most disrupted by the parental divorce. In addition, many of the male respondents found it difficult to accept their fathers’ behavior which they viewed as a betrayal of the values and morals they had been taught as young children.

*Help Exchange between the Generations: Fostering Intergenerational Relationships*

As children become adults, their relationships with their parents are characterized by a reciprocal exchange of help, including emotional, financial, and instrumental help. However, there are gender differences in regard to who helps more, who receives more, and how different types of help are characteristic of one gender over the other. In general, mothers are more likely than fathers to give help of a domestic and personal, supportive variety. Their adult children also reciprocate in a similar manner, helping with chores and providing comfort (Rossi and Rossi 1990). Fathers are more likely to give help in the form of job leads, money or loan advice; but, this is the case only for sons. Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that sons were more likely to specialize in types of help such as advice, money and job leads (similar to fathers), whereas daughters were more likely to specialize in personal support, kinkeeping, ritual occasions, and domestic chores. An interesting gender difference is that when parents are widowed, there is more help from daughters to their fathers and from sons to mothers. In all cases, the help exchanged between the generations was most extensive in the mother-daughter relationship.
Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that more mothers both give and receive help than is the case for fathers. They explain that women’s investment early on in life “pays off” later when they need help and support. Connidis (2001) adds that when parents are well, sons and daughters are equally active in supporting them. However, as parents enter old age, adult children undergo more responsibility providing for their parents. Daughters begin to help parents more when their mothers are in their mid-60s; sons do not provide more help than they receive from their parents until they are in their mid-70s (Rossi and Rossi 1990).

Unlike Rossi and Rossi (1990), in regard to gender differences in terms of help exchange between parents and adult children, Logan and Spitze (1996) did not find great differences. They found some evidence that mothers receive more help than fathers, but little evidence of gender differences between help given by parents and children. Nonetheless, when adult children did provide help, the tasks were gendered with housekeeping being done more by daughters and yard work being done more by sons. In explaining the discrepancy with the work of Rossi and Rossi (1990), Logan and Spitze (1996) explain that their study focuses on routine helping in a general population sample in contrast to the focus of many past studies which focus on the care of frail elderly persons. Also, even though they did find some gender differences between men and women (i.e. higher rates of telephone contact for women), there were some commonly gender-identified activities that they did not analyze such as kinkeeping and arranging family visits. If these activities had been measured, they argue, perhaps there would have been more dramatic gender differences (Logan and Spitze 1996). However, it is
important to keep in mind that others (Rossi and Rossi 1990) may have exaggerated gender differences.

As children reach young adulthood, the support exchange becomes more reciprocal; however, with the onset of a mid to late life parental divorce, some parents become more dependent on their adult children than would be normally expected. As noted by Swartzman-Schatman and Schinke (1993), many do so because they have lost ties with spouses, in-laws and others with whom they had long standing support systems and networks. In a study by Wright and Maxwell (1991), parents of later-life divorce were surveyed regarding their social support after the divorce. When both parents and children were available as potential supports, the divorced respondents chose the adult children more often than their own parents (Wright and Maxwell 1991). In this sense, the adult child can be seen as an invaluable resource. Women were more likely than men to consider children as adult equals and confidants (Wright and Maxwell 1991). Nonetheless, research in this area indicates a key difference concerning the timing of divorce. Unlike parents who divorce when children are minors, parents who divorce mid to late life have adult children who are often called upon to be key members of their support network.

Weingarten (1988) also found that the majority of participants in her study of divorced parents identified the supportiveness of children as one of the most important factors influencing their adjustment. As noted by the parents in her study, prior to the divorce, the parents were more likely to have been givers to their children than sharers with them or receivers from them (Weingarten 1988). Weingarten (1988) also found that the majority of participants in her study identified the supportiveness of children as
one of the most important factors influencing their adjustment. However, even when help from the children was forthcoming and appreciated, changes in one’s relationship with adult children were often perceived as problematic due to loyalty issues that confronted the ACD (Weingarten 1988).

Social support from adult children to parents is more likely to flow to mothers than to fathers according to numerous studies. Wright and Maxwell (1991) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to rank their children as the most helpful source of support during the divorce process. Fathers were more likely to rank their friends and their parents ahead of their children with respect to support provided during the divorce process (Wright and Maxwell 1991). Wright and Maxwell (1991) concluded that mothers received significantly more support than fathers in all four support categories: advice, services, financial assistance, and socioemotional aid. One explanation for such a discrepancy might be that older women expect more filial support than older men (Wright and Maxwell 1991). Another explanation offered is that the child’s perception of parental need is a factor (Wright and Maxwell 1991). For instance, children may believe that mothers need more advice, services, financial assistance, and socioemotional support than fathers (Wright and Maxwell 1991).

Such research findings indicate the “expected” support of adult children toward their parents, especially during this untimely family event. Such role expectations can be taxing at times on the adult children who are often trying to raise their own families and/or balance a career or schooling. Wright and Maxwell (1991) found that in regard to service aid, there were no significant differences between the frequency of provision of traditionally female-dominated activities such as running errands, doing shopping, or
giving assistance when sick and in traditionally male activities such as helping with home repair or yard work (Wright and Maxwell 1991). However, socioemotional aid was found to be more often provided by female children (Wright and Maxwell 1991). Also, the child’s marital status was related to support received by the parent, with never-married children providing the most services (Wright and Maxwell 1991). Married children ranked second as providers of services, while children from the category “maritally disrupted” were ranked last (Wright and Maxwell 1991).

Hammond and Muller (1992) found similar results applying quantitative analysis on data from the Current Population Reports, Marital Status and Living Arrangements for the years 1974-1988. One unexpected finding with Wright and Maxwell’s (1991) study is that in comparison to the older divorced men and women, divorced or separated parents under the age of fifty were more likely to turn to children for support than those divorcing after the age of fifty.

**Contact and Proximity**

Help exchange between the generations is often limited by issues of contact and proximity; thus, intergenerational relationships are often assessed by measuring frequency of contact and proximity or geographic distance between parents and children. Using data from a 1986 national survey, Umberson’s (1992) results demonstrate that the quality of the intergenerational relationship appears to be influenced by the structural circumstances of parents and adult children. Umberson’s (1992) results suggest fairly positive relationships between parents and children; however, she found that compared to
married parents, divorced parents reported less frequent contact with their adult children, more relationship strain, and greater parental dissatisfaction (Umberson 1992).

Cooney (1994), using data from 485 ACD and young adults from two-parent families, looked at how parent-adult child relations are affected by recent mid to later life parental divorce. Cooney (1994) found that compared to young adults from two-parent families, overall, both sons and daughters of parental divorce reported less contact with their fathers, although the difference is significant for sons only. Also, males from divorced families reported significantly less interaction with their mothers than did adult children from two-parent families (Cooney 1994). Cooney (1994) explains that the findings are significant because the low levels of contact between fathers and children cannot be attributed solely to maternal custody. As Cooney’s (1994) findings suggest, even when children are not subjected to custody orders, fathers are still more negatively affected than mothers in terms of contact as well relationship quality.

Using two waves of the NSFH, Shapiro (2003) examines how relationship quality between adult children and their parents is affected by parent-child contact, proximity, and the marital status of their parents. His findings indicated that divorce has significant negative effects on older fathers’ contact with their adult children (Shapiro 2003). On the contrary, the effect of divorce on older women is not as clear (Shapiro 2003). Furthermore, the results modestly indicate that divorced mothers are more likely than married mothers to be estranged from at least one of their adult children, indicating negative effects (although not significant) for both mothers and fathers experiencing mid to later life parental divorce (Shapiro 2003). Suggesting directions for future research, Shapiro explains, ‘less clear is why the process of divorce affects parent-child
relationships. Future research should analyze the fundamental mechanisms that operate to alter these relationships. To better understand this complex relationship, future research should address the meaning of divorce for both parents and their children and how these meanings shape parents’ and adult children’s sense and enactment of mutual obligation” (2003:284).

**Instrumental and Financial Assistance**

According to Lye’s (1996) literature review, she concludes that American adult children and their parents engage in reciprocal exchanges of instrumental and financial assistance, with parents remaining mostly givers than receivers for most of the time until they become very elderly. In addition, assistance to adult children is often linked to key life course transitions, especially the one from adolescence to young adulthood (Lye 1996).

When parents divorce mid to late life, ACD are now left without the financial, emotional, and social support that they had become accustomed to in their previous two-parent family. Many young adult children are left without the financial and family support necessary to pursue educational and career goals (Lang and Pett 1992). Similarly, Campbell’s (1995) interviewees expressed concern about interruptions to their own education or careers due to curtailment of finances or changes in living arrangements. This finding is significant due to the fact that adult children are in a transition phase to adulthood as they are pursuing their education, launching their careers, and/or starting their own families. Such experiences require much support along many dimensions from the family. Aquilino (1994a) found that maternal custody significantly
reduces the likelihood that young adult children will receive sizable financial support from parents, compared with young adults from two-parent families. Also, young adult children from father-custody families are just as likely as those from two-parent families to receive financial transfers (Aquilino 1994a).

Furstenberg et al. (1995) explain that few researchers have looked at how divorce and remarriage modify intergenerational bonds and redirect the flow of financial resources between parents and children in later life. Employing data from the 1988 wave of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, they focused on a subsample of adult children whose parents are also a part of the PSID sample (a total of 3,295 matched adult children and parent households) (Furstenberg et al. 1995). They found that marital disruption continues to alter the organization of kinship in American society, including the amount and direction of intergenerational transfers in terms of time and money given to and received from other households in the previous year (Furstenberg et al. 1995). Specifically, they found that the timing of divorce was a critical factor (Furstenberg et al. 1995).

Thus, parental divorce during childhood has a significant effect on intergenerational transfers (Furstenberg et al. 1995). Specifically, transfers with mothers increased while transfers with fathers decreased drastically if the divorce occurred when the children were young due to the consequences of custody arrangements (contact and length of time spent in household with children) (Furstenberg et al. 1995). Most importantly, mid to late life parental divorce did not create differences in the transfers for mothers and fathers; fathers and mothers involved in mid to late life divorces have similar levels of transfers with their adult children as those involved in early divorces.
(Furstenberg et al. 1995). However, Furstenberg et al. (1995) suggest that future research should look at the same question to determine if noncustodial parents will have improved intergenerational transfers because many have better and more contact with their children today due to the legal push for joint custody as well as the enforcement of child support payments.

**Caregiving by Adult Children to Parents**

As parents age, they become more dependent upon others to help care for them. This exchange of caregiving is fundamental to the intergenerational relationship at this point in the life course. When parents are no longer able to care for themselves, the responsibility often falls to the adult children, especially the daughters (Dwyer and Coward 1992; Montgomery 1992). Horowitz (1985) notes that when elderly parents are in need of help, the sex of the adult child is one of the most important predictors of who will provide care. When sons are the primary caregiver, it is usually by default when there are no sisters to care for their parents (Horowitz 1985; Connidis 2001). However, when sons did take on the role of primary caregiver, they tended to be less committed than daughters in terms of time given to their parents (Connidis 2001). In addition, even when sons are the primary caregivers, the direct personal care is often done by the daughter-in-law (Connidis 2001). Nonetheless, Connidis (2001) finds that the parents are not receiving lower quality care when the primary caregiver is their son rather than a daughter. Another gender pattern that emerges is that sons are more inclined to help fathers than mothers and daughters are more likely to help mothers than fathers; however,
daughters are still more likely than sons to help both mothers and fathers (Lee, Dwyer, and Coward 1993).

Montgomery (1992) notes gender differences in patterns of caregiving. First, daughters spend more hours per week than sons in parent care and are more likely to assume the role of primary caregiver. Even when sons assume the role of primary caregiver, they commit less time to caregiving tasks and are less likely to engage in hands-on care than daughters. In sum, sons are more likely to be managers of care rather than direct providers. In addition, sons are more likely than daughters to use formal services to assist in their caregiving duties. Daughters are more likely to provide help with household chores and personal care tasks that may require “hands-on” care and daily assistance (Montgomery 1992; Horowitz 1985). In contrast, sons are more likely to perform instrumental tasks such as home repair and maintenance. Thus, even though sons and daughters may perform the same number of tasks, there are still clear gender differences.

**Relationship Quality**

Many researchers are interested in measuring parent-adult child relationship quality to see if there are gender differences or generational differences in perceptions of the relationship. According to Lye (1996), there is no single widely accepted measure of the quality of parent-adult child relationships. In addition, since a relationship involves two or more individuals, researchers argue that ideally it would be best to collect information regarding relationship quality from both individuals. As Aquilino (1999) notes, the choice of informant for data collection has become a very important
consideration in research on intergenerational relationships. There remains much inconsistency between relationship quality when both parents and children are surveyed. For instance, Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that parents are more likely than grown children to view past family relationships through a rosy lens and to see current relationships as separate from past relationships. Thus, Aquilino (1999) argues adamantly that both theoretical and empirical research on intergenerational relationships would benefit greatly from making the collection of data from both parents and children a standard practice.

Focusing on the parent adult-child relationship when adult children are making the transition from dependence within the parental home to independence outside of the parental home, Thornton, Orbuch, and Axinn (1995) assessed relationship quality from both the mother’s perspective as well as the child’s perspective. Using data from an intergenerational panel study they asked respondents a number of questions about the parent-child relationship. They found that most of the mothers and children reported that the relationships were quite positive. However, one area of difference between the mothers and the children is that in regard to joint activities, mothers were more likely than the children to report substantially more enjoyment than their children in such activities (Thornton et al. 1995). Not surprisingly, children reported more favorable relationships with their mothers than their fathers, although more children reported that they always respected their fathers’ opinions rather than their mothers’ opinions (Thornton et al. 1995).

Most importantly, Thornton et al. (1995) found that there was an improvement in the parent-adult child relationships as the children matured from ages 18-23, the time
during which they were making the transition to adulthood. Thus, this research is indicative of generally positive and supportive relationships between the two generations.

**Impact of Childhood Parental Divorce**

There are many factors, including but not limited to parental divorce, marital discord, or parenting issues that may impact an intergenerational relationship. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Aquilino (1994a) assessed whether and to what degree parental divorce during childhood had an impact on young adults’ relationships with their parents. Measures from the NSFH for global relationship quality with the parent is rated on a 7-point scale from (1) very poor to (7) excellent. Aquilino (1994a), interested in the impact of childhood family disruptions, found that most mothers who retain custody of their children and who do not remarry maintain close relationships with their children into adulthood. In addition, the majority of noncustodial biological mothers also maintained close relationships with their adult children (1994a). Relationships with custodial single fathers were similar to children’s relations with fathers in two-parent families (Aquilino 1994a). A significant difference was found for adult children of single-mother families; these adult children reported much lower relationship quality and contact frequency with fathers than those from two-parent families (Aquilino 1994a). All in all, Aquilino (1994a) found that by young adulthood, children’s relationships with noncustodial divorced fathers were very similar to relationships of children who never lived with their fathers.

In another study, Aquilino (1999) also found that timing of parental divorce was a factor; on average, parent-adult child relations were less affected by childhood disruption
if it occurred later in childhood. Using data from waves 1 and 2 of the National Survey of Families and Households, Aquilino (1999) had a sample size of 1,090 parent-child dyads. Aquilino (1999) measured global relationship quality, humor closeness, tension in the relationship, extent of shared leisure activities, parental need for control, parental disapproval of child’s decisions, extent of open disagreements, and the frequency of fights and arguments in the relationship. Results indicated that parents were more likely than their children to describe the parent-child relationship more positively (Aquilino 1999). In addition, he found that the relationship became more positive as the children make the transition to adulthood, with their lives becoming more similar to those of their parents (Aquilino 1999). Aquilino (1994a) found that adult children from father-custody homes reported significantly higher relationship quality with their fathers than did adult children from two-parent families.

Amato and Booth (1996) point out that it is too simplistic to conclude that a parental divorce per se is to blame for a poor quality parent-adult child relationship. Using data from the 12 Year Marital Instability Dataset (1994), they found that at least some of the problems in parent-child relationships observed after a parental divorce are actually present many years before the legal divorce takes place (Amato and Booth 1996). Furthermore, they found that parental marital happiness predicts problems with the parent-child relationships. In addition, results suggest that the quality of the parents’ marriage has consequences for later parent-child affection that are independent of early problems in the parent-child relationship and parental divorce (Amato and Booth 1996). Amato and Booth (1996) explain why low marital quality may translate into strained parent-child relationships. First, marital discord may distract the parents and take away
from time to deal with their children’s needs (Amato and Booth 1996). In addition, parents may be more irritable with children as a result of being stressed from the marital discord (Amato and Booth 1996). Another explanation is that children’s problematic behavior may be a negative reaction to the marital discord, leading to more conflicts over parenting (Amato and Booth 1996). Nonetheless, research concludes that an early parental divorce during one’s childhood has negative consequences on the parent-child relationship extending into the adult years of the child.

Impact of Mid to Late Life Parental Divorce

I have already discussed some of the more general effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children in a previous section; now I will address the empirical literature on parent-child relationships as they are affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Similar to the impact of an early parental divorce on the parent-child relationship, a mid to late life parental divorce also alters the parent-child relationship with both positive and negative effects. During young adulthood, many young adults report a renewed sense of emotional dependence and closeness to their parents; however, parental divorce disrupts this sense of security for adult children (Cooney 1988). Also, studies (Pryor 1999) show that the normal process and development of intergenerational relationships is a move toward interdependent friendships between adults. One positive outcome for ACD was the opportunity of getting to know a parent (usually their father) better on a more individual basis (Lang and Pett 1992).

In a sample of 48 late-life divorced parents, the relationship between parents and their adult children was perceived as critical to personal well-being (Bonkowski 1989).
Specifically, most of the respondents identified the supportiveness of children as one of the most important factors influencing their adjustment to the divorce (Bonkowski 1989). In addition, even when adult children were supporting them, changes in the parent-adult child relationship were seen as being troubled (Bonkowski 1989). Much of the reluctance was in dealing with the fact that the adult children were trying to remain neutral and avoiding loyalty conflicts between the parents (Bonkowski 1989). Also, many of the parents in this study reported that they had waited weeks and even months before telling their children about the marital breakup in an effort to protect them from the pain (Bonkowski 1989). An especially challenging task for the ACD was trying to achieve separate relationships with each divorcing parent since there were often loyalty conflicts (Bonkowski 1989). In a quantitative analysis of data from two waves of longitudinal data on a sample of 257 ACD, Cooney et al. (1995) found that being involved in the divorce process lowered levels of parent-child relationships.

Aquilino (1994b) found that the impact of later life family disruption on parent-adult child relations is different than when the parental divorce occurs during one’s childhood. Although the aforementioned studies show how the intergenerational relationship is altered by a parental divorce, few studies use NSFH data to assess how parent-child relationships are affected when the parental divorce occurs when the children are young adults. One exception is Aquilino’s (1994b) who utilized the detailed life history records of childhood family structure, as collected by the NSFH. These records indicated which young adult respondents have lived with both biological parents from birth until age 19. In addition, the respondents from two-parent families were asked about the current marital status of their parents, if they were still living. By restricting the
sample to a total of 3,281 young adults, Aquilino (1994b) was able to make certain that the parental divorce or widowhood occurred during the respondents’ young adulthood as opposed to childhood. However, Aquilino (1994b) does note a limitation of NSFH data concerning adult children of divorce. He explains that the NSFH does not provide data on the exact timing of parental separation or divorce for this sample of respondents who grew up in a two-parent family. In other words, the parental divorce may have occurred any time before the survey, from age 19 to 34, since he used age 35 as the cutoff for a young adult sample.

Aquilino (1994b) found that 21% of adult children from two-parent families had experienced parental divorce or widowhood after they had left home. Aquilino’s analysis included the following dependent variables: global relationship quality, geographic distance, frequency of contact, help exchange, financial transfers, and perceived kinship obligations (1994b). He found that ACD reported lower relationship quality and contact with fathers. However, he also found weaker, but still significant, negative effects for mother-adult child relationships. As much research shows, Aquilino (1994b) also found support for the father-daughter bond being most negatively affected. Parental separation or divorce had a significant negative effect only for son’s receipt of help, while daughters’ receipt of help from parents was unaffected by parental divorce. In addition, later life parental divorce had a significant negative effect on the likelihood of sons receiving a financial transfer, but no effect for daughters (Aquilino 1994b). Also, ACD were significantly less likely than children from two-parent families to agree that adult children should support their aging parents financially (Aquilino 1994b).
Longitudinal data analyses give us a more complete understanding of how the parent-adult child relationship may change over time. Using data from two waves of the NSFH dataset, Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) found that mid to late life parental divorce does have a negative effect on intergenerational relationships. However, from the longitudinal data, findings suggest that the parent-adult child relationships may improve over time. As Kaufman and Uhlenberg (1998) note, “Future studies need to devote more attention to ways in which child-parent relationships develop and change over the entire life course and to the factors that lead relationships to improve or deteriorate” (1998:936).

In a qualitative study with 58 college students (average age at time of parental divorce: 9 years), Arditti (1999) found that mothers’ dependence on adult children for social support contributed to a sense of equality, closeness, and friend status, leading to a more positive relationship between mothers and adult children after the divorce. Much like other research on gender differences, mother-daughter bonds seemed to be closer than mother-son bonds (Arditti 1999).

In an interesting study of 60 college students, Swartzman-Schatman and Schinke (1993) divided the sample into two groups: those whose parents divorced when they were in high school and those whose parents divorced when they were in college. They found that both groups have very similar problems in adjusting to divorce; however, there were significant differences between the two groups both in their feelings of general contentment and in their feelings about their fathers (Swartzman-Schatman and Schinke 1993). Specifically, those whose parents divorced while they were in college had a better relationship with their mother than their father, although the same was not true for
those whose parents divorced when they were in high school (Swartman-Schatman and Schinke, 1993).

In an attempt to examine the changes in parent-adult child relationships and the perceived disruptiveness of mid to late life parental divorce for 115 adult children, Lang and Pett (1992) found that this is a stressful, disruptive, unplanned event for adult children and the consequences spillover into the parent-child relationship. In this study, the relationships between mothers and adult children appeared to remain stable after divorce (Lang and Pett 1992). Furthermore, respondents listed three reasons for perceived changes in their relationships with their mothers including the following: adult child’s perception of his or her own increasing maturity, promoting more adult-adult interaction; sharing the experience of the divorce brought some closer; and some perceived mothers as happier, reducing the amount of tension in the relationship making interaction more pleasant (Lang and Pett 1992).

Booth and Amato (1994) are not so quick to attribute divorce per se as the sole factor that causes deterioration in adult child-parent relationships. Using data from the 12 year longitudinal study “Marital Instability over the Life Course” (1994), they found that parental marital quality is positively associated with children’s closeness to and recency of contact with parents (Booth and Amato 1994). Furthermore, parental divorce is negatively associated with closeness to and contact with parents (Booth and Amato 1994). Divorce and low parental marital quality appear to have largely independent effects on later relationships (Booth and Amato 1994). According to Booth and Amato (1994), marital unhappiness and instability appear to weaken parent-adult child
relationships, even if there is no parental divorce. However, if a parental divorce does occur, the relationships are considerably weakened (Booth and Amato 1994).

Although there is a tendency in the divorce literature to focus on the negative effects of divorce on the parent-child relationship, there are some positive outcomes as well. Concerning changes in parent-child relations, Cooney (1986) found that in general, the young people in her study reported positive changes following the divorce. Positive changes included increased communication, greater understanding and mutual respect, and the relaxation of parent-child roles (Cooney 1986). Several studies show that positive changes in parent-child relations are expected in young adulthood, even without divorce. Cooney (1994) also notes that this study revealed no connection between adult children’s relationships with each divorced parent. Thus, she concludes that it seems that good relations between a divorced parent and child do not preclude equally good relations with the other parent (Cooney 1994).

A Note on Sibling Relationships

In addition to the parent-child relationship being altered as a result of a parental divorce, sibling relationships are also affected. Although there is an abundance of research on intergenerational relationships, there is a dearth of research on adult sibling relationships, especially how such relationships are affected by a parental divorce. The most long-lasting and enduring relationship an individual develops during the lifespan is the sibling relationship (Cicirelli 1980). Research indicates that there are differences between childhood and adult sibling relationships. For instance, during middle childhood and adolescence, there is a decline in reported conflict among siblings (Riggio 2001).
Also, sibling relationships are regarded as a source of friendship and social support during adulthood (Riggio 2001). Bedford (1989) explains that the dearth of sibling research might be attributed to the difficulty in studying this largely symbolic relationship, one that exists despite little or no contact. She argues that adult sibling relationships are symbolic since there is relatively little overt contact although the relationship is still valued (Bedford, 1989). Weaver et al. (2003) argue that additional research on young adult sibling relationships is needed to develop a clearer understanding of the roles siblings play as well as the functions they fulfill for other siblings.

Many researchers argue that sibling relationships are unique in that they are the longest lasting of immediate family relationships (Riggio 2006). Limited research suggests that the adult sibling bond is second, in terms of contact and affection, only to parent-child relationships (White and Riedmann 1992). Furthermore, adults are highly influenced by the relationships they have with their siblings from childhood throughout all stages of adulthood (Riggio 2006). Nonetheless, Riggio (2006) notes that sibling relationships change over time, with emotional closeness fluctuating over the life course. Stewart et al. (2001) found that there was a decrease in conflict and increase in emotional closeness as siblings got older, especially during the transition to young adulthood.

Using the Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale (LSRS; Riggio 2000), a measure of attitudes toward sibling relationships in childhood and adulthood, Riggio (2006) found that recollections of positive or negative childhood sibling relationships did not necessarily predict positive or negative adult relationships. In addition, she found that siblings who are closer in age have more positive relationships with one another and consider them to be more meaningful and important than other sibling relationships.
Weaver et al. (2003), using a sample of 224 college students between the ages of 18 and 24, found that young adult siblings are a unique potential support system for other siblings. Furthermore, Weaver et al. (2003) found that sisters, compared to brothers, are more likely to be willing and able to provide emotional support during young adulthood.

Bedford (1989) is the only researcher to date to look at ambivalence in adult sibling relationships. According to Bedford (1989) childhood sibling relationships are often characterized by simultaneous feelings of rivalry and hostility coupled with friendliness and warm alliances with siblings. However, there is a lack of research that has investigated whether or not such contradictory and simultaneous feelings persist into sibling relationships during adulthood. She notes that many of the studies looking at adult sibling relationships report highly positively skewed feelings of closeness with little or no negative feelings (Cicerelli 1981 as cited in Bedford 1989), while other studies report much negative affect among siblings (Ross and Milgram 1982 as cited in Bedford 1989).

Using a random sample of 60 adults age 30 to 69, who were married, had children, and had a same-sex age-near sibling, Bedford (1989) assessed underlying feelings about the respondent’s targeted sibling using the Sibling Thematic Apperception Test. Conscious feelings about the targeted sibling were measured through the use of self-report scales assessing positive and negative feelings as well as contact frequency (Bedford 1989).

Bedford (1989) found that women were more aware of their underlying feelings toward their sisters than men were toward brothers, with child-rearing women more
aware of positive feelings and empty-nest women more aware of negative feelings. In addition there was a clear lack of congruence between men’s conscious and underlying sibling affect toward brothers (Bedford 1989). Results of Bedford’s (1989) study suggest that, in general, siblings either do not know how they feel about their siblings or are only aware of either positive or negative feelings. One methodological limitation of her study is that the findings cannot be generalized to unmarried and childless individuals since respondents had to be married with children. In sum, Bedford’s (1989) results highlight a potential source of the lack of the research on ambivalence in adult sibling relationships. Her findings are important in the sense that if adult siblings are unaware that they even have ambivalent feelings toward a sibling, it is that much harder to study ambivalence in these relationships in general. Thus, Bedford (1989) argues that there is a great need to a.) replicate research on ambivalence in adult sibling relationships and b.) develop more suitable instruments that can elicit information that could perhaps better tap into feelings of ambivalence.

There is a clear need for both empirical and theoretical work in the research area of adult sibling relationships. Some research has focused on how and why adult sibling relationships are affected by a childhood parental divorce; however no research to date assesses the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. Thus, in addition to further research on how a mid to late life parental divorce affects the parent-adult child relationship, research is also warranted on the effect on adult sibling relationships.
Theoretical Perspectives and Conceptual Frameworks used to Explain Intergenerational Relationships

Until the 1990s, studies of intergenerational relationships were dominated by the dualistic approaches: the solidarity perspective (Bengtson and Roberts, 1991) and the conflict perspective. In addition, much of the research on the quality of parent-adult child relations has tended to take an either/or approach, focusing only on the positive or the negative aspects of a relationship (Pillemer and Suitor, 2002).

The Solidarity Perspective

Early research on aging and the family was dominated by support for the solidarity perspective (Marshall, Matthews, and Rosenthal 1993). The solidarity framework represents a nomenclature for family integration in various forms (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, and Silverstein 2002). In the Intergenerational Solidarity Framework, Bengtson and Roberts (1991) came up with six dimensions of solidarity including normative, affectual, associational, functional, consensual, and structural. Bengtson et al. (2002) explain that the solidarity model is multidimensional and that each of the dimensions of solidarity is distinct with each representing a dialectic: intimacy and distance (affectual solidarity); agreement and dissent (consensual solidarity); integration and isolation (associational solidarity); opportunities and barriers (structural solidarity); and familism and individualism (normative solidarity).

Research that employs the solidarity perspective provides data that reveals the ties that bind families together despite the diversification of contemporary families (Bengtson et al. 2002). Bengtson’s and Roberts’s framework has been employed in numerous
studies drawing from his longitudinal study as well as in publications such as Rossi and Rossi’s *Of Human Bonding* (1990).

Connidis and McMullin (2002a), major proponents for the usefulness of ambivalence in the study of intergenerational relationships, argue that the solidarity perspective has many limitations due to its normative underpinnings. Luscher and Pillemer (1998) are also highly critical of the solidarity perspective. They argue that it is overly positive, assuming that individuals’ personal feelings such as affection, attraction, and warmth serve to maintain cohesion in the family system (Luscher and Pillemer 1998). Furthermore, from the solidarity perspective, negative aspects of family life in the form of conflict, stress, or tension are viewed as having an absence of solidarity in that particular relationship (Luscher and Pillemer 1998). Despite criticism that the solidarity model’s view of families is overly positive and conflict-free (Connids and McMullin 2002), Bengtson and colleagues refute such an argument. They explain that the solidarity model does account for negative family relationships by revealing them as negative on specific dimensions of solidarity (Bengtson et al. 2002).

*The Conflict Perspective*

During the 1990s, research on families and aging shifted from a focus on solidarity in family relationships to a focus on caregiving and its related stress and abuse, particularly elder abuse (Marshall et al. 1993). This shift resulted in research that was supported by the conflict perspective. Bengtson, Rosenthal, and Burton (1996) explain that prior to the 1990s, research on later life relationships had not addressed conflict in intergenerational relationships. They explain that there are four reasons for a lack of data
on conflict in intergenerational relationship research. First, there is the issue of selective reporting in which respondents do not mention or elaborate on family conflict due to social desirability. Second, there is conceptual confusion over the use of the term “conflict.” Third, most research on family conflict has taken a quantitative approach, with The Conflict Tactic Scale, developed by Straus (1979, as cited in Bengtson et al. 1996) as perhaps the most widely used measure of degree of conflict within families. Bengtson and colleagues (1996) argue that since conflict is a very interpretive and qualitative aspect of relationships, a qualitative method would enrich our understanding of conflict within families. Finally, Bengtson and colleagues (1996) argue that a typology of the themes around which intergenerational conflict occurs is needed to better direct investigations into family conflict. Such an approach ignores conflict that results from structural issues or links between social structure and the actions among family members (Connidis and McMullin 2002a).

As applied to family research the conflict perspective focuses on the negative aspects of family relationships—Isolation, caregiver stress, family problems, conflict and abuse (Luscher and Pillemer 1998). For instance, Umberson (1992) found that conflict between parents and children lead to psychological distress of both the parents and adult children. Suitor and Pillemor (1988) also found higher levels of conflict when adult children lived with their elderly parents. Lastly, research has also found that caregiving toward elderly parents can result in higher levels of conflict between parents and adult children. In sum, research provides evidence that intergenerational relationships are not maintained by solidarity only; in contrast, conflict is evident in parent-child relationships.
throughout the life course, especially as parents and children spend an even greater number of years together.

Although there is much empirical evidence on intergenerational relationships supporting both the solidarity perspective and the conflict perspective, these perspectives do not adequately explain how intergenerational relationships are affected by the unique experience of a mid to late life parental divorce. More specifically, the intergenerational relationship at this point during the life course for both the adult children and parents is quite complex. For instance, young adults are attempting to make the transition to young adulthood and independence from their parents, yet they feel compelled to help their parents make the transition to life after the divorce. In this sense, a theoretical argument using the conflict perspective would inadequately or erroneously emphasize the conflict or strife created by the family transition. In contrast, an argument stemming from the solidarity perspective would focus on the processes that serve to maintain family solidarity and cohesion.

**Ambivalence in Intergenerational Relationships**

Luscher and Pillemer (1998) strongly suggest that research should not be limited to such polar extreme perspectives. One of the most recent theoretical developments in research on intergenerational relationships is the conceptual framework of “intergenerational ambivalence” (Luscher and Pillemer 1998). Luscher and Pillemer, two of the most prominent scholars in this area of research, define ambivalence as a situation “when polarized emotions, thoughts, volitions, actions, social relations, and/or structures that are considered relevant for the constitution of individual or collective identities are
(or can be) interpreted as temporarily or even permanently irreconcilable” (Luscher 2004:36). Stemming from this general definition, Luscher and Pillemer define intergenerational ambivalence as involving “contradictions in relationships between parents and adult offspring that cannot be reconciled” (1998:416). Therefore, ambivalence is not necessarily negative but rather implies a task of structuring relationships based on structural, situational, and personal conditions. Nonetheless, they note that ambivalence is distinct from ambiguity which is “uncertainty and unclarity in a family situation where the family system is not secure or well-defined and in which family members cannot get the facts required to take appropriate action” (1998:416).

Furthermore, Luscher and Pillemer (1998) distinguish between two types of ambivalence: structural or sociological and psychological or individual. Structural ambivalence stems from contradictions at the level of social structure, in terms of institutional resources and requirements, whereas psychological or individual refers to contradictions on an individual level in terms of cognition, emotions, and motivations (Luscher and Pillemer 1998).

Luscher and Pillemer (1998) argue that ambivalence is theoretically and empirically useful when studying intergenerational relationships. They explain, “Intergenerational relations generate ambivalence. . . the observable forms of intergenerational relations among adults can be social-scientifically interpreted as the expression of ambivalences and as efforts to manage and negotiate these fundamental ambivalences” (Luscher and Pillemer 1998:414). Pillemer and Luscher (2004) propose that “societies and the individuals within them, are characteristically ambivalent about relationships between parents and children in adulthood. . . rather than being formed on a
basis of solidarity, or being under imminent threat of conflict or dissolution, the social
dynamics of intergenerational relations among adults revolve around sociological and
psychological contradictions or dilemmas and their management in day-to-day family
life” (2004:6). Thus, according to Pillemer and Luscher (2004), the concept of
ambivalence provides legitimacy for studying the dilemmas and contradictions in late-life
families, suggesting that these dilemmas should be the focus of study.

Since Luscher and Pillemer (1998) were the first scholars to provide a concrete
definition of intergenerational ambivalence, their introduction of the concept was
challenged by other family scholars interested in studying intergenerational ambivalence.
Specifically, Luscher and Pillemer’s (1998) differentiation between the two types of
ambivalence was challenged in a symposium on intergenerational ambivalence in the
the differentiation and argued that intergenerational ambivalence should always be
viewed as socially structured. Connidis and McMullin (2002a) explain that a
sociological conception of ambivalence must emphasize the individual as a social actor
who cannot be reduced to psychological states and feelings. Thus, their
conceptualization of ambivalence is rooted in the critical and interactionist sociological
traditions (Connidis and McMullin, 2002b). Connidis and McMullin (2002b) argue that
their concept of structured ambivalence is distinct from Luscher and Pillemer’s (1998).
In particular, they argue that Luscher and Pillemer conflate institutions and social
structure (Connidis and McMullin 2002b). In contrast, Connidis and McMullin (2002b)
characterize social structure as “sets of social relations based on class, age, gender, race,
and ethnicity that produce lasting patterns of inequality in society. In turn, these
structured social relations shape the arrangements embedded in institutions, including families” (2002b:600).

Connidis and McMullin (2002b) believe that developing ambivalence as a concept that links social structure and individual agency is critical. Similarly, a key point in conceptualizing ambivalence according to Connidis and McMullin (2002a) is the idea of *negotiating* family ties. They explain that relationships between family members can involve more or less ambivalence at different points in the life course and are constantly being renegotiated (Connidis and McMullin 2002a).

According to Luscher (2005), the application of the concept of ambivalence as applied to the study of intergenerational relationships has two main sources. First, upon critical evaluation of the existing literature on intergenerational relationships, scholars characterized the literature as rich in data, although lacking in theory (Luscher and Pillemer 1998). Specifically, they criticized the dominance of the solidarity perspective for emphasizing the positive aspects of intergenerational relationships while ignoring more negative aspects (Luscher and Pillemer 1998).

Second, researchers began applying the concept of ambivalence to the study of intergenerational relationships during the 1990s after analysis of previous qualitative studies of parent-adult child relations in which mixed feelings were reported as common occurrences (Pillemer and Luscher 2004). In particular, Luscher and Pajung-Bilger (1998, as cited in Luscher 2005) conducted a research project at the University of Konstanz assessing the reorganization of families after parental divorce in later life. They collected data in semi-structured interviews with 103 individuals from 65 families (Luscher and Pajung-Bilger 1998, as cited in Luscher 2005). The interviews included
questions about the way all of the family members experience intergenerational relationships (Luscher and Pajung-Bilger 1998, as cited in Luscher 2005). A main goal of their research was to determine if there were differing degrees of mutual solidarity after this life-altering family event (Luscher and Pajung-Bilger 1998, as cited in Luscher 2005). However, results of their study indicated that even in the aftermath of an untimely parental divorce, family members still reported both instances of support and of neglect (Luscher and Pajung-Bilger 1998, as cited in Luscher 2005). Such results led Luscher and other scholars to search for a concept that would capture and account for the existence of both solidarity and conflict in the process and understanding of intergenerational relationships (Luscher 2005). Luscher notes, “The notion of ambivalence in the everyday sense (being torn in two directions) was a first and natural choice” (2005:98).

Luscher (2005) explains that the definition as formulated by Pillemer and himself (1998) can be used in two different ways. First, the term may be utilized as an interpretative concept, relevant for work in macro-sociology. An example would be the widespread characterization of “post-modernity” as pervaded by ambivalence (Luscher 2005). Second, the concept of ambivalence may be used as a “research construct,” in which the concept is applied in research such as with surveys, experiments, or observations (Luscher 2005). Luscher (2005) emphasizes the need for an explicit definition of ambivalence so that specific hypotheses may be generated. In addition, a specific definition of ambivalence is necessary for the construction of valid research instruments. For instance, if one has a clear definition of ambivalence, one can
hypothesize that ambivalence is inherent in intergenerational relationships, yet individuals will cope with them in more or less competent ways.

Luscher (2005) notes the relevance of the concept of ambivalence in contemporary times. Upon an analysis of structural and cultural changes in Western societies, he notes macro-level demographic changes in which ambivalence is likely to arise (Luscher 2005). In particular, he notes the increase in life expectancy coupled with the decrease in infant mortality (Luscher 2005). Due to the rise in life expectancy, parents and children are remaining dependent upon one another for longer periods of time than in previous generations (Luscher 2004). Furthermore, Luscher (2004) argues that dependence is an important component of intergenerational relationships. Most importantly, the direction of dependency shifts between the generations as they age (Luscher 2004). In addition, parental divorce or a child’s divorce may accentuate overt and covert ambivalences as dependency may shift as one generation seeks aid or support from the other generation (Luscher 2005). More specifically, a parental divorce that occurs when the children are adults may temporarily disrupt the structural balance between dependence and independence for ACD.

Thus, Luscher (2002) explains that ambivalence is inherent in intergenerational relationships, especially in family situations in which individuals want to help another family member, but feel burdened or overwhelmed at the same time. Examples of such situations include caring for children or elderly parents; dealing with an adult child moving back into the parental household after already having been gone for some time; as well as dealing with a family divorce.
Luscher (2005) argues that with regard to a life-course perspective, ambivalences are presumed to activate the human potential for action in social structures. Thus, he argues that it is beneficial to view ambivalence as “neutral” in the sense that dealing with ambivalence requires human agency. Furthermore, Luscher (2005) argues that future research on ambivalence should focus on awareness and coping. Ambivalence captures the complexity that characterizes family ties by assuming the co-existence of harmony and conflict, rather than an over-riding tendency towards either solidarity or discord (Connidis 2003). According to Connidis (2003), certain transitions such as divorce make ambivalence and the renegotiation of relationships more apparent.

Connidis and McMullin (2002b) propose that future researchers use the concept of ambivalence to study intergenerational relationships to gain a better understanding of the processes of family life instead of focusing on its steady states. Such a statement emphasizes the notion of the continual renegotiation of ambivalence in intergenerational relationships that exists throughout the life course (Connidis and McMullin 2002b).

According to Luescher and Pillemer (1998), there are three aspects of parent-child relations in later life that are especially likely to generate ambivalence including the following: 1.) ambivalence between dependence and autonomy; 2.) ambivalence resulting from conflicting norms regarding intergenerational relationships; and 3.) ambivalence resulting from solidarity. Since ambivalence is inherent in intergenerational relationships, it is no surprise that these specific situations are likely to create ambivalence. Many researchers believe that the tension between autonomy and dependence is a main determinant of ambivalence for parent-child relationships (Luscher 2004).
Currently, there are few established measures of ambivalence in intergenerational relations. There have been a few key studies that have attempted to measure or understand ambivalence in intergenerational relationships. Fingerman and Hay (2004) measured intergenerational ambivalence as they explored many social relationships to see if individuals experience more ambivalence in their relationships with parents and offspring than in other social relationships. They also wanted to see if individuals experience different degrees of intergenerational ambivalence at different points of the life course (Fingerman and Hay 2004).

Measurement of intergenerational ambivalence was obtained by having the 187 individuals ranging in age from 13-99 describe their close and problematic social ties by completing diagrams of circles (Fingerman and Hay 2004). The diagrams of each of the participants were then classified by independent raters. All of the social contacts were categorized as solely positive; solely negative; or ambivalent. Fingerman and Hay (2004) concluded that within the context of a larger social network, parents and offspring do experience greater ambivalence toward one another. In addition, they found that both parents and offspring tend to report greater ambivalence when children are teenagers or in their twenties rather than when the children are in their thirties or forties (Fingerman and Hay 2004).

Fingerman and Hay (2004) note that the heightened ambivalence during this time may be due to the tension as a result of the children making the transition to young adulthood. Furthermore, they note that parents may be frustrated with young adult children who have not established themselves outside of the parental home at a time when parents believe the young adult children should be more autonomous (Fingerman
and Hay 2004). Fingerman and Hay’s (2004) research is a very important contribution to the literature on intergenerational ambivalence, especially since intergenerational ambivalence in general was measured; however, future research needs to build upon their established measure of intergenerational ambivalence to gain a better measure of intergenerational ambivalence after specific family transitions such as a mid to late life parental divorce.

Pillemer and Suitor (2002) also measured intergenerational ambivalence in their research, using two global questions to get at feelings of ambivalence from the parent’s perspective. Pillemer and Suitor (2002) in their research on mothers’ ambivalence toward their adult children, empirically demonstrate how the three aspects of parent-child relations in later life are likely to result in ambivalence. They explain that a key dilemma resulting in intergenerational ambivalence is the conflict between the norm of solidarity with children and the normative expectation that adult children gain independence from their parents as they are successfully launched from the parental home (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). In addition, during the transition to adulthood, there exists a societal expectation that adult children will attain adult statuses in a timely fashion, becoming independent and potential support for aging parents. This is when the dependency between the generations begins to shift. It is also expected that intergenerational ambivalence will fluctuate over the course of the relationship. It is hypothesized that there will be greater ambivalence expressed by the parents when their adult children fail to achieve adult statuses and independence from the parents during a normative time frame (what used to be right after high school or college) (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). In addition, Pillemer and Suitor (2002) note that as adults age, they begin to focus on a
smaller set of interpersonal relationships, especially with adult children rather than on other social supports such as friends and neighbors (Pillemer and Suitor 2002).

Using data from the established panel study The Pathways to Life Quality Study, 189 older women respondents were asked to what degree their attitudes toward the oldest child are mixed or conflicted (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). There were open-ended interviews with focus group discussions with two global questions tapping into ambivalence feelings, as measured on a likert-type scale. The indirect measures of ambivalence were modeled after Rossi and Rossi’s (1990) measure, a single-item bipolar measure used to assess affectual solidarity, asking respondents to rate the parent-child relationships on a scale from 1 to 7 (low end of the scale representing relationships that are “very tense and strained,” and the high end representing those that are “close and intimate” (Pillemer and Suitor 2002:607). First, respondents were asked about the degree to which they felt “torn in two directions or conflicted” about the child. Second, they were asked to what degree they had “very mixed feelings” toward the child.

Results indicated that a significant proportion of the mothers experienced ambivalent feelings regarding their adult children (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). Furthermore, mothers reported the highest conflict with daughters, probably reflecting their greater contact and the wider range of issues over which they interacted, a finding consistent with the literature on ambivalence. However, Pillemer and Suitor (2002) caution that since theirs is the first study to address the sources of intergenerational ambivalence using multivariate analyses, the findings should be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. In conclusion, the findings provide convincing evidence that intergenerational ambivalence is worthy of further research. In addition, the qualitative
pilot research conducted for this study suggests that certain events such as a child’s
divorce or an adult child returning to their parental home may temporarily raise
ambivalent feelings.

Connidis (2003) also applied the concept of ambivalence to intergenerational
relationships in her qualitative study on the effects of early parental divorce and union
dissolution as related to ambivalence. The goal of Connidis’s (2003) study was to
specify some of the implications of divorce (not specifically mid to late life parental
divorce) and relationship dissolution for negotiating family relationships over time and
across generations. Such an approach highlights the view of divorce as a process that is
part of ongoing relationships among family members rather than as an isolated event
(Connidis 2003).

Using the life course perspective, Connidis (2003) interviewed 83 adults from 10
3-generation families, with two of the families being selected as case studies. Specific to
her research questions, Connidis (2003) found that ambivalence is likely to occur when
the boundaries of the mother-daughter tie stray too far from those established prior to the
separation or the divorce. For example, when the daughters began hearing about their
mothers’ sex lives, this was a violation of boundaries for that particular tie, resulting in
ambivalence on the part of the daughters. Another finding was that the children develop
ambivalent views about their own intimate relationships (Connidis 2003).

Connidis (2003) concludes that parental divorce during childhood creates
ambivalence and requires individuals to resolve contradictions in their relationships. In
addition, it seems as though parents and children continue to negotiate the divorce long
after the transition is over. Furthermore, some relationships remain strained as a result of
the parental divorce, indicating that the ambivalence resulting from the parental divorce, has not been successfully negotiated (Connidis 2003). In such cases, this leads to conflict or estrangement. In other cases, successful negotiation leads to positive relationships between parents and adult children (Connidis 2003). Nonetheless, according to Connidis (2003) the important point from this research is that the ambivalence from the parental divorce sets in motion an ongoing process of relationship renegotiation, rather than treating divorce as a discrete transition. As noted by Connidis (2003), conceptualizing divorce in this way serves as an important reminder that relationship dissolution should not be treated as a discrete event.

As the aforementioned studies (Fingerman and Hay 2004; Pillemer and Suitor 2000; Connidis 2003) demonstrate, when parents or children face unexpected circumstances, ambivalence is likely to be heightened. Furthermore, Luscher (2005) regards non-normative behavior such as an adult child moving back in with their parents or a parental divorce in later life as a cause of increased intergenerational ambivalence. Nonetheless, there are still no agreed upon measures of ambivalence.

In an effort to understand how individuals deal or cope with intergenerational ambivalence, Luscher (2005) devised a research module with four basic modes or strategies for experiencing and dealing with intergenerational ambivalences. Following the tradition of the lifecourse perspective, Luscher (2005) argues that it is likely that individuals will deal and cope with ambivalences in intergenerational relationships differently as they age and mature. The following are four strategies of dealing with intergenerational ambivalence as formulated by Luscher and colleagues from the Konstanz studies (2005):
1.) Solidarity: refers to the willingness of the two generations to support one another in times of need, without emphasizing reciprocity, characterized by strong emotional closeness

2.) Emancipation: intergenerational relationships are organized in such a way that one generation gives much support to the other because they feel obliged to do so, although they show relative affective neutrality toward the other generation

3.) Atomization: characterized by the fragmentation of the family unit and detachment between the generations

4.) Captivation: refers to feelings of being obligated to take responsibility, while at the same time feeling strained by such responsibility

Luscher (2005) encourages researchers to use the research module as a general schematic representation. He offers the conceptual ideas as a proposal to understand intergenerational ambivalence and how it may be negotiated throughout the life course (Luscher 2005). Nonetheless, he notes that his conceptualization represents only one of several possible approaches and encourages future researchers to make adaptations as necessary (Luscher 2005).

Luscher (2005) agrees that assessing and measuring ambivalence is a daunting and complex task. According to Luscher (2005), qualitative methods are preferred over quantitative methods when studying intergenerational ambivalence. He argues that one of the major obstacles with using quantitative methods is in the general orientation of many scaling techniques which emphasize clarity so as to avoid any contradictions in measurement (Luscher 2005). Luscher (2005) adamantly argues that qualitative methods are best-suited for assessing and measuring ambivalence. However, he argues that
qualitative methods “require highly elaborate interpretative strategies in order to achieve inter-subjective validity, especially when studying accounts given in everyday language and experiences that are not always conscious” (Luscher 2005:107). Upon a review of the available research on ambivalence in general, Luscher (2005) notes the following approaches, techniques and methods:

1.) Interview techniques addressing the awareness of ambivalence: Respondents can be asked about their awareness of ambivalences in a more or less direct way, by using the term itself or by presenting circumscriptions such as “feeling torn in two directions”

2.) Assessment of relationships with regard to covert ambivalence: Subjects can be invited to characterize their relationships with polarized attributes presented separately, such as warm or loving for convergence, indifferent or superficial for divergence. If the answers are contradictory, because both of the two opposing attributes are simultaneously judged applicable, they can be transformed into indicators of ambivalence (see Thompson, Zanna, and Griffin 1995 for an example) (Luscher 2005:107-108).

Luscher (2005) explains that according to the ongoing studies of intergenerational relationships at Konstanz (Luscher and Lettke 2004), if one asks about ambivalence directly, experiences of ambivalences turn out to be quite common. In addition, individuals do not necessarily judge the experience of ambivalence negatively. However, what seems to be more important is the level, the intensity and/or the context of these ambivalent experiences (Luscher 2005). Understood from the lifecourse perspective, one can view ambivalent experiences as a challenge or developmental task (Luscher 2005).

Since intergenerational ambivalence is only a recent theoretical/conceptual development in the intergenerational relationships literature, and has only been applied to a limited number of studies, there are many suggestions for future research. Pillemer (2004) argues there is a need for larger more representative samples (including data from ACD) to build up empirical studies focusing on intergenerational ambivalence. Luscher
and Pillemer (1998) argue that there is a need for new and more sensitive measures of intergenerational relationships and suggest that ambivalence be used as a dependent and independent variable to expand research. There is also a great need for the development of established measures of ambivalence in intergenerational relations (Pillemer and Suitor 2002). Specifically, there is a need for the development of reliable and valid instruments to assess intergenerational ambivalence for both qualitative and quantitative studies. In particular, Pillemer and Suitor (2002) note that it is possible that individuals who do not identify ambivalence about the relationship in a general way may in fact do so when provided with specific dilemmas or conflicts.

In addition, Luscher (2004) argues that it is necessary to develop indirect measures of ambivalence, measures that require larger and more complicated sets of questions that go beyond the understanding of ambivalence as having “mixed feelings.” He also proposes personal interviews in order to gain a better understanding of how ambivalence is understood (Luscher 2004). Furthermore, he suggests interviewing both members of a dyad to gain a better understanding of agreement and disagreement among both generations (Luscher 2004).

In addition to conceptualization and measurement issues of ambivalence, Connidis and McMullin (2002a) argue that a challenge for future researchers will be to identify the strategies that individuals use to resolve ambivalence in their family relationships. Connidis and McMullin (2002b) argue, “If our conception of ambivalence has helped to encourage the application of critical sociological ideas about social structure, social actors, and conflict to family ties, then we have succeeded” (2002b:601).
Luscher (2002) suggests that future research look at how and in which situations adults deal with ambivalence in intergenerational relationships. More specifically, the question needs to be addressed, taking into account both the personal and the institutional dimensions (Luscher 2002). As noted by Pillemer and Suitor (2002), ambivalence may be particularly strong during status transitions such as a parental divorce or a child’s divorce. Luscher (2004) and Pillemer (2004) suggest that future research should determine whether ambivalence has different causes and consequences for men and women. Furthermore, Luscher (2005) argues that future research should also focus on the different levels of awareness and of the different strategies that are used in dealing with ambivalence. Upon a review of the literature on intergenerational ambivalence, it is evident that research has only begun to use this fruitful approach to better understand family life. There are many opportunities to contribute to the research on ambivalence in intergenerational relationships especially after a mid to late life parental divorce.

**Conclusion**

The research on the effects of mid to late life parental divorce on young adult children has grown in the past decade with numerous quantitative and qualitative studies. Although the findings from these studies have contributed greatly to an understanding of how the parent-young adult child relationship is affected by a mid to late life parental divorce, there are limitations. Many of the studies that assess the parent-child relationship are quantitative in nature. Although quantitative methodology has provided statistical evidence to support the notion that the parent-child relationship is affected by a mid to late life parental divorce, the numbers do not give a complete picture of the story.
For instance, many researchers find that the parent-child relationship is negatively affected, especially for fathers; however, it is unknown why the parent-child relationship has changed or in what ways it has changed.

The qualitative studies on the effects of mid to late life parental divorce give a more elaborate understanding of the ways that the parent-child relationships are affected; however, there are limitations with these studies as well. Many of the qualitative studies do not focus specifically on how the parent-child relationship is affected after a mid to late life parental divorce. Instead, many studies take a broader view in general asking respondents in what ways their lives have been affected by the parental divorce. Thus, the general conclusion from many of the qualitative studies is that a mid to late life parental divorce changes the relationship, without going into great detail as to how or in what ways the relationship has changed after the parental divorce.

Furthermore, while many studies focus on intergenerational relationships, there is a dearth of research on adult sibling relationships, especially as they are affected by a parental divorce. The few studies that do exist are limited in that they assess the adult sibling relationship after a parental divorce that occurred during childhood. Thus, research on how adult sibling relationships are affected by a mid to late life parental divorce is warranted and will be an additional area of interest in my research.

Upon a review of the literature on parent-child relationships in general, Lye (1996) argues, “Overall, research on adult child-parent relations has yielded impressive results. . . clearly the most pressing task for researchers interested in adult child-parent relations is the formulation of theoretical models to organize existing findings and guide new research” (1996:99). Thus, there is a moderate amount of empirical research on the
effects of mid to late life parental divorce on intergenerational relationships that lacks an explicitly stated theoretical perspective to explain how this family life transition upsets family relationships. However, many studies follow some derivation of a life course theoretical perspective, noting that the mid to late life parental divorce is untimely and upsets the transition to young adulthood for ACD. In addition, much of the intergenerational relationship literature is dominated by either the solidarity perspective or the conflict perspective. In an attempt to bridge the two comprehensive literatures, effects of mid to late life parental divorce on adult children and intergenerational relationships, I propose using the theoretical perspective/conceptual framework of “intergenerational ambivalence” that combines elements of all of the previously used theoretical perspectives.

As noted by proponents of the intergenerational ambivalence framework, intergenerational ambivalence is inherent in intergenerational relationships and existing studies that apply the intergenerational ambivalence conceptual framework provide evidence that when parents or children face unexpected circumstances, ambivalence is likely to be heightened. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, this conceptual framework best matches my research interests. Furthermore, no research to date has actually focused on how the specific experience of a mid to late life parental divorce would heighten intergenerational ambivalence from the perspective of the ACD. I have just summarized the existing literature, as well as the research gaps; I now turn to the methodology section.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Although there is much research on the effects of parental divorce on children and on intergenerational relationships, there is a lack of research that specifically focuses on the processes involved when intergenerational relationships are altered due to a mid to late life parental divorce. The primary interest of this dissertation was to gain insight into the viewpoint of the ACD and their perceptions as to how and in what ways the relationship with their parents and siblings have changed. Thus, conducting in-depth interviews with ACD was necessary to gain the best understanding of their personal experience. Specifically, the ACD were asked to talk about what was going on in their life during the process of the parental divorce, as well as after the divorce. This was asked to better understand the extent of their involvement in their parents’ divorce.

In addition, the ACD were asked to give a thorough personal history of each of their relationships with their mother, father, and any siblings. They were prompted to discuss their relationships from childhood through the parental divorce, up until their current relationship. By asking for such a detailed history, I was better able to disentangle any extraneous factors that may have affected the relationship other than the parental divorce. Only by engaging in one-on-one interviews with the ACD was I able to get the details necessary to go beyond making general observations or statements about the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce from the perspective of an adult child.

Prior to beginning the interviews for this study, I proposed that the intergenerational ambivalence framework might be a useful framework from which to
enrich our understanding of how a mid to late life parental divorce might affect the
caret-child relationship. There are a few studies that use the intergenerational
ambivalence framework to understand how similar family processes, such as parental
divorce during childhood or a young adult moving back into the parents’ home, affect the
caret-child relationship (Connidis 2003; Pillemer and Suitor 2002). Since this study
focuses on intergenerational relationships, I was interested in exploring whether or not
the intergenerational ambivalence framework might be applicable in this study. Through
coding and analysis, I was able to assess both directly and indirectly whether or not adult
caret children of divorce experience intergenerational ambivalence, drawing from previous
work that has used the framework (Connidis 2003; Pillemer and Suitor 2002).

In this chapter, I state my research questions and the methodological choice of in-
depth interviews. I describe how interviewing is affected by methodological concerns
such as validity, reliability and sampling in general. In addition, I discuss the data
analysis, the interview process and other ethical issues related to this research.

**Research Agenda**

The following are research questions that were the topic of inquiry in this
particular study.

1.) From the perspective of ACD, how does the parent-adult child relationship
change after a mid to late life parental divorce? What kinds of meanings and
interpretations do ACD give to the experience? How are the experiences of ACD
similar or different for sons and daughters?

2.) Do ACD experience heightened intergenerational ambivalence as a result of a mid
to late life parental divorce? If so, what experiences from the perspective of ACD
imply heightened intergenerational ambivalence? Also, how does gender of the
ACD shape their experience of heightened intergenerational ambivalence after the
parental divorce?
3.) How does one’s place in early adulthood transition (i.e. whether one is attending school, has children, or is married/in relationship, etc.) influence the parent-adult child relationship after a mid to late life parental divorce?

4.) How do adult sibling relationships change after a mid to late life parental divorce?

5.) What strategies are used by ACD to deal with changing parent-adult child relationships as well as adult sibling relationships after a mid to late life parental divorce?

**Methods**

Since I was most interested in understanding *how* and *why* the intergenerational relationship changes in the years after a mid to late life parental divorce, qualitative methodology was the best choice for this research. Specifically, I was interested in learning how the event of a mid to late life parental divorce is interpreted by ACD. This type of information was obtained by asking to hear the stories about ACD’s perceptions and reactions to the parental divorce. More specifically I focused on how, if at all, their relationships with their parents and siblings were affected by the parental divorce. Weiss (1994) argues that if a researcher is interested in learning how events are interpreted, qualitative methodology is preferred over quantitative methodology. This qualitative study was designed as an exploratory study since I was interested in looking for common themes from the interviews with the adult children of divorce. This approach was preferred over alternative ones (Connidis 2003; Pillemer and Suitor 2002) so that intergenerational ambivalence could be detected indirectly without asking them direct questions about experiencing intergenerational ambivalence.

Maxwell (1996) argues that there are five particular research purposes for which qualitative studies are especially suited, including the following: 1.) Understanding the meaning for participants in the study of the events, situations they are involved with, and
how the participants make sense of this and how their understandings influence their behavior; 2.) Understanding the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions; 3.) Identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences and generating new grounded theory; 4.) Understanding the process by which events and actions take place; and 5.) Developing causal explanations, in the sense that qualitative researchers tend to ask *how* *x* plays a role in causing *y*; that is, explaining the process that connects *x* and *y*.

My research interest fit well with all five of Maxwell’s (1996) suggestions. First, I was interested in ACD respondents’ perspectives on *how* a mid to late life parental divorce has affected their relationship with their parents and how they interpret changes in the relationship as a result of the parental divorce. Second, I was interested in the respondents’ perceptions of reasons for the changes in relationships not only with their parents but also their siblings. Also, in-depth qualitative interviewing allowed for the emergence of other themes common to ACD, generating new grounded theory that will be useful for future work in this particular research area. In addition, qualitative methodology provided a better understanding of how and why parent-adult child relationships change after a mid to late life parental divorce, as opposed to just stating that they do change, which has been typical of quantitative methodology. Lastly, this research sought to determine what the process was that connected the event of a mid to late life parental divorce and altered family relationships.

Furthermore, grounded theory is commonly used to understand the data obtained from qualitative interviews. As opposed to using a preconceived theory to understand *how* and *in what ways* the parent-child relationship is affected by a mid to late life
parental divorce, I immersed myself in the data to see if the intergenerational ambivalence framework was useful for understanding this experience. Although “intergenerational ambivalence” was expected to be an important overriding theme emerging from the data, the use of grounded theory allowed themes to emerge that may otherwise have been overlooked with the use of an imposed theory. In addition, the results of this study are meant to generate hypotheses which should be tested in future research. I now turn to a discussion of my sample.

Sample

Sample Size

The unit of analysis for this study was adult children of divorce. Adult children of divorce, defined as those whose parents divorce after they are 18 years of age, are a population for which there is no absolute count available. In addition, data on the number of children of an early parental divorce can be obtained since divorce records require the number and ages of children to be kept on file. However if children are over the age of eighteen at the time of a parental divorce, data do not have to be kept on record. Thus, this population of participants was difficult to locate. Maxwell (1996) argues that convenience sampling is justified if one is trying to learn about a group that is difficult to gain access to, or a category of people who are relatively rare in the population and for whom no data on membership exists.

Convenience sampling was used to obtain a sample of 40 ACD respondents who were between the ages of 18 and 34 when their parents divorced. Since this research was exploratory in nature and not meant to be representative of the general population, a sample size of 40 was used. Given the time and financial restrictions that are
characteristic of dissertation research, this sample size provided the most variability of this specific subgroup, while still being practical. This age range was used as the cutoff since this is the interval that is commonly used in family research to denote young adulthood (Aquilino 1994b). However, it is important to note that some respondents in the sample are older than age 34, up to the age of 54 if they were age 34 when their parents divorced twenty years ago. In addition, the parental divorce had to take place in the past 20 years since this is approximately the time when the number of mid to late life parental divorces started to rise. Since the number of years passed since the parental divorce ranged from zero to twenty years ago, the issue of recall arises, especially for those ACD who have not recently experienced the parental divorce. However, this did not seem to be an important factor as most ACD were able to discuss their experience of the parental divorce and were able to talk about their family relationships without much difficulty. The only criteria that are imperative are their age at the time of the parental divorce and that it occurred in the past 20 years. Participants were also paid $10 as a token of appreciation.

**Recruitment Strategies**

Several different recruitment strategies were used to obtain a sample of 40 respondents. Advertisements in the form of flyers (See Appendix A), newspaper advertisements (See Appendix B), and online advertising (See Appendix C) were used to locate participants. The flyers and newspaper advertisement had my contact information, including a contact number and email address, noting my academic affiliation, so that interested participants could contact me. Since diversity in terms of social class and
race/ethnicity was also a concern, flyers were posted in areas frequented by lower-class, middle-class, and upper-class individuals. Flyers were posted around campus as well as the Albany area in locations such as public libraries, grocery stores, and bus stops.

I had intended to use snowball sampling to gain additional participants; however, even though I asked if the participants knew anyone else who qualified for the study and might be interested, I had only one referral. I was not surprised by this since this is not a common experience for most adults, although I believe the number will increase in the near future. I had many of the participants offer for their siblings to contact me, although I explained that I was not interviewing siblings to have a more diverse sample.

During the first few months of recruitment, I only had one participant who responded to my advertisement in the local Times Union newspaper. I pulled the advertisement after a couple of months and opted instead to advertise on Craigslist, a free online advertisement website that attracts a wide and diverse audience. I had great success with this recruitment, obtaining about one-half of my participants from this source. In particular, I advertised under the “Volunteers” heading since I was asking the participants to volunteer their time and under the “Et Cetera Jobs” heading since many individuals use this website to look for jobs in the Albany area.

One possible source of bias resulting from advertising on Craigslist is that individuals must have access to the internet. So, ACD who could not afford to have a computer and/or internet connection at home would not be represented in this study. However, I continued to post flyers throughout the Albany area in order to reach those ACD who did not have access to the internet. In addition, public libraries have free access to the internet and there were a few ACD in this study who told me that they used
the internet at the library to search for jobs and other postings on Craigslist. Another possible source of bias is that one might think that I would obtain a younger sample of ACD by using Craigslist since younger individuals are more likely than older individuals to use websites such as Craigslist. Although I did have a higher number of younger ACD than older ACD contact me through the use of Craigslist, it is difficult to determine whether this has to do with the fact that younger individuals are more likely to use the internet and sites such as Craigslist or if it has to do with the overall general demographic pattern of ACD.

Although I had initial concerns of meeting my target sample size of 40 participants, I was surprised at the number of individuals interested in participating in my research study. One reason that I believe I had such a good response rate is due to the fact that ACD is a unique and small population. Perhaps when the individuals saw that they “fit” the criteria for my study, they were curious and decided to contact me. In fact, numerous individuals told me that they did not know of anyone else who had experienced a parental divorce after they were an adult and that it was nice to be able to talk with someone about their own personal experience.

**Selectivity Bias**

An important issue to address concerning my recruitment strategies is that of selectivity bias. Many of the previous qualitative studies focusing on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children collected data from a convenience sample of college students (Cooney et al. 1986; Cooney 1988; Cain 1989). Such a recruitment strategy yielded a sample of ACD who were of similar class backgrounds since they were
attending college. Some used word of mouth to obtain participants (Campbell 1995; Pryor 1999), which presents problems of selectivity based on the volunteer nature of the studies. One of the most representative studies recruited ACD from a previous study on randomly selected older individuals who had divorced in later life (Lang and Pett 1992; Lang, Pett, and Gander 1992). Selectivity bias was kept to a minimum with this previous research since the ACD were the offspring of randomly selected individuals who had been identified through official certificates of divorce registration filed with the state.

Similar to the aforementioned studies, this research was not without selectivity bias. One source of selectivity bias resulted from the volunteer nature of this research study. Participants had to take the initiative to contact me if interested in participating; thus, it is possible that those who volunteered had something in common with one another. During the recruitment process, I had to consider the possibility that my sample may be biased if perhaps those who had a very negative experience in dealing with their parents’ divorce were more likely to participate. Although I had about one-half of the participants who did not report a negative experience with their parents’ divorce, I cannot conclude that my sample was not biased in this sense.

Since I was interested in obtaining a more diverse sample population than previous studies, I attempted to recruit older individuals (i.e. older than the typical “college-age” populations) and adults who did not experience the parental divorce in the past five years. Initially, my sample was comprised of many “young” young adults who had recently experienced a parental divorce. I attribute this to three factors. First, I had advertised heavily on campus. Second, many initial respondents were recruited through Craigslist, the online advertising site. Since young adults are more likely than older
adults to use the internet, this may have attributed to my initial “younger” sample. Third, the literature (Cooney et al. 1986; Cooney 1994; Lang and Pett 1992) supports the idea that a majority of mid to late life parental divorces occur soon after the children leave the parental home which is typically between the ages of 18 and 22, for instance. Thus, I would expect my sample to have a large young adult population. Nonetheless, I adjusted my recruiting strategies by stopping recruitment from campus and by being more selective of those responding to my other advertisements. For instance, I would ask for their current age and if they fell into the category of age 18-22, having experienced the parental divorce just recently, I thanked them for their interest and told them I would put them on a list and contact them later if I needed additional volunteers. Such adjustments helped somewhat, but my sample was still comprised of a significant number of ACD who had recently or were currently experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce. However, my research was still supported by testimonies of ACD who experienced a mid to late life parental divorce more than ten to twenty years ago, for instance, as well as individuals who were older than the age of 25 when their parents divorced. See Table 1 for detailed demographic information of the sample.

Table 1 contains a summary of the demographic profiles of the sample. The sample was composed of an almost equal number of males and females, with 18 males and 22 females. About 48% of the individuals reported a current age between 18-23 years, while 52% fell between the ages of 24-54. Twenty-five of the ACD had experienced their parents’ divorce within the past ten years, whereas more than ten years had passed since the parental divorce for 15 of the ACD. A majority of the sample (31 out of 40) had experienced their parents’ divorce between the ages of 18-25 years, while
nine ACD were older than 25 years old at the time of their parents’ divorce. I was not surprised by this finding since the literature supports the idea that many mid to late-life parental divorces occur soon after the children leave the home, especially if the parents “stayed together for the sake of the children.” Also important to note is that one individual who was 35 years of age at the time of the divorce actually did not meet the criterion for current age (ACD must have been between the ages of 18 and 34 when parents divorced); however, she was referred to me by a coworker and I did not find this out until the time of the interview. I decided to keep her interview since she did not fall outside the set criteria by very much.

Although I was initially striving for as much diversity as possible, some sacrifices such as variation in terms of social class and race/ethnicity had to be made in order to obtain the desired number of participants for this research project since ACD are a difficult population to locate. Thirty-six of the ACD were White; two were Black; and two were multi-racial. Social class was determined by asking about their education level, their current occupation and employment status, the occupations of their parents, and education levels of their parents. For individuals who were still in college, I based their social class on their parents, unless they indicated that they were living independently. Twenty-nine of the 40 ACD described backgrounds that could be characterized as middle-class while eleven ACD indicated backgrounds that could be characterized as poor or working class.

The results of this study are not generalizable to larger populations since the sample is not random. In addition the sample is not large enough to draw conclusions about differences among sub-populations based on social class, gender, and
race/ethnicity. However, these issues are not problematic since the purpose of this study was to generate theoretical concepts related to the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce and family relationships. Furthermore, the results of this study can be tested on larger, more representative samples in future research. I now consider issues of validity and reliability associated with the qualitative methodology of this study.

**Validity and Reliability**

A main threat to valid interpretation of qualitative data is imposing one’s own framework or meaning, rather than understanding the perspective of the respondents. In order to avoid this threat to validity, the interview guide was constructed so that leading questions would not be asked. In particular, with this research, a central research question sought to determine whether intergenerational ambivalence is characteristic of parent-adult child relationships after a mid to late life parental divorce. Although intergenerational ambivalence has been directly measured in previous studies (Fingerman and Hay 2004; Pillemer and Suitor 2002) on intergenerational relationships, this research sought to take a more indirect approach without imposing the concept on the respondents. Thus, questions were asked in a neutral, non-leading way. Furthermore, probe questions were used to resolve inconsistencies in respondents’ answers as well as to gain additional information not voluntarily offered.

In addition, I was aware that researcher biases could be threats to validity of the data. As an ACD myself, I am aware that my own experiences could lead to biases if I failed to keep an open mind. This was avoided by asking to hear the respondents’ stories about their own experiences while using the interview guide to cover areas not discussed
by the respondents. In addition, I was aware that my own characteristics could affect how much information is provided to me by the respondents. Specifically, I was aware that respondents may react to my age, sex, race, etc. For instance, respondents of the opposite sex, of a different race, or of a different age range may be less inclined to be more open with me because they do not feel that they can relate to me. In summing up issues of validity with qualitative interviewing, Weiss concludes, “for the most part we must rely on the quality of our interviewing for the validity of our material. Ultimately, our best guarantee of the internal validity of interview material is careful, concrete, level interviewing within the context of a good interviewing partnership” (1994:150).

In addition to concerns of validity from the data obtained, a weakness of qualitative methodology is poor reliability. Since data obtained from non-probability samples is not generalizable beyond the population sampled, the research is not easily replicable. In addition, since there is no quantitative analysis in this study and this research is an exploration of some of the issues associated with the altered parent-child relationship, reliability is not as much of a concern as laying the groundwork for future research in this area. However, as with most qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviewing allowed a richness of data and great breadth of data that is not possible with quantitative methodology. These advantages outweighed the lack of reliability. I now move on to address the interviews and issues associated with the interviewing process.

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted in a variety of public places including local public libraries, coffee shops, restaurants, and the University at Albany campus libraries. One
interview took place at a woman’s home, but only because she had a young toddler and it was more convenient for me to come to her house so that she could care for her child during the interview. Public places were chosen to assure safety and alleviate concerns of awkwardness. The interviews took place at a time that was convenient for the participant and I was as accommodating as possible in regard to the scheduling of the days of the week and times. The interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to two hours, with a median of one hour and twenty minutes.

**Confidentiality and Protection of Human Subjects**

This research was approved by the University at Albany’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), and met the conditions of human subjects protection as set forth by the University at Albany (Protocol # 07-266). All subjects recruited for this research were asked to sign a consent form (See Appendix D) prior to beginning the interview. No research was conducted until the consent form was signed. In addition, participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate the interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they may otherwise have been entitled.

To avoid a breach of confidentiality, all data that contained names and matching identification numbers, including consent forms, contact information, and digital audio files were kept at my home office with access limited to myself as the primary researcher. Pseudonyms were used to assure anonymity and confidentiality. In addition, any other identifying information disclosed during the recorded interviews was removed, as required by the University Institutional Review Board. The participant’s data was
assigned a number, with the matching name only to be known by the principal investigator. Furthermore, in order to protect confidentiality, any quotations that were used in this dissertation or other published work from this research will not include identifying factors (such as occupation, etc.) so that the participants’ identities will not be recognizable to others. Prior to the participant signing the consent form, I explained how their identity would be protected and their information would remain confidential. Participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. They were given an opportunity to ask questions after reading the consent form (See Appendix D) and interviews were not conducted until consent was obtained.

**Audio-taping**

Also included on the consent form was a question pertaining to permission to audio-record the semi-structured interview (See Appendix D). A digital voice recorder was used during the interviews so that I, as the interviewer, could focus on listening to the participant instead of trying to take notes verbatim. According to Weiss (1994), using an audio recorder makes it easier to attend to the respondent than taking notes without tape recording. In addition, notes never capture exactly what was said during the interviews; by tape recording all interviews, verbatim quotes were able to be incorporated into the analysis. All 40 of the participants agreed to the audio-recording of the interview.
The Qualitative Interview Guide

The interview guide (See Appendix A) was constructed with my research questions in mind in order to assure that the research questions were addressed to the fullest extent possible. Since I was using a semi-structured interview protocol, the interview guide was to be used as a tool in eliciting general topics of discussions to make certain that all areas of research interest were covered. The questions on the interview guide were used to transition to a new topic of discussion or to probe for additional detail concerning a topic. Most importantly, the interview guide served as a means to make certain that all of the information I was interested in obtaining from the participants was covered in one way or another. During the interviews I would check off each section and subsection when it was covered and make notes concerning which areas had not been covered. Then, at an appropriate time during the interview I would ask to hear about the topic that had not been discussed.

The interview guide was restructured after some of the interviews were conducted in order to get richer, more detailed responses (See Appendix A). First, I decided to place the section “Relationships with Adult Siblings” earlier in the interview guide because it was the last section covered in the interview and I felt like the participants tended to rush over the topic since it is was near the end of the interview. Second, I decided to ask more detailed questions about the stages of the family relationships. Initially, I only asked respondents to talk about their relationship with their mother (for instance) in more general terms before the divorce, during the divorce, and after the divorce.
What I found is that there was much confusion over whether or not they should
discuss their relationship during the separation time period or focus on the actual legal
divorce. So I decided to go one step further and ask about very specific time frames such
as during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, during the parental separation (if
there was one), during the initial stages of the divorce, after the divorce, and currently.
By asking the participants to cover all these time periods, I was able to gain a better
understanding of how and in what ways their relationships evolved over time. In
addition, I was able to see if there was any connection to the parental divorce if there was
any reported change in the relationship. This same format was used to ask about their
relationship with their father as well as with their siblings, if they had any. It may have
been more useful if I had implemented these changes earlier in the interviewing stage;
however, I had a surprisingly high number of interviews within the first month and
decided to make the changes only after writing up a progress report after the first month.

I began the interview by informing the participant that I would be asking them to
discuss in detail their experience of being an ACD as well as discussing at length their
relationships with their mother, father, and siblings. Drawing from the interview guide,
Section I (see Appendix A) served as an opportunity for the respondent to tell me about
their life at the present time. At this point in the interview, I was hoping that the
respondents would begin to reveal some personal information as well as information
pertaining to their parents’ divorce. If the respondent only gave little information without
elaboration, I used additional probing questions. Possible probes included asking how
many years it has been since their parents’ divorce as well as how the divorce had
impacted their position in life today. Respondents would also be probed to talk about
their current status, that is if they are working, going to school, raising a family, etc. Another probe was to ask them to talk about their current relationship, if they are dating, cohabiting, or married. I also asked about their family life in general, such as what holidays are like; how often they see their family, etc.

These questions have been asked in previous qualitative studies; however, I used these questions for two reasons. First, these initial questions served as an introduction to the interview as well as providing background information on being an ACD. Second, I was looking for responses that hinted at intergenerational ambivalence, especially heightened intergenerational ambivalence. Since no existing studies on mid to late life parental divorce have even considered the issue of intergenerational ambivalence, data from these questions will build on existing studies.

Section II contained questions that ask the ACD to talk about the initial stages of the parental divorce. I asked the ACD to talk about their life during the initial stages of their parents’ divorce and how their story would have been different. Probes included asking what their life was like at the time when they first found out about the divorce; asking about whether or not they were still in school, working, in a relationship, raising a family, etc. I was also interested in hearing about their experiences upon first hearing of their parents’ divorce. Other related probes included asking the ACD about not only their perceptions but also other family members’ perceptions about why the divorce occurred. Sometimes, I would also ask the ACD to discuss how family holidays changed after the divorce. Similarly, I would ask the ACD to discuss what the most challenging part of dealing with the parents’ divorce was and why. Lastly, I would ask
the ACD to talk about the ways in which they feel like their life has changed as a result of the divorce.

While the first two sections were designed to gain general information on how their parents’ divorce had impacted their own lives, the following sections dealt specifically with sibling relationships and parent-child relationships. These questions build upon existing studies. Previous qualitative studies failed to collect specific detail on mother-adult child and father-adult child relationships. By asking the ACD to discuss in great detail their intergenerational relationships, heightened intergenerational ambivalence was able to be detected indirectly (See later section on operationalization of concept “intergenerational ambivalence”).

In Section III, the respondent was asked to talk specifically about their relationships with each of their siblings and to reflect on how these relationships may have been affected (if at all) by their parents’ divorce. If necessary, the ACD was probed to discuss what they have in common with each sibling, what a common topic of conversation is between them, with whom do they feel the closest and why, etc. Specifically, they were asked to talk about their sibling relationships as it has evolved over time in order to get an idea of how and why it changed, if they perceive such a change in the relationship. Such questions were important, as this area of inquiry has not been addressed at all in previous research.

In Section IV, I asked the respondent to discuss his/her current relationship with their mother. If the respondent was very brief upon being asked to talk about their current relationship with their mother, I then asked some more guided questions. Possible probes to get more detail included asking about how close they live to their
mother; how often they communicate, etc. In addition, I also asked them to talk about their relationship with their mother during childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, during the parental separation (if applicable), during the initial stages of the divorce, and after the divorce. Furthermore, if they indicated that their relationship had changed in any way, I asked for their perception as to why it changed. By asking these questions, I was able to gain a sense of how the relationship had evolved over time. Other questions asked concerned their mother’s current marital status, whether she is remarried, dating, or cohabiting at the present time. In addition, the ACD was asked to discuss how their mother’s later life relationships after the divorce have impacted their own relationship. Lastly, ACD were asked to discuss their relationships with their mother’s side of the family and to talk about how these relationships have changed after the divorce, if at all.

In Section V, I asked the respondent to discuss their current relationship with their father. Once again, additional probes (see previous paragraph) were used if the ACD was too brief in discussing their current relationship with their father. As a wrap-up of the discussion on the topic of intergenerational relationships, I asked the ACD to discuss whether they currently felt closer to their mother and father and why.

The last section, section VI, provided an opportunity for me to gain personal demographic information on the ACD. Not all of these questions needed to be asked; rather the list of demographic questions served as a checklist to be certain that I had collected basic information such as age, age at the time of parents’ divorce, number of siblings, marital status, number of children, etc. This demographic information allowed me as the researcher to better understand how their unique experience of being an ACD fit with the other stories told by other ACD in the sample.
At the conclusion of the interview, the ACD was asked to discuss how their parents’ divorce has impacted their own life overall. In other words, they were asked to characterize their own experience as an ACD. Specifically, they were asked to discuss the strategies they have used to cope with this family transition. In order to get at the strategies that they have used personally, I asked them what advice they would provide to other ACD who may be going through a similar experience. These questions were asked since I was most interested in learning about the strategies that the ACD have used to deal with their changing relationships with their parents and siblings, if their relationships were at all affected. I have just covered the interviewing process; I now describe how intergenerational ambivalence and related concepts were operationalized.

**Operationalization of Intergenerational Ambivalence and Related Concepts**

Since there are no agreed upon measures of intergenerational ambivalence, there were both advantages and disadvantages in regard to detecting and measuring intergenerational ambivalence based on the data obtained from the interviews. One advantage was that I was not restricted to a limited number of responses that would elicit intergenerational ambivalence. On the other hand, intergenerational ambivalence is a tricky concept to not only define, but also to operationalize. Qualitative methodology, through the form of semi-structured interview questions, is the preferred method in which to detect intergenerational ambivalence along both structural and individual dimensions.

Based on the questions contained in the interview guide, I anticipated that certain responses would hint at experiencing intergenerational ambivalence. Luscher (2002) explains that intergenerational ambivalence is a concept that describes an experience in
which individuals want to help another family member but feel burdened or overwhelmed at the same time. The respondents were asked to discuss how their parents’ mid to late life parental divorce has affected their lives in general as well as how it has affected their relationships with their parents and adult siblings. Following Luscher’s operationalization, I came up with a list of certain responses that would detect or hint at intergenerational ambivalence, including the following:

- “I feel bad…I know my mom/dad needs me right now, but I have my own life too.”
- “I get stressed just listening to both of my mother and father complaints but I listen anyhow.”
- “I feel like my mom/dad is to blame, but I cannot cut ties with them completely.”
- “This whole divorce interferes with my schooling/work/raising my own family; but all siblings must stick together.”
- “It seems as though my relationship with my father/mother is different since the divorce; I still love him/her but I need to worry about myself right now.”
- “I never expected that my mother/father would become so dependent this early in life.”

Such responses indicate intergenerational ambivalence as defined by Luscher (2002), however, there was a moderate amount of discretion on my part as the researcher in determining which responses might hint at intergenerational ambivalence. Proponents of the intergenerational ambivalence perspective argue that future research should not only focus on detecting intergenerational ambivalence, but should also identify and explain the strategies that individuals use to deal with intergenerational ambivalence.
Luscher (2005) explains that dealing with intergenerational ambivalence requires human agency. Thus, another important area of inquiry in this research was identifying the strategies that ACD use to deal with the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce, especially as it affects family relationships. For purposes of this research, strategies were operationalized as the behaviors or actions that ACD use to deal with the challenging experiences associated with being an ACD. In order to ask ACD about the strategies they use in dealing with intergenerational ambivalence (without directly referring to it as such), respondents were asked to discuss any and all strategies they have used or are using to deal with this family transition. Specifically, they were prompted to provide advice to other or future ACD that would ease the burden of dealing with such a family transition. Respondents were encouraged to focus on coping skills or behaviors they have used to deal with changing parent-child and adult sibling relationships.

Since there is a lack of clear measures for intergenerational ambivalence and the concept is more than experiencing “mixed feelings,” the operationalization of this concept is indeed quite complex. In addition, since I employed grounded theory, my understandings and theoretical concepts continually developed over time as themes emerged from the data. Thus there was a need to be flexible in my methodology, while at the same time having a general idea of anticipated themes. Future research will be needed to confirm the operationalization of intergenerational ambivalence as experienced by adult children of divorce. I now turn to a discussion of the data analysis.
Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using a comparative method. As a way of becoming immersed in the data, I completed all 40 of the transcriptions myself during the course of the interviewing process. Thus, during any point of my data collection, it was just as likely that I would have been conducting an interview as I would have been transcribing an interview. This was beneficial in that it often generated insights and theoretical ideas that enabled me to see themes and patterns across different interviews. Even though the transcription was quite time-consuming, I believe I was more personally connected to the data, having already thought about numerous codes to be used in the more formal analysis. Although I did not use the computer software to analyze the data until all 40 interviews were completed, I was constantly reading over transcriptions and noting themes and patterns that were emerging from the data.

Coding of the data was aided with the use of NVivo software. NVivo software is an efficient data-handling tool for textual data such as transcribed interviews. The software allows the researcher to explore documents such as transcriptions and memos, create categories and coding texts, manage, and organize the data in a way that can save the researcher a lot of time. The software was used to generate themes that illustrate patterns throughout the interview data. Although the software proved to be very useful in coding, searching, and organizing the data, I benefited greatly from the tedious task of transcribing and taking notes during the course of the time that I was still interviewing.
Process and Ethical Issues

In this last section I address some of the ethical issues related to qualitative interviewing that I encountered during the interview process. Although I was prepared for most of the instances that occurred, there were a few that were unexpected. Issues that arose included the participant becoming emotionally upset during the interview, disclosing my status as an ACD, and participants asking to see the results of this study. I address each of these issues in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

As indicated on the informed consent form, there was a moderate risk of becoming upset as a result of some of the questions that will be asked. Family transitions, especially divorce often are a very emotional time for all members of the family. Since I was asking for the ACD to reflect and tell their stories of how the parental divorce impacted their lives, I anticipated that some participants would have a difficult time discussing some of the painful memories that may have resulted from the parental divorce. There were a couple of interviews in which the ACD broke into tears while talking about their experience. At that time, I told them to take their time and waited for them to continue when they were comfortable. In all instances, this only took a minute or two. In addition, I would have referred them to counseling, but they had already explained to me that they had sought counseling previously or were currently in counseling. It seems as though even though the parental divorce may have been some time ago, the resurfacing of the memories related to their experience of the parental divorce can still evoke strong emotions.

Although I originally contemplated disclosing my status as an ACD prior to the start of the interview as a means of establishing rapport, I decided against this for the
following reasons. First, I did not want the participants, in telling their stories, to view me as psychologist that was there not only to listen to their stories but also to help them deal with the pain that has resulted. Second, I did not want the participants to ask me if my experience of my parents’ divorce was similar or different. I did, however, disclose my status as an ACD at the conclusion of some of the interviews if their stories resonated with my own. By waiting until the interview had concluded, I was still establishing rapport without biasing the data.

I had one individual at the conclusion of the interview ask me what I suggested in order for her to get through “the tough times.” This was an issue I had not expected. I reminded the participant that there are licensed psychologists and counselors who can be of assistance and encouraged her to consult the informed consent form that included contact information for various counseling centers throughout the Albany area, including the SUNY-Albany University Counseling Center, the Capital District Counseling Center, as well as additional ones.

I also had many individuals who were interested in seeing the results of this study and asked if they would be able to read the finished product. I informed them that I did not intend to produce a summary of the findings that would be given to all participants; however, I contacted all participants asking if they were still interested in seeing a brief summary of the results. A brief summary of the results was emailed to those who expressed interest in seeing the results.

Lastly, many of the individuals also told me that they really enjoyed the interview and some even tried to refuse the money that was given as a token of appreciation. I was impressed by the willingness of strangers to share such personal details of their family
life with me as a researcher. Some ACD, at the conclusion of the interview, stated that this was the first time they had really talked about their parents’ divorce and that it really helped them to sort through some of the feelings and experiences associated with the divorce. I also had many participants that informed me of siblings who would be interested in the study. Although I appreciated the referral, I explained to them that siblings could not be used in this particular study, since I was looking at family relationships and was striving for as much diversity as possible.

Since I was prepared for most of these issues that arose during the interview process, I believe I handled them in a very professional manner. All in all, most of the participants seemed to enjoy talking about their experiences which created very rich unique data detailing the experiences and family relationships of ACD. In the next chapter I begin my description of the results of this process.
CHAPTER 4

ACD AND THEIR GENERAL EXPERIENCE OF THE PARENTAL DIVORCE

Based on a thorough review of the existing research on adult children of divorce and their experiences, I began my data collection process with the basic assumption that a parental divorce during young adulthood will be difficult and troubling for most adult children. Most of the existing studies (e.g. Cooney 1988; Lang and Pett 1992; Campbell 1995) on mid to late life parental divorce focus on the negative consequences of a parental divorce for adult children, such as parentification or role reversal; negatively affected parent-child relationships; conflicting loyalties or “taking sides” between parents; altered family rituals or holidays; psychological and emotional problems; and changes in attitudes toward marriage.

The consistent theme from the literature is the many negative effects of parental divorce on children even if the divorce occurs during adulthood. The contribution of these studies has been to bring attention to the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce from the perspective of adult children. From these studies, one would conclude that a parental divorce is likely to be a very troubling and disruptive experience for a young adult. The results of the current study supported this conclusion as well; however, only about one half of the respondents described their experience as negative and troubling. This chapter begins with a discussion of themes and issues that were characteristic of most of the ACD, regardless of whether or not they felt they were initially affected in a negative way by their parents’ divorce. I then describe the themes that distinguished between the two groups of ACD: “Affected Initially” and “Not Affected Initially.” It is important to note that the ACD were placed into either category
based on their self-reporting of their experience of their parents’ divorce. The following findings are common issues that arose from the stories of the ACD in each group.

**Overview of Initial Response to Parental Divorce**

A main difference between a parental divorce that occurs during one’s childhood and after the children are adults is the amount of time the family has spent together as a family unit. When I asked the ACD to discuss their initial reactions when they found out that their parents were divorcing, their individual stories were unique; however, there were a few themes that stood out. In the remainder of this chapter, I will briefly discuss the themes that were characteristic of most of the ACD, regardless of whether or not they described their initial experience of their parents’ divorce as negative. The themes include the following: surprise/shock; holidays altered; loss of the family home; financial difficulties; being busy with their own adult lives, and being “put in the middle” by their parents. Altered family relationships involving parent-child and sibling relationships were also prominent themes; however, I discuss each of these types of relationships in greater length in chapters five and six, respectively. I then go on to describe how roughly one-half of those interviewed were initially affected negatively by their parents’ divorce, whereas the other half did not have a tough time initially, discussing in detail how the one group of ACD differed from the other.

**Surprise/Shock Factor**

Previous research found that many ACD were shocked when they found out about their parents’ decision to divorce (Lang and Pett 1992; Cain 1989). As a result of this
surprise or shock, the ACD began wondering why the parents had waited so long to inform them of their marital dissatisfaction. While previous research notes the surprise of the ACD, it is not clear exactly how common it was for an ACD to have been surprised by the news of the parental divorce. Not all of the ACD that I interviewed were surprised or shocked by the news; in fact only about one-third of the individuals I interviewed were surprised. Nonetheless, some ACD were completely surprised that their parents were divorcing after being together for most of the child’s life. The reasons given for being surprised ranged from never really having seen their parents fight to thinking that their parents were always going to be together, despite some marital conflicts. The following are examples of ACD who were surprised:

It was taken as shock. My older sisters saw it coming for a long time—so they say. Me? I was taken aback. I didn’t think things like that happened to people in my family. I always thought people who had divorced parents were like—somewhat—I don’t know what I want to say—trashy? There was a negative connotation to divorce for me. I didn’t see it coming.

(Aaron)

So, I went and that’s when they told me that they were getting separated. Both of them together had told me... But, I was just like in shock. I mean, I knew my parents had been seeing a marriage counselor. Um, I’m very close with my mother and she was comfortable telling me that—like it was probably my freshman year in college when they started—when my mom told me they were still having problems and nothing was really helping. So—and it was the first time I had seen my dad cry. Uh, and so that hurt because I had never seen my father cry. I was 22 years old and lived with him since I was born and had never seen him cry. And so that hurt too. I guess it was more of like a [hesitating] not really expected—but kind of expected—because I knew my mom was so unhappy.

(Rachel)

For some ACD, they were not surprised that their parents had decided to get a divorce because they knew that their parents’ relationship was conflicted for some time now. Some of the individuals interviewed even expressed feelings of relief when they
heard the news. One reason why some were not surprised was that their parents had a
history of fighting and conflict, sometimes to the point of spousal abuse. Some ACD had
seen their parents fight so much growing up that they had often wished for the divorce.
Other ACD had already gotten used to the fact that their parents had separated and were
living their own lives, so the “official” divorce was no big deal.

They called me on the phone. It was—my mother had initiated. But, we
had all always encouraged them to get a divorce because the house was
noisy. They were always fighting and clearly it wasn’t working and so.
But they stayed together for the children and as soon as my brother went
away, then my mother initiated the divorce. So we weren’t surprised at
all. It was just like finally. (Margaret)

My sisters and I kind of weren’t surprised when my parents said they were
getting divorced. For a while we said, “Maybe you guys ought to.” But
after they got divorced, they decided they would continue to cohabitate in
the house together. They weren’t living—it wasn’t—it was more of a
roommate situation. They didn’t share—they hadn’t shared a bed—they
hadn’t shared a bedroom for as long as I can remember. By the time I was
like three or four, they were already in separate bedrooms. (Cole)

Based on the findings from the current study, even though a mid to late life
parental divorce may be unexpected in the normative sense, not all young adults are
shocked or surprised by the news. There are various factors that account for whether or
not the young adults are surprised. First, since ACD have lived with their parents for
most of their lives by the time their parents get divorced, they are likely to be aware of
marital conflict and dissatisfaction. That is, if one’s parents have a history of fighting
and conflict, then the ACD would be less likely to be surprised. Furthermore, if the
parents had separated prior to the actual legal divorce, then the ACD would be less likely
to be surprised by the news of the divorce. However, it is important to note that some
ACD were surprised that their parents actually followed through with the divorce, even
though there may have been much fighting. In fact, some ACD reported that they were so surprised because they felt like their parents had invested so much time into the marriage and the family and they could not imagine them starting over. As one can see, there are many factors related to the element of surprise when ACD were informed of the parental divorce. The key point from this current study is that not all ACD are surprised by the news; in fact, many are relieved.

**Holidays Altered**

Previous research (Pett, Lang, and Gander 1992; Cooney et al. 1986; and Campbell 1995) concludes that holidays and other family rituals are altered dramatically following a mid to late life parental divorce. In particular, Pett et al. (1992) found that when ACD were asked about the most difficult part of dealing with their parents’ divorce, many reported the fact that holidays and other family rituals were now different and/or split between parents. I asked the ACD to discuss family holidays before and after the parental divorce in order to capture any perception of change since the parental divorce. A majority of the young adults that I interviewed reported that family holidays changed a lot; the family holidays that were once shared together as a family unit became a thing of the past.

Family holidays took on a different meaning for some ACD, as they now had to split holidays with each parent. Furthermore, most of the studies (Pett, Lang, and Gander 1992; Cooney et al. 1986; and Campbell 1995) conclude that holidays become a time of negative stress and unhappiness for the young adults. In my study, I found similar results, but certainly not for all of the ACD that I interviewed. Some ACD noted that
holidays were a very tough time initially because they now had to split the holidays with their parents and missed the “old holidays.” Some of the ACD I interviewed explained this initial change:

Well holidays for a while were very tough in my twenties. But, they’re better now because I’ve met someone and I just—you know it’s weird—it’s like they were really tough in my twenties and I think it almost taught me to think, “Oh, it’s just another day.” It’s like this isn’t the end-all-be-all if I don’t have the Partridge family little Christmas. So I just kind of look at it differently. But, I mean, it’s fine now. But, in my twenties after the divorce, it was like, “this is not how I want things to be.” (Melissa)

She even tells about how she had met her mother in a parking lot to exchange Christmas gifts one year—a drastic change from the family dinners that were once spent together at the family home:

But at times, like I’ve met my mom—I know shortly after the divorce when I was in my young twenties and my parents actually moved in different locations, I got my own apartment, and things like that. I met my mother in the [mall] parking lot and exchanged Christmas gifts with her because I wouldn’t even go to her house or the boyfriend’s or anything. (Melissa)

Similarly, even though ten or more years have passed for some ACD, they still struggle with holidays. Edith explains how holidays can be emotionally draining for her:

Holidays are kind of difficult because there’s always that thing—should I do something with mom? Should I do something with dad? And, you know, my dad is perfectly fine if I say, “You know we made plans to do something with mom.” But my mom just never wants to hear about us going to—what she refers to as “that whorehouse”—because my dad is living in sin. (Edith)

Holidays? Holidays are very depressing. I mean I try to keep them—my sister and I—I mean, they’re not really that depressing for me, but they’re very depressing for my mother and I don’t know—my sister’s sort of ambivalent about holidays because she really loves like Christmas. Christmas is the hardest holiday, I would say. (Josephine)

I definitely hate going home for holidays now. I mean, holidays were good back then. But, now I hate holidays. Going home—like, “Where are
you going to sleep? Are you going to sleep at your mom’s? Are you going to sleep over there? If you do stay there, are you going to stay with me tomorrow night?” (Robin)

Previous research by Cooney (1986, 1988, 1996) and Lang and Pett (1992) have found similar conclusions. However, there were some ACD who did not seem to mind that they had to split the holidays or had learned to make the best of it.

Oh, my dad usually comes up and then we usually go down there to see my aunt and my cousins and stuff. So, it’s upon us—it’s not like we force-split the holidays, we just kind of do it. (Kurt)

Or there were some whose parents still shared the holidays together even after the divorce to make the transition as smooth as possible for the children.

Uh, holidays, we usually. . . it’s kind of complicated, we split up. Me and my sisters, for the past few years have usually gone with my mom to my uncle’s house for Thanksgiving and dinner and then we’ll go to my grandpa’s house with my dad for dessert or something. We usually split it up pretty well. A few times, my dad has actually come with us to my uncle’s house, um, because everyone kind of gets along. It’s not bad at all. . . But, that Christmas was weird because it was the first one apart, except my dad still came up. They wanted to remain like the tradition and it was good. We all opened up presents together and stuff. (Brandy, recent parental divorce)

I don’t think that a lot has changed. They generally—like Thanksgiving for example—my parents have always had their little rituals. With Thanksgiving, my mom cooks the food and sets it out and we have a pretty traditional Thanksgiving dinner. . . Things like Christmas—this Christmas was interesting because my mother still like bought gifts for my dad. Like he came over and we like had pretty much the same as the other years. (Sal, recent parental divorce).

Some ACD looked at the experience of their parents’ divorce as an opportunity to start their own holiday traditions.

It was a little difficult when holidays come and stuff like that—family get-togethers, Thanksgiving, stuff like that where I know that we always—ever since I can remember—we always celebrated together. That was a done-deal.
[JL: How did you deal with that?]

I started traditions of my own like that. And I invited them to my house. And my mother said, “You know your father is going to be there.” I said, “Listen. That’s your business. I’m having dinner. I’m inviting my mother and my father to the home. I don’t care what you all do. I want you there.” (Zack, parental divorce over ten years ago)

**Loss of Family Home**

Related to the idea of holidays taking on a different meaning after a parental divorce, is the loss of the family home. Unlike a child whose parents divorce when they are younger, a young adult may have spent their entire childhood and adolescence growing up in a family home with many family memories. After a parental divorce, often the family home is still occupied by one parent or both parents move on to other residences. Nonetheless, the family home that they have grown up in is no longer the same after a parental divorce. Only one study (Lang and Pett 1992) notes the theme “loss of family home” as reported by ACD. Whereas Lang and Pett (1992) focused on family rituals and holidays, other studies were more general. That is, it may be true that many ACD are concerned about “losing” the family home or their old “family life,” but previous studies simply did not ask about this issue.

For many of the ACD interviewed in this study, this was a difficult realization for them to accept. Even those ACD who said they did not have a tough time initially with their parents’ divorce still lament for the old “family home” and the way things used to be. The following quotes represent this “loss of the family home.”

It was the realization that when I go home, it’s not going to be mommy and daddy there no more—even though I was a grown man with my own family. Mommy and Daddy wasn’t going to be there no more. I had to go to one town to see Daddy and go to another to see Mommy. (Zack)
That’s something that I still get kind of sad about—is actually my moving—my house—because my dad stayed there and my mom moved to an apartment. And that’s the house. . . And I loved that house and I felt like when I did come home from college I wanted to come to that house. And I was at my neighbor’s house yesterday and then I saw my house and I was like—it’s not like I don’t cry about it, but it’s like “Oh wow. It’s other people living there” . . . That was much harder. That was two years ago. It was definitely the hardest, I think—just moving—because that’s like—I guess it’s like a separate break-up from my parents anyway because all of the memories of my parents being together were in that house and uh, now that house is totally out of my life basically. It’s like my parents breaking up and all of these other memories all breaking up. I guess that [the house] was a common denominator or something. That definitely affected me more. Still, it’s not like I’ll never get over it. I’m fine with it now. (Brenton)

**Financial Ramifications**

In addition to ACD worrying about future holidays with their families and family gatherings, ACD have also reported worrying about financial issues after the parental divorce. Campbell (1995) found that a majority of the young adults in her study were worried about interruptions to their education or careers due to their parents’ finances following the divorce. This was especially true for college students who were still financially dependent on their parents. I found similar results in this study. When the ACD were asked, they reported that the hardest part initially for some was the change in the financial situation for their family. Since legal divorces can be costly, for ACD on their way to college, the parental divorce often had a negative effect on how their college tuition would be paid. For others, it was difficult seeing their mother or father and siblings struggle financially after the divorce. For instance, it was very hard for Tim to see his mother and younger brothers struggling financially after their father left their mother. As the oldest son, Tim had felt a responsibility to take over and make sure that his family was managing.
[JL: Let’s now talk about the ways that you feel your life got worse.]

Well now there’s more financial stress. So, it’s really hard to see my mom and my brothers suffer that way.

[JL: So your younger brothers are still living at home and are financially independent?]

Yeah. That’s about it.

[JL: What about for you though?]

Just that I can’t do anything to help them.

For others, they were directly affected by their parents’ divorce. Aaron’s parents used most of the money from his college fund to pay for the divorce attorneys, resulting in Aaron having to attend community college instead of a private college.

[JL: At this time—you were finishing high school when you first found out about the divorce—were you planning to college?]

I was planning on going to a really nice private college and my parents split up. They spent—my parents had a college fund for me and my next oldest sister—about eighty, ninety thousand dollars, but they spent all that in the divorce between the two of them. So I ended up going to a community college for two years and then I went to [name] University.

[JL: All in all, how do you feel that your parents’ divorce has impacted your own life?]

It affected what schools I could go to—that’s an immediate impact—immediate and definite.

Similarly, Crystal had to go to a community college because her parents had less money to pay for her tuition.

I had gotten into the university, but then they realized they couldn’t pay for it. So I ended up having to go to community college for one semester before I enrolled for the winter... and I went to [name] university, which was the worst school for me at the time. It was so horrible. I mean, after a year, I took three suitcases and no car and I moved to [place]. And I
started my whole life over. I got myself a full-time job. I went to school full-time. I met new people. Then I was there for nine years. I got through college. I got a good job. . . So lots of things happened, but I think I felt bitter that I had to like sit there and take care of myself.

**Parental Divorce as Potential Source of Additional Stress**

Previous research (Cooney et al. 1986; Campbell 1985; Lang and Pett 1992) has found that a mid to late life parental divorce is especially difficult for young adults who are pursuing their education; starting careers; and/or starting a family. Specifically, the stress related to the parental divorce is exacerbated during this phase of young adulthood. Cooney et al. (1986) in particular notes the stress associated with starting college (being away from family and friends at home). In a sample of 48 ACD, Campbell (1985) found that 1/3 of the ACD reported that their lives were disrupted temporarily while they were worried about or dealing with stress and issues associated with the parental divorce.

I found similar results with the ACD in this study. Many of the ACD talked about how they were so busy with their own lives during the time of their parents’ divorce. Some were attending college; others had been living independently for a few years with an established career and a family. Some ACD discussed how they struggled initially with their parents’ divorce because they felt overburdened having to deal with another “issue” or “problem” when they were already so busy with their own life. On an interesting note, for others, the fact that they were so busy during the time of their parents’ divorce helped to ease the transition for them since they didn’t have time to “deal” with their parents’ divorce. For instance, Justin was away at college when he got a phone call from his mother telling his that his father had cheated on her and they were going to get a divorce. Justin’s family always seemed “normal” to him as he was
growing up, with very little fighting or arguments. Although Justin was away at college, he talked to both of his parents about it and was able to get on with his life. Justin explained that the hardest part of dealing with his parents’ divorce is the fact that he was out of the state going to college when the separation and divorce were taking place. He expresses how distance could be a factor at times:

So, you know, I was out there. I couldn’t sit down and talk with them. I couldn’t go out and have a beer with my dad. I couldn’t just talk to my mom. It was more over the phone and email was kind of just starting with my parents. So, it was like they would write me letters. It was just harder to communicate at that point than it would be if I were at home or whatever.

Like Justin, Brandy was in college when she found out her parents were divorcing, but her parents initially separated before deciding to go through with the actual divorce proceedings. She explained what was going on in her life at the time:

I remember that when I was a freshman, they took us to the apartment—it was completely empty—where my dad was going to move in and they were like “We’re buying this for rental purposes in the future to raise money.” And I didn’t think anything of it, but then when my dad said that he was moving there for time to think and stuff, it kind of shocked me and my sisters. It was like out of the blue because my parents never fought or anything so it was really random… And then I just got so used to that. I thought that was how things were always going to be, but then last year when they told us that they were getting divorced, it was definitely a shock because after years of just separation, it just came out of nowhere. We just thought that’s how things were going to continue.

Brandy’s parents helped make the parental divorce as smooth of a transition as possible. Her parents waited until she came home for winter break from college to tell her the divorce was finalized and told her together. She told about how the first holidays were not so bad because they kept some family traditions:

They just sat us down in the room and told us and it was upsetting and there was like a lot of tears, but, I mean, I think that we kind of saw it coming that they hadn’t gotten together after years of separation. But, that
Christmas was weird because it was the first one apart, except my dad still come up. They wanted to remain like the tradition and it was good. We all opened up presents together and stuff.

As is evident from the aforementioned examples, although all of the ACD in this study were going through the “young adult transitional phase of life,” not all reported this as a reason that complicated how they dealt with the parental divorce. Ironically, some ACD cited being too busy with their own lives to let their parents’ divorce affect them, while others noted that this was a main reason why they had such a difficult time dealing with their parents’ divorce. Upon interpretation of these differences, it is hard to determine why some ACD were negatively affected by the parental divorce while others who were going through similar transitions in life reportedly were not affected initially. As will be explained in a later section, it is difficult to determine causation; however, if ACD experienced a combination of certain factors such as being put in the middle, having a strained relationship, etc., then they were more likely to report having been affected initially.

**ACD “Put in the Middle”**

One of the most common themes cited by previous research on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce (Lang and Pett 1992; Cooney, Hutchinson, and Leather 1995; and Pryor 1999) is that ACD are often “put in the middle” and asked to take sides with one parent over the other during the divorce. In addition, many ACD are asked to serve as the mediator, relaying information to each of the parents. Previous research has found that ACD report having a negative experience if they are “put in the middle,” putting a strain on the parent-child relationships and affecting their overall well-being.
One common finding is that the young adults quickly become overwhelmed with the stress and pressure of being put in such a position between their parents. I found similar results with my own research.

Right before they were getting divorced, my mom would always come down to my bedroom and vent to me. And then after that, she would still do the same thing. So I was kind of like the parent to the parent, sort of. . . I was always the strong one—that’s what she always referred to me as. My brothers would do the same thing. Like, whenever my parents would fight, I would take whatever siblings were home and we would just go for a ride, you know? So and then it just became all too much. (Tim)

[JL: What would you say was the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce?] Um, I would think it would be—just the manipulative portion of it where my mother would say things or where she would put me in awkward positions or ask me questions or—I don’t know. I just felt like I didn’t have a backbone. And I would just—initially I would just answer the questions and then I wouldn’t answer them. It was like torture. (Melissa)

I found she tended to use me to talk about her problems with my dad and I found that uncomfortable. . . Before she would always talk to me about, “Your dad did this and I think we’re going to do this.” She would talk about their relationship and I didn’t really want to know it.

[JL: Could I ask you to elaborate on that—give some examples to the extent that you feel comfortable? What kind of things did your mother talk to you about?] Well, she would say things like, “I argued with your dad about this.” And she would tell me about the argument even if I hadn’t been there. I didn’t really want to know about it. And then she would say, “I think me and your dad are going to split up and then I’m going to do this and that.” And, I wasn’t sure that I really wanted to know too much about it. (Charlotte)
Two Groups of ACD: “Affected Initially” and “Not Affected Initially”

Upon completing the first half of my 40 interviews, I realized that not all ACD have a negative overall experience with their parents’ divorce. Most of the previous studies emphasized the negative effect of a parental divorce on children, even if they are already adults at the time of the parental divorce. In contrast to these previous findings, many of the ACD in my sample were not negatively affected at all by their parents’ divorce. Some were quite relieved when they found out that their parents were divorcing. The adult children I interviewed all had unique stories about their initial reaction to their parents’ divorce; however, there were some patterns in regard to their overall initial experience of their parents’ divorce. The ACD were placed in either the “Affected Initially” group or the “Not Affected Initially” group based on how the ACD characterized their personal experiences. That is, as the researcher, I analyzed all of the case studies as a whole in order to disentangle the common themes while retaining the stories and characteristics unique to each individual.

In the next section of this chapter I go into great detail as to how the two groups had different initial reactions to their parents’ divorce. In particular, I highlight common experiences for the ACD in each group, emphasizing the fact that most of the ACD in the “Affected Initially” group reported having a strained parent-child relationship whereas the ACD in the “Not Affected Initially” group were less likely to have reported a strained parent-child relationship. This point is discussed in a later section of this chapter. I have chosen two case studies to demonstrate some of the general themes and experiences of the two categories of ACD which will be discussed at greater length throughout the chapter. The story of Sonya represents an ACD who struggled initially with her parents’
divorce; the story of Brenton is representative of those ACD who did not struggle initially with their parents’ divorce.

**Affected Initially**

Upon analysis of my data, I found that some ACD in my study reported having a difficult time dealing with their parents’ divorce. Those cases bolster the general conclusion of previous research, that ACD may be negatively affected by a parental divorce. However, the key difference between my findings and those from previous studies is that instead of a majority, only about one-half of the ACD in my sample struggled initially with their parents’ divorce. Those ACD who did struggle initially talked about how they had a “tough time” overall dealing with and accepting their parents’ divorce. Some ACD had to deal with strained financial resources, especially those who were still dependent upon their parents for college tuition. Others had such a tough time that they had to seek professional counseling for emotional and psychological problems such as depression. For some, their family relationships were strained as a result of the stress and tension associated with the parental divorce. In addition, another common factor among nearly all ACD in the group “Affected Initially” is that they were, in one way or another, “put in the middle” by their parents. As a result, they were burdened with a family problem that became both personal and problematic for them. The case study of Sonya is representative of many of the characteristics or themes that emerged from the stories of those ACD who struggled initially with their parents’ divorce.
Sonya

When Sonya found out her parents were divorcing during her sophomore year of college, she was not too surprised because her parents had lived in separate parts of the house for so long, leading separate lives and even dating other partners while still married. However, Sonya was very surprised how emotionally upset she became when the divorce was being processed:

So, it was no surprise to me when they finally decided to go ahead with the proceedings but the surprise to me was how it affected me. Like, I knew it was coming. I expected it. I even wanted it because I wanted them to be happy and obviously they weren’t happy together, but it was so strange that I was so saddened by it—to finally have it happen. We had gotten so used to our way of life—just mommy’s in this room; daddy’s in that room. Daddy eats at this time and mommy eats at this time. It had become a way of life. Even the fighting was like normal to us—it was commonplace. So when they finally started the divorce it was so strange. It was like, “Wow, this is really happening and this really hurts.” Just a lot of things ensued—a lot of dirty little secrets came out—again that my parents really over the years tried to keep from us and they tried to. . . . They involved us in a way that we should not have been involved. They were pitting each other against one another and trying to get us to take the others’ side. Like, my dad would come and say, “Oh your mother’s trying to take me to the cleaners; she’s trying to take everything I have; she wants half of my pension and all of this.” And sort of made my mother seem like a greedy person and then my mother said how they would be arguing out loud and saying these things—“Oh, you tried to rape me.” And all of these things that I never wanted to know about my parents. And obviously it changed the way I feel about both of them. But, I sort of resent both of them for doing that because regardless of how they treated each other, they were always good parents to me. And my relationship with my mother and my relationship with my father is different from their relationship with each other. So, I thought it should always be kept separately and I shouldn’t be involved in that. So, things that I thought I had no business knowing. . . And then their relationship—I think it put a lot of stress on everybody because my sisters were fighting a lot—me and my sisters were constantly fighting like we were strangers—not just like siblings fight. We were fighting like people in the street—like, “I hate you!” It was horrible.
Sonya was so affected by her parents’ divorce because her family is very close. She became very emotional, crying a few times, as she talked about how her parents stayed together for the “sake of the children” so that they could be raised by two parents.

And so like the reason that they got married was because of us and the reason that they—well, because of them—and the reason that they stayed married was because of me and my other sister because we came later. They just stayed married for us, you know?

The most challenging or difficult part of the parental divorce experience for Sonya was that she was put in the middle with her parents and had to learn very personal things about them.

[JL: What would you say was the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce?] Finding out all of those things that I shouldn’t have found out because it changed the way I feel about them. I didn’t know or maybe I didn’t wish to know that my dad was abusive or that he allegedly raped my mother. I didn’t want to know that my mother was sort of trying to squeeze every dollar out of my dad. I just didn’t care to know those things. So it changed the way I feel about them.

Sonya is still “caught in the middle” with her parents. For instance, her father still gives her an alimony check to give her mother and Sonya continues to serve as the mediator between her mother and father with issues such as this.

It (the divorce) was a long drawn-out thing because I think he wanted to give her $200,000 and she says, “No, after all these years of pain and suffering, you owe me more than that” so I think he’s paying alimony. I don’t know because every now and then he gives me a check and says, “Give this to your mother.” A hundred thousand dollars.

[JL: You are in charge of that?] Yeah. That’s the other thing. I’ve been the liaison between them—between anybody. Any information that needs to come from my dad to the rest of the family, he comes to me. He called me and said, “Tell your sister this or tell your mother that.” I’m the go-between now.
As an adult, Sonya realized she needed therapy because she was having a very difficult time dealing with this family transition. She sought professional counseling from her campus counseling center and explained that other ACD should do the same because it has helped her deal with the emotional strain that the dissolution of her parents’ marriage has put on her.

**General Negative Experience**

Those who were initially affected in a negative way had very unique stories. Some recounted stories of how their “whole life” seemed to have been ruined by their parents’ divorce. Others talked about more specific instances such as a strained parent-child relationship or an awkward family event such as a wedding. Some had a very difficult time dealing with their parents’ divorce if they were surprised by the news of the parental divorce. The following are stories demonstrating the struggles associated with the initial reactions of the ACD:

So I got a phonecall—it was a Sunday night—a regular Sunday night and it was, “Well, um, your mother and I have something we want to tell you” or “Your father and I have something we want to tell you.” “He’s moving out.” And this was the first we had heard of it at all. I mean, I totally got my doors blown off. It was pretty traumatic. It was very traumatic because I had been raised in a very family-centric household. You know, it was mother, father, children—you marry for the long term. My parents were married for thirty-three years. They were very much “The family is it. The family is all. You don’t throw away relationships. You work on relationships. You make them work”... And this is when my parents were in their mid-fifties. (Nicole)

Well I found out because my mother told me one night that my father was leaving her for a woman. This was at night and she was crying in the room alone and I asked her what the problem was and she said, “Oh your father is leaving me.” And I was shocked. I mean, I believed my mom because she was so upset, but at the same time, I didn’t know what was going on... I was just like—I don’t know—shocked, I guess. I mean, I
was definitely upset. I was like, “What the hell?!” My family had been pretty stable for my whole life and then all of a sudden that happened. So I didn’t really—it didn’t really register. I didn’t know what to think yet. . . Dealing with it now is—I have—I’m still—I have issues with my father because I don’t talk to him too much. . . I think he thinks now that we’re adults, we can deal with it and—which he said—the reason he didn’t do anything—the reason he stayed the ten years in that marriage was because he didn’t want anything to happen—he wanted to wait until my sister and I—he thought—were grown up and could handle it. (Josephine)

Even for those ACD who were not surprised at the news, many still struggled initially during their young adulthood in different ways. Family holidays were altered, with ACD having to “split” the holidays with both parents. In addition, other family rituals such as weddings or graduations became a source of tension when both parents were expected to participate. The following is an example of one ACD who could not even enjoy his own wedding day completely since he married after his parents had separated:

[JL: What do you feel was or still is the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce/separation?]

It’s my mom’s inability to deal with him (his father). Like my wedding was just—I didn’t want to get married and a lot of it had to do with—I didn’t want to deal with that day. . . It was nice and I had a good time. But there was a lot of being like I don’t want these people in the same place. My mom’s a nightmare. My mom’s a selfish, selfish person. . . and just the tension of having to deal with the fact that she has—it all being about her: “I have to be in the same place with your father” . . . But then again, I am my father’s son where I am worried about everybody but me. You know everyone’s like, “It’s your day.” I’m like, “That’s bullshit! It’s everybody’s day. Let’s be honest. This is my father’s day. This is my father’s son getting married. This is my mother’s son. This is their thing too, you know?” (Jim)

**Emotionally or Psychologically Affected**

Much like previous research on ACD (Cooney and Kurz 1996; Cooney et al. 1986), a common finding among those initially affected by their parents’ divorce was that
they were affected emotionally, often citing depression or high stress levels. In particular, Cooney et al. (1986) found that the prevalence of emotional problems such as depression was high for both male and female ACD when compared to young adults whose parents were still married; however; they found that the rate was higher for women, especially during the initial stages of the divorce.

In the current study, many of the ACD reported having struggled emotionally during the course of the parental divorce. Whereas previous research (Cooney and Kurz 1996; Cooney et al. 1986) notes a higher prevalence of emotional problems among women, this sample is too small to make gender differentiations, even though there were both men and women who reported emotional or psychological distress from the parental divorce situation. Some of these individuals had sought professional counseling, while others just tried to get on with their lives.

Tim was in college and doing well when his parents had divorced. He was not surprised by the divorce because there was always a lot of fighting between his parents. But, as Tim admits, he struggled with the break-up of his family. He became involved in drugs as a way to deal with his negative feelings related to his parents’ divorce. It was not long after that he ended up dropping out of school, completely consumed by a drug problem. After an attempted suicide, Tim realized he needed to help himself and he picked up and left his home state in the West and moved to the East Coast to start a new life. When asked to talk about how his moving to Albany was related to his parents’ divorce, he explained:

Ah, what happened? Well, I’m the type of person who tries to take too much upon myself and try to solve everyone’s problems. So in the process of doing all that, I sort of lost my own goals and priorities. . . . I started school and I loved it, you know? And I had financial aid of course.
But then it got to the point where I only went to school to get financial aid to have a little extra cash to help at home. And so then it just kind of flipped. My priorities—I don’t know how to explain it... I was working two jobs... And then the drugs got worse... I got really bad into drugs. That’s why I didn’t finish school yet. But, so I just needed to get away from everyone and everything. That’s why I’m here. I slit my wrists on July 3rd. I have scars. See them?

Similarly, Hope was very upset and depressed during the time of her parents’ divorce and for a few years after.

I had just moved... to [place] early September... So I had just started this new and incredibly romantic relationship and was kind of on a high from that and the news of the divorce was such a—it was a shock. And I’ll be blunt about it. I was depressed. It’s kind of silly to talk about my own reaction, but as a thirty year old, I was very depressed. I actually was in shock for quite a while and to be honest—the next summer... I ended up seeing a therapist... Yeah, I was depressed. I was the oldest child—I am the oldest child. And I think I had that fantasy of at one point—whether it was real or not—but mom and dad should be together. I’m sure as awful as it was—I didn’t want mom and dad to split—even though I was a thirty-year-old woman and I could obviously take care of myself.

Donald was not surprised because he wanted his parents to divorce for a long time, but he is still struggling from his parents’ divorce. At the time of the interview, he was on medical leave from university for depression, related to family issues.

[JL: In conclusion, how do you think that your parents’ divorce has impacted your life in general, if at all?]

Well, I’ve been thinking about this a lot more recently and this has to do with why I’m taking a break from school. I think that some of those things that happened in the past—I kind of—at the time, you deal with them. And then as you grow and you get older, it’s kind of like you re-deal with them sort of, like re-evaluate it.

[JL: So right now you’re in a process of re-evaluating your relationships with your family and what happened?]

Yeah everything. My life in general... I’m on break from school. I’m on medical leave for depression. What I’m finding is that that’s not the problem necessarily. It’s that I’m re-evaluating all these things.
Similarly, Ben was away at college when his parents divorced, but he was not surprised because there was always a lot of fighting between his parents. He explains:

I was away at school. I have to say it did affect me at times—you know, dealing with a lot of what my parents were telling me. I was in a relationship at the time for over a year and a half. We [the family] had been happy, but at the same time, my parents always had some major problems between each other and major problems with me and my sister.

Ben had an especially tough time dealing with his parents’ divorce and sought help from the campus counseling center to help him get through the rest of the semester.

Well as far as when I was still at school having to deal with finals—I was basically taking Tylenol PM to sleep and just sleep it all off pretty much and just study when I can. I still came out with decent-enough grades—over 3.0. That’s when I started seeking the counseling center and then I used their resources. He [the counselor] wrote me some notes to get me—to help me out with some of the assignments I had missed because of everything that was going on and they helped me through.

**Relationship with Siblings Affected**

Since a parental divorce is a family affair, all members of the family are involved in one way or another. In addition to the parent-child relationships potentially being affected, so too are sibling relationships, especially if siblings take sides with different parents. There have been no previous studies that have specifically looked at how sibling relationships are affected (if at all) by a mid to late life parental divorce. In this study, I asked the ACD to talk about their sibling relationships before, during, and after the parental divorce, in an attempt to see if their sibling relationships were affected. There were some ACD in this study whose sibling relationships were affected negatively by their parents’ divorce. Although Kathryn was never especially close with her brother, out of all of her siblings, she says that her relationship with her younger brother has changed
the most since their parents’ divorce because he is set on his parents getting back together
even though they have divorced. When asked to discuss how her siblings took sides
during their parents’ divorce, Kathryn explained their situation:

[Did your relationship with your brother change at all since the time of
the divorce?]

Yes. Because he thinks they should be together. He even said it at
Christmas. He goes, “Next year, we’re having Christmas on Christmas
Eve. We’re gonna have it at mom’s house and dad’s going to be there.”
I’m like “Alright. Will you please go for counseling?”

Similar to Kathryn’s experience, the parental divorce was a divisive factor with
their sibling relationships. According to Sonya, her relationships are not the same with
her three sisters since their parents’ divorce. This change was obviously very upsetting to
Sonya as she broke out in tears while discussing how hard the divorce has been on her
and her family.

Obviously there’s been a wedge between me and my sisters. I mean, it’s
sort of healing over now, but it’s definitely not the same, you know—our
relationship. We can’t talk the way we used to, you know? We can all get
into a room together and laugh and joke and talk about old times, but I
don’t feel as close to them as I would like to or that I used to. I think I’ve
just learned to put things in perspective.

Although there were individuals whose sibling relationships were negatively
affected by their parents’ divorce, there were many who reported that their relationships
were unaffected or had even strengthened over time, since they had gotten older. In
chapter six, I provide evidence of sibling relationships that were and were not affected by
the parental divorce. In addition, I offer explanations for the difference and also discuss
the evolution of sibling relationships in general based on the findings from this research.
Relationship with Parents Negatively Affected

There is a vast amount of evidence supporting the idea that a parental divorce during childhood negatively affects the parent-child relationship (Booth and Amato 1994). Many of the previous studies have looked at how the parent-child relationship is affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Most of the studies (Lang and Pett 1992; Cooney 1994; Booth and Amato 1994; Bonkowski 1989) conclude that parental divorce causes strain in the parent-child relationship, although the father-child bond is the most affected. In addition, the mother-daughter bond has been found to be the most resilient, a finding that has been consistent in the intergenerational relationship literature (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Connidis 2001). A few studies found that the parent-child relationships actually became closer after the parental divorce. Arditti (1999) found that the mother-child relationship tended to evolve in a positive way as the mother became more of a friend to her children. In addition, Cooney et al. (1986) noted that ACD reported positive changes in their parent-child relationships following the divorce such as increased communication, a greater understanding and mutual respect, and a relaxation of parent-child roles as they became more “equal.”

I found similar results, but I have taken the analysis a step further than previous research. Only about one-half of the ACD in this study reported having a strained relationship with their parent(s) following the divorce. In an early attempt to understand why some ACD struggled with their parents’ divorce while others did not, I was having a difficult time explaining this difference. However, after much additional analysis and thought, I realized that whether or not the parent-child relationship was strained was a major difference between the two groups “Affected Initially” and “Not Affected
Initially.” That is, nearly all of the ACD who reported being negatively affected initially by their parents’ divorce also reported a strained relationship with one or both parents during the course of the parental divorce. On the other hand, nearly all of the ACD who reported that they did not have a difficult time with their parents’ divorce did not report that a parent-child relationship was negatively affected. This finding builds upon previous research that concludes that the parent-child relationship is negatively affected by a parental divorce.

There were many different reasons, as reported by the ACD, that the parent-child relationships became strained during or after the parental divorce including anger and resentment toward one parent, especially if the ACD felt that the mother or the father was to blame for the divorce (extramarital affair). Other reasons include spillover from the stress of the divorce into the parent-child relationships. For some ACD, they were constantly being “put in the middle” or forced to take sides by their parents, resulting in a strained relationship. Some of the young adults I interviewed experienced a period of not speaking to a parent for months or years at a time as a result of the strained relationship. These findings are consistent with previous research (Lang and Pett 1992; Bonkowski 1989). I provide brief examples of each of the different reasons below as a preview of the following chapter on parent-child relationships.

Melissa initially had a very tough time dealing with her parents’ divorce. Part of the reason is that she was very angry at her mother for having an extramarital affair. Melissa was still living at home when the divorce was in process and was very involved in her parents’ divorce and was put in the middle quite often. Despite the fact that
Melissa was struggling with her parents’ break-up, her parents responded to her quite differently. She explains how her mother disregarded her emotions at the initial time:

So when I was twenty-one or so, my dad ended up moving out and the lawyer said it was okay…She would just say, “You need to deal with this. You’re an adult. Get over it. This is your father’s and my life. You’re twenty-one. You’re in your own life. This should not impact you.”—and it did. . .And I did go to a counselor and speak to them. My father encouraged it actually.

Another reason that the parent-child relationship was negatively affected is if the parents’ behavior had changed due to the stress of the divorce. For example, although Jennifer was out of the house by the time her parents divorced, her father initially blamed her for the divorce. Jennifer and her father did not speak for one year. Now she and her father are best friends, after her father called her and reconciled their relationship.

We had a really tough time—he and I. Because he was trying to figure out what happened and he started to blame me. He was like, “Oh, you were too expensive. You didn’t pay for your own car. You didn’t pay for your own insurance. We had to pay for school. It’s your fault.” And we had this big huge blow-out. And I know part of it was because he was drinking and he doesn’t drink. He wasn’t drinking heavily. Like, he didn’t turn into an alcoholic, but he—I don’t know. . . And I didn’t talk to him for a year. I wouldn’t speak to him until he apologized because he blamed it on me. And I was like, “Your problem and her problem isn’t mine. It’s not my fault. All you guys had to do was say, ‘Can you help pay for this? Can you help pay for that?’” I had a job. “I’ll pay for whatever you want me to pay for”, but you both just said, “No. Keep your money. Save it for school. So don’t blame me.” Don’t blame me because she cheated on you and because she didn’t like you because you’re not smart enough and you’re not making enough money and you’re just not good enough for her. It’s not my fault.

Similarly, the stress from Kathryn’s parents’ conflicted relationship spilled over into her relationships with her parents since she was often “put in the middle” by her parents and asked to serve as a mediator between the two of them. This role of being “put in the middle” was cited by the ACD in this sample as a main reason their parent-
child relationships were strained during the parental divorce. Kathryn was often put in the position of mediator between her parents, a role she had assumed even during childhood and adolescence. Even though Kathryn was surprised that her parents went through with the actual legal divorce, she was not completely immune to their discontent in the marriage. When Kathryn was in college, her sisters would often call her and ask her to come home to serve as the mediator between their parents. As a young adult trying to complete college, Kathryn was often overwhelmed at times and even sought counseling while at college.

I was always the mediator. Always! The big band-aid—which we now know is not healthy because I went for counseling I think right around the time when they were separating. I went for counseling because my role—I mean I would come home every weekend from [name of college]. . . because my sister would call me and say, “If you don’t come home, they’re going to get a divorce. If you don’t come home, they’re not going to be together much longer.” So I would come home. I would mediate the whole weekend and then I would go back to school.

[JL: So this has been going on for a while?]  
Years. . . If we had to go somewhere and they got into a fight, my dad would say, “I’m not going.” My mom would be out in the car with the kids, “I’m not going.” So I would go inside, “Come on dad. Come on. We want you to go. Please go. Come on.” I’d talk him out of it.

[JL: What age did that start at?]  
Thirteen, fourteen—when I was old enough to articulate what I wanted to say.

[JL: How many years did your parents turn to you for emotional and social support? How long did that go on?]  
It still goes on now—not as bad, but yeah. It’s always, “Call Kathryn.” My husband said, “You gotta start billing by the hour.”

Another common pattern among those ACD whose parent-child relationships were negatively affected is that they often discussed a period of time where they were not
speaking to their parent as a result of this strained relationship. Brittany explained that even though she was hurt by her father’s action, she was emotionally distressed during the period of time where they were not speaking:

It [the relationship] went downhill initially, but then it came back up because I had not talked to him for two or three years at a time and it was like the year before I got married. I think it was two years I didn’t talk to him. . . It was immediately following his marriage that I didn’t talk to him. For two years and that hurt because it was like—when you idolize your father, that is not what you want to happen and it was one day. This used to eat at me left and right. I used to have—I wouldn’t eat. I just was not a very upbeat person.

At the time of the interview, Brittany was speaking to her father again and currently described their relationship in very positive terms. In this study, I found that those ACD who went for a period of time without speaking to a parent often resolved the issues and had mended their relationship. For others who recently experienced a parental divorce, they were less likely to have mended the strained relationship. I discuss this finding in greater detail in the following chapter. While it is not the intent of this current study to make any causal connection between having a strained parent-relationship and one’s initial reaction to the parental divorce, it is of importance to note this pattern. This point will be elaborated on in the following chapter.

A point of divergence from previous studies that have looked at the parent-child relationships in the aftermath of a mid to late life parental divorce is that I take the analysis further than merely stating that the parent-child relationship is affected; I look at how it is affected and I discuss how it changes over time. These points are elaborated on in much greater detail in the following chapter. I will provide further examples of how the parent-child relationship was affected by the parental divorce as well offer an
explanation as to why some relationships were affected while others were not in the next chapter.

In addition to the aforementioned examples of how the lives of ACD are initially affected in a negative way, the common denominator of nearly all of the ACD who expressed being “affected initially” by their parents’ divorce is that they reported a strain in their relationship with either their mother, father, or both parents during the process of the parental divorce. There were various reasons cited for the strain in the parent-child relationship including the following factors: ACD blaming one parent for “wronging” the other; spillover from the conflicted parents’ relationship; and the ACD being “put in the middle” by the parents or being asked to take sides. Upon analysis of the themes and patterns of the experiences of the ACD in the two groups, nearly all of the ACD in the “Affected Initially” group were those who reported having a strained relationship with one or both parents during the divorce. In contrast, those ACD not reporting a strained parent-child relationship were the ones placed in the “Not Affected Initially” group. I now turn to a discussion of the experiences of those ACD who were not affected initially by their parents’ divorce.

_Not Affected Initially_

Since I based my research questions on the findings from the existing literature on the topic, an unexpected finding was that many of the individuals in my study were relatively unaffected by their parents’ divorce. Many of them were very nonchalant when discussing the process of their parents’ divorce and how it unfolded. Some of the ACD described the experience as something that simply “happened” in their lives, emphasizing the fact that they were unaffected by the dissolution of their parents’ marriage. Others
were relatively unaffected, busy with their own transitional young adult lives. For others who had seen their parents fight constantly while growing up, they viewed their parents’ divorce as a relief, with some expressing great happiness for their parents. The story of Brenton is representative of many of the experiences of the ACD who did not struggle initially with their parents’ divorce.

**Brenton**

Brenton was in college when his parents divorced but he explains that he can understand why they decided to divorce. Since Brenton’s parents did not fight a lot, Brenton was surprised, but was not bothered too much by the new family transition. As a young adult, Brenton was mature enough to realize that the divorce was a good thing for his family and has not let the experience get in the way of his own life.

My parents actually got divorced my senior year of high school when I was—I was eighteen for about maybe a half a year. And it happened right at the end of the year. And shortly thereafter I went to [country name] and it was kind of like my mom moved out right when I got back from [country name]—actually while I was there. So I came back to a house where my mom was actually gone. So she like moved into an apartment and actually, it sounds worse than it is because my parents—when they first told us initially about their breaking up and getting a divorce—it wasn’t like—it was kind of like they were still friends about it and they just said they’re not in love anymore. I really—maybe subconsciously it’s affecting me more than I think it has, but it hasn’t—I mean, my life’s obviously changed, but it wasn’t like “Oh, I’m totally messed up.” I’m glad both of them did that because they’re both happier now. My dad’s remarried and my mom has a house in [place name] and she’s dated a few guys and stuff but I’m happy for them. And I’m happy that it happened in my life because I believe in things like—you know, what’s meant to be—or whatever.

[JL: I want to ask you now to talk about what was going on in your life when you first found out your parents were divorcing. Were you surprised? What was your reaction?]
Oh, I remember it. I don’t have a great memory. But I remember when it happened. They brought us downstairs to our living room—my brother and I—and they sat us down and they said, “We have something to tell you.” And I’m a worry-wart, so I got really nervous obviously. They said, “Your mother and I are going to get separated. I mean, we’re just not happy together. It’s not like we hate each other. We’re still gonna be friends.” Of course the disclaimer always was, “We might get back together.” But, that’s for someone that’s naïve. We kind of took it well. I wasn’t like—not saying if you cry, you’re a baby, but like I didn’t cry. I was like, “Alright, if you guys want to do that, then” And I was—like I said, I was eighteen and I was a senior in high school. It was the end of the—I was like, “I’m going to college next year.” I was like if this happened five years prior, maybe it would hit me a lot harder. But I was kind of like a grown-up then. And my brother was in college already, so he took it—I guess—even easier. And then I said like—that was April or May of 2003—and I went to [country name] for three weeks like I said in July and my mom was moved out when I came back. So she stayed in the house for about two months or three months and when I came back she was gone.

Many of the previous studies (Cooney 1988; Cain 1989; Campbell 1995) on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children used college-based samples and found that ACD were negatively affected since it was during this transitional phase of college life that made the experience so negative. However, for Brenton and other ACD, since they were so busy with their college lives, it made the experience a bit easier. Contrary to previous studies (Cooney 1986; 1988; Campbell 1995), I found that being in college could serve as an important factor that helped distract the ACD from being negatively affected by their parents’ divorce.

[JL: So you already had plans to go to college?]

Yeah. I was just kind of like, “This is just a bump in the road. It’s not really—I’m moving out of the house and I knew I wasn’t going to be home that much anyways.” The timing was actually really good.

Well, I always thought—I mean, it’s kind of funny because, like I said, I was a worry-wart. So whenever they would get in a fight, I’d be like, “Oh mommy, are you getting a divorce?” And it’s kind of ironic that I said that when I was five and ten and probably even fifteen. But, like I always
thought they had a good—like it was normal to me because I didn’t know what other parents were like. But I guess now seeing it and in hindsight, or whatever the term is—that it wasn’t like—some normal parents—they didn’t flirt as much so. I mean, on anniversaries, they would kiss each other though and I’d think “Oh, everything is fine.” I guess I didn’t really see it because they didn’t want me to see it—or my brother. So, I guess I kind of expected it because they did kind of get in fights sometimes, but it wasn’t like anything—every day kind of fighting. I guess they kind of just fell out of love—which I can understand. It made sense to me—so that’s why I guess it wasn’t such an initial “Oh my gosh. I can’t deal with this-kind-of-thing.”

[JL: So you weren’t shocked?]

No, I wasn’t shocked. I was like—oh, my heart dropped. But, it made sense. I was fine with it.

Brenton explained that since he already had plans to go to college, he didn’t let his parents’ situation get in his way. When asked about the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce either initially or currently, he replied:

Hm. That’s hard. I wouldn’t say now because I’m so used to it now. It’s like I can’t imagine living with my mom or my dad because I don’t live with either, but--- I’d say like maybe—See the thing is—it’s kind of like it was overshadowed because I was in college. I was going to college right after they got a divorce. And when I came home from vacation, my mom was already moved out of the house. And I was going to be out of the house a month later. So even when I came back to visit in Thanksgiving after my first semester started, it’s like—I already had it in my head for three months that my mom was gone. And it wasn’t really that big of a difference because I was facing so many changes at college—you know—being a freshman at college—and it kind of overshadowed it and it kind of happened so fast that I didn’t even stop and think about it—like how weird this is.

[JL: So you wouldn’t necessarily say it was challenging at all?]

Yeah, I don’t really think it was challenging at all. I mean, it sounds kind of bad to say, but...
Many of the ACD I interviewed had similar experiences to Brenton. The common factor among all of the ACD stories that follow is that they did not have a hard time dealing with their parents’ divorce. Regardless of whether or not they were surprised by the news of the divorce and despite their age at the time of the parental divorce, all of the stories that follow are those of individuals who viewed their parents’ divorce as something that “just happened” in their lives. Some of the following ACD talked about how they were too busy with their own adult lives, whether or not they were in college, to be bothered by their parents’ divorce. For others, their parents had separated for some time prior to the official legal divorce, which had in a sense prepared the ACD for the ramifications of the divorce itself, smoothing the transition. Others had seen their parents fight for most of their childhood and adolescence, so for these individuals they were often happy or relieved when they finally decided to divorce. In addition, some ACD discussed how they could see that their parents were incompatible and didn’t get along; thus the ACD were supportive of the divorce. Most importantly, the ACD in this group did not report that their relationship with their mother or father was negatively affected by the parental divorce. This is an important distinction between the two groups: those initially affected negatively and those not affected initially. I now discuss some of the common themes as expressed by the ACD in the group “Not Affected Initially.”

**ACD Too Busy With Their Own Lives to Let Parental Divorce Affect Them**

Based on the findings from previous research (Lang and Pett 1992; Cooney et al. 1986), I anticipated that most ACD would feel overwhelmed or stressed by their parents’
divorce at a time when they are very busy transitioning to adulthood; however this was not the case. Like Brenton, many ACD explained that they were not affected that much by her parents’ divorce because they were very busy with school, work, or their own young adult lives. As indicated in the literature, young adulthood is a transitional stage of life for most individuals as they are establishing independency, pursuing educational degrees, starting a career, or starting a family. Previous research (Cooney 1988; Cain 1989; Lang and Pett 1992) has used this factor—the transition to adulthood—as an explanation as to why a mid to late life parental divorce is such a negative, traumatizing event in the life of a young adult. Cooney (1988) argues that a mid to late life parental divorce may negatively affect the adult children, as they are turned to for social and emotional support by their parents at a time when they cannot provide it since this is a very transitional stage in their lives. While some ACD attributed their initial negative experience of their parents’ divorce to the fact that they were so busy with their own lives (whether they were working, in college, or raising a family), just as many ACD used this factor as a reason they were not initially affected negatively. The following are examples of this group of ACD:

Well, I was living only in [place name] and I had a job and I was going to school. I was working full-time and had school part-time, so I was crazy busy anyway so that might have been part of it too.

[JL: Do you think that was your way of dealing with it? You mentioned you stayed away as much as possible. Was that intentional?]

I think so. I mean, looking back on it now, I mean, I don’t know. It just happened. I was really busy anyway, so it might have just happened naturally anyway. (Rachel)

That [the time of parents’ divorce] was also my senior year, so I had like—I was worried about going away to college and so it was really on the back burner.
[JL: So you didn’t let it distract you?]

No, it didn’t really affect me that much.

[JL: Now do you feel like your life has changed at all since your parents’ divorce?]

Not that much. I’m sure it would have continued the same way. Like I said, it’s just—like over the summer it’s different ‘cause you don’t do like family stuff anymore. But, I’m older now too, so I would be doing my own thing anyways, so.  (Lance)

**Parents Had Been Separated Prior to Divorce**

Another factor that was mentioned by individuals in this group included the fact that some of the parents had realized that they simply could not live together so they chose to separate prior to completing the final paperwork. Previous research has not given much attention to the factor of whether or not the parents had separated prior to the divorce. In my study, I specifically asked about the stages of their parents’ relationship before and after the divorce. For many ACD, a parental separation helped ease the transition to the separate lives of their mother and father so that when it came time for family events and holidays, for instance, things had become normalized. As an example, Charlotte was not negatively affected because her parents had been separated for a while and she had gotten used to her parents leading separate lives.

Okay, well, I guess my situation is a little different because my parents were separated for a couple of years before they officially divorced. They had not been. . . they had been living together, but they had not been staying in the same bedroom for maybe a year or so…But, what I mean, is we already knew they were separating for a long time. It wasn’t a shock to any of us. They did tell us, “Oh, we’re officially divorcing.” And we were like, “Well, yeah.” My brother and I were not surprised or particularly phased because we could see that it was coming.
[JL: Now, you mentioned that your reaction upon first hearing about your parents’ divorce—you weren’t surprised?]

No, in fact, I would probably say that I was relieved more than anything because it seemed like they were forced to live under the same roof and they didn’t really want to be and, you know, we were all old enough to see what was happening.

Similarly, Nicholas was not affected much because his parents were separated for so long:

No, I wasn’t surprised. He (his father) always complained to me about it (situation of dating while still married). He’d say that he’d tell this girl that he was still married and she’d complain about it and then—so I’m sure that was one of the reasons he wanted to get divorced.

[JL: All in all, how do you think that your parents’ divorcing has impacted your own life?]

It really didn’t impact it that much because it’s been about the same, even before they divorced. Nothing’s really changed.

Similar to the experiences of Nicholas and Charlotte, Jessica’s parents had separated for six years before they finally decided to proceed with the legal divorce. Since her parents’ had been separated already, she was not surprised and didn’t have a hard time dealing with the divorce either.

I wasn’t really surprised at all because they had been living apart for six years. So, I really wasn’t surprised and I don’t know. It didn’t really affect me so much, I think, because they had already been living apart for so long and I always kind of—like I never viewed it as “my parents” it was like “my mom” and “my dad”. I always viewed them as kind of separate for a while.

[JL: In conclusion, how do you think that your parents’ divorce has impacted your life?]

Honestly not too much, because they had been apart for so long. It just kind of maybe gave closure to the whole situation. We never knew if they were ever going to move back in together. Now, we know they’re not and it’s kind of like over. I mean, it’s a little sad because you wish they could have worked it out.
Cole recounted his memory of when his mother called him up while he was away at college and told him the news:

She basically called me up and said, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but we’re getting a divorce.” I said, “Okay.” It really had been a long time in the works and we saw it coming… At the time—I mean, it sounds horrible, but at the time it really didn’t affect me.

[JL: What did not affect you?]

My parents’ divorce—because I had just—I had been seeing it coming for—so many—my mother sat me down when I was eleven or twelve and came out and said, “We’re really only together for you kids.”

Lance was kind of surprised when his parents told him of their decision to divorce, but the transition was eased by the fact that his father moved to the basement during the separation, so the actual divorce per se was not a big surprise. Lance explains that he was not too bothered by their divorced because he was a senior at the time and was focused on graduating high school and getting ready to go to college. He describes his own experience:

[JL: And what was your reaction when you found out your dad was moving to the basement?]

I mean, I’m sure I was upset. Like I wasn’t—I wasn’t like crushed—no one was like dying, I guess. I mean it’s upsetting because now you don’t—I don’t know. We don’t go on vacations anymore. I mean, that was always a good part, but I mean, overall—to me, it wasn’t the biggest disappointment.

**Fighting/Abuse. . . Parental Divorce Seen as a Relief by ACD**

An original theme that arose in this study is that some ACD expressed relief when they found out about their parents’ divorce. Previous research emphasizes the idea that a mid to late life parental divorce is an unexpected event and sometimes shocking to young
adults. While I found similar results with the ACD in the current study, for some adult children of divorce, they saw their parents fighting so much that they often wished they would divorce. Zack was not affected that much because he wanted his parents to divorce a long time ago because his father was so abusive to his mother as well as to Zack and his brother.

Yes. I wanted them to divorce when I was like eighteen years old. I wanted my mother to have more—a better life.

[JL: And what did you say to your mom when you found out?]

I said, “It’s about time.” Because every time I said something about it to her, she told me to mind my business. And she said, “This has nothing to do with you. This is between me and your father.” I said, “What do you mean it has nothing to do with me?” Yes it did! I said, “It had a lot to do with me and [sibling name] and [sibling name]—all three of us had to sit there and watch all of this crap go on every day of our lives. I mean, it’s ridiculous! You’re going to tell me it don’t have anything to do with me? Yes it does! You are my mother and he is my father and you all brought your relationship into our lives.” If we didn’t know what was going on, that’s different. But we knew what was going on from day one.

Zack explained that since he was in his early 30s when his parents divorced and was living on his own at the time, he believes this was a main reason why he was not affected much when his parents split up.

[JL: Who told you about your parents finally divorcing?]

Well, I already knew. I was in on in from the beginning. See they were separated, but they actually divorced when I was like about thirty—as soon as I got up to [place name]. I was in my early thirties. . . But I was living out on my own. I wasn’t really around the family that much.

Similarly, Molly was not surprised as she had been pushing for her mother to divorce her father because he was an alcoholic and an abusive father and husband for as long as she could remember. When asked to describe her initial reaction, Molly explains how she and her brother were both relieved and happy at the news:
My initial reaction? I was happy about it. I was pushing for it since I was very small—very small. My brother and I both wanted them to be divorced forever and always. He didn’t contribute anything positive to the family. He was an abusive alcoholic. He needed to go. And nobody took him seriously as a father. I don’t think my mother took him seriously. I mean how could she him that seriously as a husband? You know, he wasn’t part of “us.” At first she left him maybe a year before and my brother and I—I remember she told us at Friendly’s and my brother and I were kicking each other under the table! We were so happy—finally!

Jocelyn was quite relieved when she found out her mother had filed for divorce.

She had wanted her parents to divorce for a long time because her father was so abusive.

So what I can remember was—in my mind when my mom said that dad finally left—I hate to say it but I was happy. I was really happy for her because she went through hell with him. And no one deserves to go through hell... mental, verbal... the physical... I didn’t think my mom deserved.

As these stories demonstrate, many of the ACD looked at their parents’ divorce as a “relief” rather than a family crisis. For these ACD, they had seen the marital conflict between their parents while growing up and realized that perhaps a divorce was not such a bad idea. In this respect, the ACD had often become hopeful that their parents would divorce.

**ACD Viewed Parents as “Incompatible”**

Another reason that some of the ACD in this study did not struggle initially with the parental divorce is the fact that some were able to understand the reasons underlying their parents’ divorce. This finding was not discussed in previous research. It seems that since the ACD were at an age where they themselves were in relationships and at a mature intellectual and emotional age, they were able to put themselves in their parents’ positions and to better understand their reasons for wanting to divorce. Unlike the other
adult children of divorce, Luke had left home at the age of seventeen to join a rock band and went for three years before making it back to his home state to visit them. He would call home every couple of months to check in with his parents, but it was not until his actual visit when he found out his parents had divorced and his mother had moved to another state. Although he was surprised by the news, he kind of saw it coming because his parents did not appear to be that close when he left at the age of seventeen. In the long run he was not that affected because he was busy touring with his bands and was never really that close with either of his parents. He explains how he heard the news from his father:

Then when I came back to visit that’s when he told me. He was like, “She left me.” I was like, “What?!”

[JL: So you went home to see your folks and your dad was the one that told you?]

Yeah. My mom wasn’t there.

[JL: So your mom had moved out?]

Yeah. She moved down to, I believe, [state name] and my dad never told me. He just kept it a secret for a while.

[JL: So did you discuss it with your dad?]

I kind of told him I kind of thought something was going on. I said, “You could have just told me. I would have been fine with it.” And then I’d been on my own for two years at that time, so it didn’t really matter. I kind of grew up quick, sort of.

Although Sal’s parents did not officially separate prior to divorcing, Sal was not surprised when they told him they were divorcing because he explains that they did not have a lot in common anyhow and did not seem compatible anymore.

Yeah I was kind of surprised. I mean, I wasn’t that surprised because my parents don’t really have a lot in common. They never did activities
together. They never spent a lot of time in the same room. Like my father had his little tv programs and he worked full-time. And my mom worked part-time and she had her—she has many hobbies and things. And she has her own television programs that she watches.

[JL: So they didn’t do a lot of things together?]

No. We had family vacations, but like week to week, day to day, my mother would always be like, “Hey, let’s go out and see a concert.” And my dad was never into that. He just didn’t like that. My mom was into sort of the finer things in life. We went out to a restaurant once in a while. My father was much more—just a lot more conservative on money and spending.

Ironically, Sal’s parents get along very well since the divorce and often share meals together, especially when Sal (an only child) comes into town for the weekend. Since his parents’ divorce was a mutual agreement and involved not much more than finding separate living arrangements and filling out paperwork, the transition has been relatively easy for Sal.

As is evident from the previous section, the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on ACD are not always negative, as reported by the ACD in this sample. There were many factors that played an important role in explaining why some ACD did not have a difficult time with their parents’ divorce. Important factors characteristic of this group of ACD include the fact that their parents separated prior to the divorce; their parents had a history of fighting, so the divorce was seen as a relief; or their parents were viewed by the ACD as being incompatible.

**Conclusion**

Upon analysis of all of the ACD’s stories, the adult children fell into one of two categories: 1.) those initially having a negative experience associated with their parents’
divorce or 2.) those not initially being affected (negatively) by their parents’ divorce. Experiencing a strained parent-child relationship during the time of the parental divorce was the most common factor reported by the ACD in the “Affected Initially” group. That is, ACD who reported that their relationship with their mother or father (or both) was strained around the time of the parental divorce, were the individuals who also discussed struggling initially in one way or another during their parents’ divorce. In contrast, the ACD who reported that their relationships with their parents were not affected by the parental divorce did not report struggling initially during their parents’ divorce or afterwards. Thus, my interpretation of this key difference between the two groups of ACD is that the parent-child relationship is very important. Based on the findings from this sample, it seems as though a mid to late life parental divorce has the potential to influence the parent-child relationship in many ways. I believe that this factor has important clinical and future research implications, a point that will be addressed in the following chapter as well as the concluding chapter.

Although there are thematic differences between the ACD in the two groups, explaining why these differences exist is a daunting task. While it is tempting to argue that certain aspects such as being “put in the middle” or taking sides cause a strained parent-child or adult sibling relationship, which in turn might make it more likely for the ACD to report being negatively affected, I am unable to make such causal conclusions. More specifically, I am unable to determine whether or not the “unhealthy” family dynamics such as putting the ACD “in the middle,” strained sibling and parent-child relationships, taking sides, periods of not speaking with family members, psychological and emotional issues, etc. cause ACD to be negatively affected by the parental divorce.
For instance, it is plausible that a strained parent-child relationship prior to the parental divorce influenced the ways in which the ACD reportedly was affected. Since I cannot place these aspects of unhealthy dynamics in any kind of causal order, it would be erroneous to make such conclusions. Nonetheless, it is important to talk about all of these aspects as being interconnected; that is, when these ACD experience any combination of the aforementioned unhealthy family dynamics, then it is more likely that they report being initially affected by the parental divorce.

Although the experiences of the ACD who struggled initially with their parents’ divorce are congruent with the findings from previous studies on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce (Cooney et al. 1986; Cooney 1988; Lang and Pett 1992), my findings differ in important ways. First, prior research on this topic has focused on more overall patterns associated with a mid to late life parental divorce, whereas my study is an attempt to build upon existing research. Specifically, a focus of this research was to understand how and in what ways family relationships are affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Previous studies provide evidence that the parent-child relationship is negatively affected; my research looks at the evolution of the parent-child relationship during the course of the parental divorce, in an attempt to understand why the relationships changed at the time that they did. Also, the impact of a parental divorce on sibling relationships is looked at in the study; this has not been studied previously. Second, based on these previous studies, one would assume that the majority of ACD struggle initially with a parental divorce. While it is true that some of the ACD in my study experienced the common themes of emotional/psychological distress, strained parent-child relationships, or being “put in the middle” and serving as a mediator, only
about one-half reported a negative initial experience. The key point of my findings is that experiencing a parental divorce during adulthood is not necessarily a traumatizing event; some ACD struggle initially, but others do not.

As a researcher contributing to the scholarly work on the phenomenon of mid to late life parental divorce, I think one major conclusion can be made in regard to the initial experience of ACD. Preliminary research on ACD (Cooney 1986; Lang and Pett; Campbell 1995) arose challenging the common assumption that a mid to late life parental divorce has little to no effect on the adult children involved because unlike children, they are older and more mature, with no custody issues involved. Early findings of research on ACD concluded that similar to young children and adolescents, young adults are negatively affected by a mid to late life parental divorce, but in different ways. Based on the findings of my diverse sample, although it is small and generalizations are not possible, I argue that instead of emphasizing either of the two extreme viewpoints from which this study was based, it is best to say that there is a middle ground. That is, adult children can be negatively affected by a parental divorce even though they are older and not living in their parents’ home anymore. However, it is important to note that not every ACD has the same experience and there are certain factors that make the experience more negative for some young adults than for others. Nonetheless, even if ACD had a difficult time initially with their parents’ divorce, this did not necessarily last for many years. In many cases, as time passed, strained relationships mended and the initial stress associated with the parental divorce diminished. I now turn to discuss in greater detail the parent-child relationships.
CHAPTER 5
PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

There have been numerous studies that have looked at the impact of a parental divorce on parent-child relationships (Booth and Amato 1994). Most of these studies reach the same conclusion: both the mother-child and father-child relationships are negatively affected by a parental divorce; however, the mother-child bond is most resilient while the father-child bond is more vulnerable (Booth and Amato 1994). The explanation given for the gender difference has to do with custody issues since mothers usually retain custody.

Based on these findings, researchers studying the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult children were interested in finding out if the parent-child relationships are similarly affected (Cooney et al. 1986, 1994; Lang and Pett 1992; Arditti 1999; Pett et al. 1992). Interestingly, the findings are indeed similar, even though there are no custody issues involved since the children in these studies are young adults. The exception was Cooney’s original study with a sample of college students (Cooney et al. 1986). They found some of the ACD reported positive changes in the parent-child relationships following the divorce such as increased communication, greater understanding and mutual respect and a relaxation of the parent-child roles (Cooney et al. 1986). However, there were still ACD who reported negative changes in the parent-child relationships, with the father-child bond being most negatively affected and the mother-child bond being most resilient (Cooney et al. 1986). This study by Cooney and others (1986) was one of the very first exploratory studies on ACD and I would argue the small
sample size of the study helps to explain why a majority of the other studies did not find similar results.

Like many of the other researchers previously mentioned, I was also interested in understanding how a parent-child relationship is affected by a mid to late life parental divorce (if at all), especially since custody issues are not involved and the relationship is more voluntary at this stage of life. Previous research seems to gloss over the details of exactly why or how the parent-child relationship changes during a parental divorce. In addition, none of the studies look at the effect of time to determine if the relationships mend over time. My research makes two main contributions. First, I specifically asked the ACD about the details of their parent-child relationships as connected to the divorce. Second, I asked questions to determine if and how the relationship changed over a period of time.

Since I was most interested in finding out if and how family relationships are affected by a mid to late life parental divorce, I asked each ACD to talk about their relationships with each of their parents over time. Specifically, I asked each individual about their current relationship with their mother and their father; then I asked them to go back in time and discuss their relationship with each parent from childhood up until the present. By asking about their history of each of their parent-child relationships, as the researcher, I was able to distinguish whether or not their relationship with either of their parents had changed at any time during the course of the parental divorce. In some cases, the ACD were quite vocal about how their relationships were directly affected by the parental divorce, bringing up the topic before I even asked them about their parent-child relationships. These instances were ones in which the relationship had become strained
during the process of the parental divorce for various reasons. It is important to keep in
mind, though, since I interviewed only one ACD from each family, I am reporting on
only one side of the story. Thus, the parental divorce and the family relationships during
the context of the parental are likely to be interpreted differently by various family
members. This limitation will be elaborated on in the final chapter.

As mentioned earlier, about one-half of the ACD in this study reported a strained
relationship with one or both parents. Therefore, my results are consistent with the
majority of studies (Lang and Pett 1992; Arditti 1999; Cooney 1994) that find that the
parent-child relationship is negatively affected; however, my findings are also similar to
Cooney et al.’s (1986) research in that one-half of the individuals in this study reported
positive relationships with one or both parents following the parental divorce. In this
chapter, I present the experiences of both groups, as well as offer an explanation for why
these two groups differ.

In this chapter, I begin by presenting examples of ACD whose relationships with
one or both parents were negatively affected. Within this category of ACD, I also
distinguish between ACD whose parent-child relationships were negatively affected
initially but are fine now and ACD whose parent-child relationships were negatively
affected initially and are currently still strained. In addition, I highlight what appear to be
the most important differences between the two groups of ACD.

In the next section, I present examples of ACD experiencing intergenerational
ambivalence in both the structural and psychological sense. I discuss the role of important
factors, such as being “put in the middle,” role reversal, or parentification which have
been reported as reasons for experiencing what would be labeled “intergenerational
ambivalence.” Next, I argue that intergenerational ambivalence would be a useful framework for understanding how and why some ACD struggle initially with a mid to late life parental divorce and others do not struggle, emphasizing what a parental divorce does that creates these structural and psychological conditions. Then I present the experiences of ACD whose parent-child relationships were not negatively affected and offer an explanation as to what was going on with their personal family dynamics that insulated their parent-child relationships. Next, I discuss the evolution of the parent-child relationship, focusing on how and in what ways the intergenerational relationship changes during young adulthood. Lastly, I discuss the role of a parent’s remarriage status or dating status on the parent-child relationship, including both positive and negative experiences. I now turn to a discussion of parent-child relationships that are negatively affected by a parental divorce.

**Parent-Child Relationship Negatively Affected by Parental Divorce**

I asked each of the ACD to talk about their relationships with each of their parents. Specifically, each ACD was asked to discuss their relationship with their parent, tracing back to their relationship over different time periods from childhood through adolescence, young adulthood, the initial stages of the parental divorce, after the parental divorce, as well as their current relationship. By asking for such details, I was able to distinguish among the following: 1.) ACD whose relationships with their parents have been negatively affected by the parental divorce and have “mended” their troubled relationships with their parents over time; 2.) ACD who currently have a strained
relationship with one or both parents; and 3.) ACD whose relationships with their parents have not been negatively affected by the parental divorce.

In my sample, about one-half of the ACD interviewed reported that their relationships with one or both parents had changed since the parental divorce. It is important to emphasize that nearly all of the ACD who could be categorized as “Affected Initially” reported a strained relationship with one or both parents during the time of the parental divorce. This point was introduced in the previous chapter. There were many reported factors that were responsible for altering the parent-child relationships during the parental divorce; however some of the most common reasons provided by the ACD included the adult children blaming one parent for “wronging” the other; the ACD being “put in the middle” or being asked to serve as a mediator between the parents; and the ACD experiencing role reversal in that now they had to take the responsibility of providing emotional and social support to their parents. In addition, many of these ACD reported that they went for a period of not speaking to one or both parents.

Previous research (Cooney 1994; Lang and Pett 1992), mostly cross-sectional in nature, has not taken into account the issue of time since the parental divorce, so I was interested in exploring how this factor could play an important role in the evolution of the parent-child relationships. A key difference between the ACD in this sample whose parent-child relationship(s) were negatively affected previously, but not currently, and those ACD who still have strained parent-child relationships is the length of time that has passed since the parental divorce. ACD whose parents divorced within the past five years are more likely to report having a strained parent-child relationship currently than ACD whose parents divorced more than five years ago. It seems that the old saying,
“Time Heals” holds true for the family relationships in this sample, as hypothesized initially in my research questions.

For ACD who have mended their relationships with one or both parents, I asked them to talk about how their relationship issues were resolved. In some cases, the ACD waited for the parent to take steps to mend the relationship; in other cases, it was the ACD who took the initiative to deal with the issue and move forward with their relationship. I was impressed by the stories of how the ACD struggled during the period of time when they were not speaking to their parents over the “parental divorce” issues. However, it is important to note that I am reporting only one side of the story, that of the ACD. It would be interesting to be able to compare the parent’s perception of the “period of not speaking” with that of the ACD. Perhaps the parents struggled just as much as the ACD, but felt that their son or daughter did not want to resolve the issue; perhaps for some parents, they were angry with the child for taking sides. Unfortunately, we do not know. Nonetheless, in many cases it was the adult children who took it upon themselves to make the phone call or take steps to resolve their differences with their parents and move on with the relationship. I would argue such examples are testimony to the great importance of the intergenerational relationship, despite struggles and obstacles such as a parental divorce during the course of family life. In addition, this is also evidence of the process of how intergenerational relationships evolve over time with adult children becoming more “equal” with their parents and being able to communicate on a different and more mature level than when they were children or adolescents. I begin with Jim’s story, an example of an ACD whose relationships with both parents were negatively affected by the parental divorce.
**Jim’s Parent-Child Relationships**

Jim’s relationships with both his mother and father have changed over the years since the separation of his parents. Although Jim’s parents have not officially divorced, they have been separated for over ten years. Jim’s story is representative of many of the themes that were expressed by other ACD, when asked to discuss their relationships with their parents over time. Jim has experienced each of the following themes that will be discussed at a greater length throughout this chapter including the following: relationship with one or both parents negatively affected by parental divorce; ACD being “put in the middle;” role reversal and/or parentification; a period of not speaking with either parent; experiencing intergenerational ambivalence; relationships evolving over time; the effect of a parent’s remarriage on the parent-child relationship; and parent-child relationships mending over time.

Although Jim has never been very close with his mother, he reported that their relationship deteriorated even more in the aftermath of the divorce. As the oldest son, Jim was his mom’s “crutch” during the initial stages of the divorce. Jim was turned to for emotional and social support by his mother. Jim was nineteen years old when his parents’ marriage dissolved when his mother found out his father was having an affair. Since he was the oldest son in the family, he felt he needed to be there for his mother at that time, although he admits to feeling resentful of this role later on in his life. When I asked Jim if either of his parents turned to him for emotional or social support during the initial stages of the divorce, he explained his experience:

Yeah, my mom did. My mom became—me and my mom never had the best relationship in the world and then all of a sudden, I became like her crutch. Again, she had a ten year old son. She had a son on drugs. And
so all of a sudden it was, “Oh Jim this and oh Jim that.” And I have to admit, in retrospect, I feel kind of used. I also have a pretty serious problem—like I wouldn’t say we had an abusive relationship—like we were abused as kids. We were hit as kids and my mom brought that up as she was like trying to build up her ability to leave my dad. Like she used that all the time. Like, (speaking to his mother) “You sat there. You let it happen. You hit us too sometimes.” But all of a sudden now it’s like, “Do you remember when your father was like this? Do you remember when your father was like that?” And in the middle of it [I was] like, “Yeah! That bastard!” And then in retrospect, I was like, “You know what? That wasn’t right—to do that to us—to put us through that because you were just doing it for yourself to build up your own ability to leave him.”

[JL: You were nineteen, twenty when your mom was talking to you about this?]

Yeah. Within months of it—within my dad being out of the house. So by my junior year of college—by that summer—yeah.

[JL: How did this change your relationship with your mom?]

It didn’t. Me and my mom never had the closest relationship.

[JL: Did you stop listening to her—]

There were a few—well that stopped on its own anyways when she left him. It was more like in retrospect being like, “That bitch put me through all that.” And I think she only did that for herself. I never said it to her. I never brought it up to her. But it’s just in retrospect and in retrospect within that time period. And whatever—you know? She needed me. I mean, I can remember being like—seeing her getting upset in front of [brother’s name] and being like, “You have to pull your shit together. You have a ten year old child.”

[JL: And you would say that to her?]

Yeah. I told her that to her face. And that’s one of the reasons why she doesn’t like me to this day because I wasn’t going to accept that “Oh poor you. Poor you. Yeah. That was bad. But you had a part to play in this too. And yes, your husband cheated on you, but stop. Your husband cheated on you in a dead marriage. It wasn’t this wonderful blissful marriage and he ran off and had an affair. It was a rotten marriage! There wasn’t a marriage by that point. And even if there was you got to pull your shit together because you have a ten year old son.” And at least in front of him [sibling name]—I got mad at her. I was like, “How can you
let your son see you like that?” . . . And the divorce—I think my mom feels like I didn’t take her side. And I really just feel like I looked at it rationally and didn’t take anyone’s side.

Currently Jim admits that he does not have a strong relationship with his mother. However, he talks to her often and he keeps their relationship civil because of his young daughter. He believes that he should not let any strain in his relationship with his mother get in the way of his daughter’s relationship with her grandmother. So he maintains a relationship with his mother on account of his daughter, although over the years, since the divorce, there have been periods of time when they did not speak at all. He explained their relationship:

We talk pretty often, I’d say. Well, I mean, we’ll go in gaps. After last Christmas (he and his mother got in a disagreement), I didn’t talk to her for months. . . And it’ll happen every once in a while. And I try to talk to her once a week and again, a lot of that has to do with [daughter’s name]. Like I’m like, “All right talk to Grandma. Yes, she’s doing good. This is what we did with her. I’ll send you down pictures.” I really don’t talk to her about me. I’ll let her talk about herself. After last year—I think something changed. Not that I ever think I ever tried to fool myself with expectations, but maybe what I expected from myself to her—I’m just like, “Whatever. This is the relationship I have. This is my mother. There’s nothing I can do about that.”

Jim also maintains a “good” relationship with his father, but he discussed in great detail how their relationship changed dramatically after his parents separated. Since Jim was nineteen years old when his parents separated, he was able to analyze his family situation from a mature perspective and has done much reflection concerning his relationships with his parents. When asked to talk about his current relationship with his father, Jim said the following:

You know—it’s good. He’s a hard guy to deal with, you know? I feel bad for my dad. I think my dad is a tragic American story in a lot of ways. I really do. Like he would make a hell of a good book. This guy who tried to do everything right and in the end, fucked it all up and he knows it. He
knows it. There’s no getting around it. He knows he wrecked his family and lives with that on his shoulders his whole life. He lives with a woman I don’t even think he really likes that much. But he is just kind of trapped in a way. [Father speaking:] “It’s nice to have someone around the house and what was I going to do? Break two different people’s hearts? Leave them both?” He knows he doesn’t have a very good relationship with his other two sons—not totally sure if he thinks he has the greatest relationship with me or not. But I think he appreciates our relationship. He isn’t happy with how—maybe he had hoped for more from me—and I had hoped for more from myself in some ways but things got lost—got tense along the way—at probably a pretty critical time. In a lot of ways, nobody knew how to get me into college. Nobody knew what that took... I love my dad. He’s always been there. I worry about him. You know he’s got a temper. I’ve seen him blow up at people. I don’t think he’s happy. I think in some ways, my mom’s happier than he is. Her life is harder financially, but... And I think in some ways he feels like this is what he deserves. [Father speaking]“This is what I get.”... My dad’s a sad character.

Jim’s relationship with his dad changed significantly. After the parental separation, the dynamics of their father-son relationship changed in the sense that they became “more equal.” As a result of this change in their relationship, Jim stopped calling his father “Dad” and began calling him “Pop.” Jim explained this transition in their relationship:

[JL: When your father made that phone call to you, what was your reaction?]

I felt bad for him. I did. Because I knew in a lot of ways, he felt like a failure. Not that I didn’t feel bad for my mom, but my mom was upset no matter what in a way. I did. I felt bad that he had to make the phone call. I just felt bad for him—like here’s this poor guy with his tail between his legs having to call his son and be like, “I fucked up.” And I did. I felt bad for him.

[JL: What did you say to your dad?]

I think—I can’t remember exactly, but I’m assuming it was something like, “It’s all right.” I was like, “Things happen. Don’t feel bad for me. It sucks, but whatever.”
[JL: Did your father come to you? Did he talk to you about it at all or anything like that?]

Not really. I mean, we had some talks about it, but nothing serious. He had nothing to say. Any question I had—I didn’t want to ask him because I didn’t want to put him through explaining it. It was what it was. It was done. I have to admit. We became more equals after it. I did kind of feel like I lost—because he very much became like, “Well don’t listen to me. What the hell do I know?” I was like, “Great! Who the hell do I listen to?” So there was that. But that was about it. We definitely became more equals. I think at that time I referred to him as—I call him “Pop” now. I stopped calling him “dad” because it just became more like “dad” was what you called your dad when you were a little kid. And I didn’t feel that way anymore. So that’s when I started calling him—because people are always like, “That’s so weird you call him ‘Pop’” and it was more because I felt like I didn’t have a dad anymore. I had no one like, “Daddy can you do . . .?” That was gone.

[JL: I think it’s very interesting you can step back and analyze why you stopped calling him “dad.”]

Well I felt—I don’t know when I was able to analyze that, but I do know that I knew that was happening. I could feel it happening. I could feel like this transition in our relationship taking place and being like, “Yeah, I don’t have—I have a father, but I don’t have my dad anymore”. . .I felt like I couldn’t ask for advice any more. I felt like we leveled out. That’s what it was. Not that I lost respect for my father. . . It was sad in some ways, but sad more I think of a loss of childhood than. . . this relationship with my father was a new relationship. I think it was more sad that it was a loss of childhood.

[JL: What would you attribute this change to?]

It was his belief that he had fucked up and no longer could give advice.

[JL: Now did he express that to you?]

Oh yeah. Not like, “Let me sit you down and tell you.” But like when things would come up, he’d be like, “Well what the fuck do I know? Look at my life!” And you’re like, “All right. Thanks a lot buddy.” And it was about small things. It was never about major—there never were major things. But it was very much like, “Yeah. You’re on your own.” And it did happen at a particular time. And I think the fact that I was in college and he never went to college. He was like, “Well look at what you’re doing and look at what I’m doing. Maybe you should figure this out—you’re as good of an answer to this question as I am.”
Although Jim’s experience is unique, there are many themes from his story that were also experienced by many other ACD. In the following section of this chapter, I present the experiences of ACD whose relationships with their parents were negatively affected by their parents’ divorce. There were some young adults who spoke in more general terms about their relationship being affected; others spoke more specifically about being “put in the middle” by one or both parents. For those ACD whose relationships were negatively affected, many went for a period of time without speaking to a parent. I discuss all of these common experiences in greater detail as well as address the process behind the improvement of relationships that were negatively affected by the parental divorce. I now turn to discuss in greater detail the experiences, as reported by the ACD, of how their relationships were adversely affected by the parental divorce.

**Parent-Child Relationships Negatively Affected in General**

Many of the ACD discussed how they distanced themselves emotionally, at least briefly during their parents’ divorce. By pulling away from their parents, their relationships with their parents were somewhat strained during the stages of the parental divorce. For example, Hope maintained close relationships with both parents during the divorce even though she was living out west, but she admits to pulling back a bit.

I think there was tumult in that I had a bit of reserve from both of them. I had to pull back from both of them in some way. In some ways I think this is a little bit about how the divorce affected me. I think it made me kind of cut some apron strings and really become an adult in a way that I hadn’t yet—or just really learn to not think of myself as part of that family and really sort of think of myself as just me, an individual, an adult. . . I was in [state name] so there was just—there probably was less communication. I think it was a relief to be so far away from the mayhem and not get dragged into it. And I think I took advantage of that. . . I
think the way it came out, it was—maybe I took more advantage of
being three thousand miles away from them than I would have otherwise.
So it probably wasn’t as dramatic as if I’d been here. If I’d been here, I
probably would have been dragged into it more and I’m really relieved
that I wasn’t.

Derrick was initially angry with his dad for cheating on his mom and breaking up
their family. Their relationship was strained for some time; however, Derrick ended up
moving in with his father after the divorce when his relationship with his mother became
tense. When asked to talk about his relationship with his father during the stages of the
divorce, Derrick explains:

At that point, because of what I saw him doing—all the fighting, causing
all the trouble and knowing his actions were a big core why the split
happened in the first place. . . I was kind of angry at him because they
were my only two parents and I was so used to them being together and,
you know, felt very tense around him, like I would try and still get along
with him and I did, but up in here, I was like “Liar!” and all kind of angry
about it. That was the initial stages of them splitting up in their divorce.

Since Derrick lived with his father, his relationship gradually improved and
currently he describes their relationship as being “pretty good.”

I see him a couple times every other week. It’s still pretty good. We’ve
definitely gotten closer since the process of me moving in with him and
since me and my mom’s relationship was rocky, I kind of confided in him
and he kind of guided me through that, so that helped definitely. . . Like I
said, after I moved in with him and after, or during the smoothing over
process of me and my mother, he helped me a lot with that. That made me
closer to him and relationship issues of my own. He helped me out too. . .
I love him too and despite everything that’s happened, I’m still there for
him when he goes through things. I still support him and I help him for
his things just like I would for my mother.

Brittany was a senior in high school when her mother moved out of the house and
filed for a divorce. As a result her relationships with both of her parents were strained at
times and she was depressed for some time as well.
So it was kind of depressing because I’m like, “Great. Now I’m becoming one of everybody else.” And then thinking up in your head, “Great. How are we going to do holidays? How are we going to do this? How are we going to do graduation?” My graduation was a pain in the ass. . . my mother and father didn’t sit together. They sat on opposite sides. . . And the pictures that were taken afterward, looking back on them now, I’d probably just throw them out because they’re not happy pictures. Any pictures probably right after that divorce—maybe right up until my wedding even—they’re not happy pictures.

Brittany talks about how her relationship with her mom changed following the parental divorce:

We became more distant because she was part of the reason why—at first, she walked out. She left. She left us to fend for ourselves with a depressed father who just wasn’t getting any better.

[JL: Did you ever voice this to your mom?]

I used to say it was very selfish and unfair of her all the time. . . The relationship with my mother right now is that I’m the mother and she’s the daughter. I love my mom. She hasn’t had it very easy. She’s had to work for a lot of things. I know the divorce wasn’t easy for her because she had a lot of stuff she had to deal with, but she was not exactly a good example of a strong woman—for the lack of a better word. . . She’s my mother. I’m never going to get another one. She’s quirky as hell, but I just hope to God I don’t turn into her.

Heather’s relationship with her father has also changed as a result of the divorce. She explained that she had always been very close with her father and turned to him for support, so it was difficult for Heather to understand why he had changed. She talked about how her relationship with her father has changed since before the divorce:

We were always close. He was my dad. I always respected. I always could talk to him about anything. He was fine. He never judged. He was stern, but he was good. . . Now I’m really upset with him because of the divorce because he had an affair and it all came out. But to this day, he’ll sit there and deny it even though we caught him. And that just bothers me because through our whole life, even if you did something wrong, be honest about it, straightforward with it, and we’ll deal with it. And now he’s not. So I feel like I’m the parent and I’m trying to tell him what he always told me when I was little. So that kind of bothers me. But he’s
great to my son. He’s such a good grandfather, you know? They both are. They’re really good to my little guy. But right now I just feel like he’s not taking responsibility for his own actions.

[JL: How often do you talk to your father?]

I haven’t seen him. I haven’t seen him in a couple of weeks. I haven’t seen him. I’ve been busy though. But I let my little guy call him, you know what I mean? And then he’ll say, “Get mom on the phone.” And I’ll talk to him. But now I just—I don’t like when he brings up, “Oh your mother did this” and “your mother did that.” If your mother didn’t do that.” I don’t like that stuff and that’s what gets me aggravated and I try to change the subject. And I’ll just be like, “Dad, I gotta go.”

As the aforementioned examples demonstrate, some of the ACD in the current study revealed that their relationships with their mother, father, or both changed in the aftermath of the parental divorce. Whereas some were able to pinpoint a precise event or situation that led to the distancing, others only realized that the relationships has been negatively affected when they reflected on how their relationships had changed since the divorce. The following are examples of specific aspects of the divorce that were cited as reasons for the parent-child relationship changing.

**ACD “Put in the Middle”**

When I asked the ACD to talk about the most challenging part of dealing with their parents’ divorce, the most frequent response centered around the idea of being “put in the middle” between the parents and being asked to take sides or to be the mediator between the two. Many ACD reported this as being a stressful experience that led to strained parent-child relationships or even emotional and psychological stress for the ACD. Similar results were found in previous studies assessing the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on parent-child relationships (Lang and Pett 1992; Cooney
The following are stories of how the ACD believed they were affected by being put in this position.

Initially Derrick had to deal with his parents vying for each of the children’s love and attention, but this has since changed and he is no longer “put in the middle” and this has positively influenced him, as he has “adjusted” quite well after only three years.

[JL: What would you say was the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce?]

Just hearing what each parent has to say about the other. Seeing, like, there’s a sort of competition. . . for me and my sister’s love or attention or, you know, trying to one-up each other. . . but I don’t want to see the whole competition thing, like I’m the better parent or this is what “a real parent would do” or just unnecessary things like that. That’s the challenging part. . . I hear from both parents. For some reason, they kind of both confide in me when it comes to this. It sometimes feels like I have got to be the savior for the family or something and I can’t do that. Like, I can help my sister out with her problems, but when it hits that close to home and it’s your own parents. You can’t fix that on your own.

Although Heather’s parents’ divorce was recently finalized at the time of the interview she discussed in great detail how the past couple of years have been very taxing on her especially as she’s had to serve as a “mediator” between her mother and father while they were separated.

I just feel like—you know, my mom calls crying all the time. “I want a place to live. I can’t live here anymore” . . . My dad—same thing. He’s like, “You gotta talk to your mom. We gotta straighten this out.” It’s like, “You two need to sit down and talk to each other.” I told them a couple of weeks ago. I said, “You know, maybe we can meet at a restaurant and we can just discuss” because they have a boat that they have to sell and stuff like that. “We can talk about this and see how much it’s worth and then cut our ties. You and mom cut your ties and go your separate ways.” But still he’s like, “Okay, okay, okay.” Never does. And she’ll call me, “Call your dad. See when he’s gonna pay me again.” I’m just like, “I can’t do this anymore” . . . I hate it. I really—I hate it. I am so glad I have another half—[partner’s name] is so good to me. I mean because he—I feel bad for him. He has to deal with me. And he says the same thing. He’s like, “You gotta stop. You gotta just tell them to do it themselves.”
Other ACD shared similar stories about being “put in the middle” by their parents and the effect it had on them personally:

I tried not to take sides. . . I ended up getting molded into this thing that I’m conspiring against him with my mother. So like if she left certain things in the house like the attic or whatnot—she asked me to get her robe one time and my dad was like, “What are you doing?” I’m like, “I’m getting mom’s robe for her.” He said, “No. If she wants her robe, she can come over and get it.” Stupid stuff like that. (Brittany)

They’re both like financially independent, but they both need the support—like social support, I think you called it. . . It definitely—it’s like a roller-coaster, I guess—hearing something from one of them and then the crazy stories that one of them tells me about the other one. (Robin)

I was always making sure everyone else was happy and I sort of lost myself there. . . I took the brunt of it all. It felt really good, you know. But at the same time—And it was really hard too. I would stay up until four in the morning sometimes with either my siblings or my mom but then like after fifteen minutes after talking about my problems, they’d be like, “Oh, everything’s going to be okay.” (Tim)

For many of the ACD in this sample who reported being “put in the middle” by their parents, they were also likely to have experienced a strained relationship with one or both parents. Once again, I am unable to make a causal connection, but the two factors seem to occur together based on the data. By involving the young adults in the process of the parental divorce, these individuals were confronted with a source of stress which resulted in the ACD reporting an overall negative experience of their parents’ divorce. It seems to be that being “put in the middle” has the potential to not only negatively affect the parent-child relationship but their interpretation of how they were affected overall by their parents’ divorce. For some of the ACD who reported a strained parent-child relationship they went for some time without speaking to a parent. I now turn to provide evidence of this pattern.
Period of Not Speaking

As a result of having a strained relationship with one or both parents after the parental divorce, there were ACD who went through a period of not speaking to one or both of their parents. There were many factors cited for this period of not speaking during the stages of the parental divorce, including the following: ACD blamed one parent for “wronging” the other; ACD being blamed for their parents’ divorce; and ACD being overwhelmed with being “put in the middle.”

Initially following her parents’ divorce, Brittany remained in the family home with her father and brother since it was her senior year of high school. During this time period, Brittany served as a mediator between her mother and father and she became very distressed and overwhelmed with this role. One night, her frustration and resentment led to a big fight and her father kicked her out of the house. Brittany talked about how their relationship was initially negatively affected by this fight:

He had an argument with me about something. And he had gotten on my case about something. I used to hear all the time I’m just like my mother. I’m just like my mother. . . So I had had enough and I remember this day like it was yesterday. We [boyfriend and Brittany] pulled up to the front of the house. He [father] let me in. He yelled at me for something and I told him to back off and he said, “Excuse me?” and it was like, “Look, I’ve never done anything to disrespect you, curse at you, anything like that and you’re getting on my case left and right about mom. I’m tired of hearing about mom. I am not like my mother.” And he said something to me. He made some kind of comment and I went upstairs to get something because I was starting to have things packed and he yelled at me. He said something to me and I had just had enough. I took my arm across my dresser, threw everything in my grasp into this box and I told him, I said, “I am not my fucking mother!” I got right in his face. My dad is six two. I said, “I’m not my fucking mother. Stop it! You know, your relationship with me is going to fizzle out because you can’t come to grips with things. . . And he got in my face. He never hit me. He got in my face. He said, “Don’t let your ass hit the door on the way out!” and that’s how I got kicked out of the house.
Consequently, Brittany set up her own residence and continued with her life; however, Brittany did not speak to her father for two years after this fight. Like Brittany, Gayle also went for periods of time where she did not speak to her mother and father after their divorce.

Although Gayle’s relationship is still not very close, she went for a period of not speaking with her mother for three years, until she found out her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Gayle talked about how her mother’s alcoholism took a toll on both her marriage and her relationship with Gayle. After a couple of rehab and detox programs, Gayle realized her mother was not going to change and ceased talking to her. However, when Gayle’s mother was diagnosed with lung cancer, Gayle became involved in her life again.

When she went to [rehab and detox place] and nothing had changed, I said, “I’m cutting it out. I can’t do it anymore.” And that was—my mother—two years this November she was diagnosed with lung cancer, so from 2003, 2004, 2005 I started talking to her again and that was because of her cancer. If not, I probably wouldn’t be talking to her today. And I don’t regret not talking to her. I have no regret at all because I wouldn’t be able to deal with her as I am right now if I didn’t go through that isolation from her for myself.

Gayle explains that the period of not speaking with her mother significantly changed their relationship. In fact, since her mother is terminally ill, she explains that she has already detached herself from her mother, in a sense.

Because the thing is when I stopped talking to my mother, I mourned her. I literally went through the stages of mourning. So it sounds horrible, but my mother’s already been dead to me. I went through it, so now I’m just dealing with the physical death of her and I’ve tried to really move past that mourning—those issues. So how their divorce affected my relationship with her—I think it was just going to be what it was going to be.
Gayle also experienced a time period where she did not speak with her father. Since Gayle was still living at home with her parents during the initial stages of the divorce, she became caught in the middle of her parents’ conflict. Gayle became very upset with her father when she discovered that there was a phone tap and that he had heard many of her personal phone conversations. As a result, Gayle was very angry with her father and went for three years without speaking to him. She describes how she was the one to approach her father after the three years:

Then after I found the tape recorder, I didn’t talk to him for three years. I just didn’t go there. And then when I went to him and said, “Look, I need to move on past this—this anger, this hate, this isn’t good for me. Anger produces anger.” Like I said, we’ve had some stumbling blocks. He’s gone back to his old habits and things like that, but now it’s great. You know, I can talk to him. He’ll have me over... my father right now out of my family is the only person in my family who doesn’t give me grief—the only person. He really doesn’t have any expectations of me.

Similarly, Ben had a big fight with his father and still has not mended the relationship and is currently not on speaking terms.

The one incident that happened where I ended up moving out of the house was—it was the night I had come home from college my freshman year... I came home. Then he (father) went out to the bar. My mother had to pick up my sister from somewhere... And my father had the car. My sister’s friend’s mother wouldn’t let me pick them up. So once before I had driven to the bar to get my father’s keys and he had given them up—no problem. This time I drove to the bar—he wouldn’t give up the keys. I guess I kind of went at him and said, “Give me the F’n keys!” and some other guy at the bar came up to me and punched me in the mouth... That was the big thing... And I told him, “I can’t respect you and I can’t be—I have to concentrate on my life right now.” At my grandfather’s funeral, I told him, “You have to change. Look at that man there. That was somebody who was loved. Look how upset his kids are. Do you want this many people when you die?”

Ben also went for a period of time where he was not speaking with his mother either and has just recently started talking to his mother again at the time of the interview.
Our current relationship? We actually just started talking again Thanksgiving day when I drove my sister home—the day after Thanksgiving, I believe it was. I drove my sister home and I hadn’t talked to my mother in several months because of something she had said to me. . . But she was very—she had been very sorry. I could tell, but at the same time, I said, “Come Christmas time, that’s when we’ll talk again. I’m not ready really to talk to you now.” . . I didn’t speak to her until November. . . Now I’ve been talking to her again regularly. I’ll call her weekly at least. We’re able to talk. I don’t have to—she’s helped me out with some money here and there. So she doesn’t have to—we don’t really—but as soon as it comes to a sore subject, I hang up the phone pretty much. I’m like, “Alright, I gotta go. Bye.” I don’t go into any subjects that would cause us to argue or anything. And she started to finally realize that, I think. . . She’ll bring it up at times, but usually, I don’t really care to really talk about it anymore, so I’ll be like, “Alright I gotta go. Bye. I don’t want to talk about it.” And then just hang up. . . You know, if it comes to the point where I have to stop talking to her again, I will. But I don’t ever plan on it being a permanent thing. But it might be a couple months where I don’t go talking to her for a couple of weeks—just because I need a break from her sometimes.

Melissa’s parents divorced over ten years ago and in general, she has adjusted quite well after having a “tough time” dealing with her parents’ divorce initially. However, Melissa’s relationship with her mother has been strained since the divorce. Currently, Melissa is not speaking with her mom, but she wants things to be different. She describes how her relationship with her mother has been rocky over the past year.

Prior to three months ago, we would talk probably once a week. But, again, it’s been inconsistent, so I can tell you June was the last time we spoke. She wrote me a letter, but I haven’t responded. It was a nasty letter. I just refused to respond to it. And then before—from June to December, we spoke. But around the holidays, we had another falling out last Christmas. So, it’s really sporadic.

When I asked Melissa if there was anything she would like to add regarding her relationship with her mother and she quickly added:

It’s just I wish things were different. . . I’m like a dumb dog. I keep going back and getting treated the same way and then I realize it. Like I’m sure I will speak to her again, but I just wish it wasn’t (such a cycle) but it is.
The time when they were not speaking was an important event during and after the process of the parental divorce, as reported by the ACD. Many ACD gave great detail as to how this situation came about in the first place as well as details concerning the time of reconciliation. This “period of not speaking” is important for a few reasons. First, due to the voluntary nature of the parent-child relationship in the context of a mid to late life parental divorce, the ACD bring a level of bargaining power to the relationship. As young adults, they are no longer financially dependent on their parents and likely to be living independently; therefore, if they have a fight with their parents, co-residential living arrangements do not dictate the terms of the relationship. For those ACD who went through a stage of not speaking to one or both parents, it seems that the ACD had much control over the parent-child relationship after it was initially strained. In fact, in many cases, it was the ACD who decided to stop communicating in the first place. They were also the ones to set the terms of the relationship during the “mending” stages. In effect, the power dynamics between the parent and child had shifted due to the voluntary nature of the relationship at this stage of life.

Whereas ACD have more power in the parent-child relationship, children or adolescents of divorce are “forced” to have at least one relationship with their parents. Although these relationships are more involuntary due to custody arrangements, this is not to say that younger children or adolescents who are experiencing a parental divorce do not go through times when they are not speaking to one or both parents. However, due to custodial arrangements and the fact that children or adolescents are most likely living with one parent, it is quite difficult to live with a parent while not on speaking terms. A more common situation is for a non-custodial parent and a child to go through a
period of not speaking especially if the non-custodial period is not involved in the child’s life. However, this situation is one in which the non-custodial parent (and custodial, in some cases) has more control in the relationship. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to make comparisons between ACD and children of early parental divorce, the topic is worthy of future research.

Connected to the idea of the voluntary nature of the ACD-parent relationship is the fact that many of the ACD wanted to mend the strained relationship. At the time of the interviews, most of the ACD who reported going through a period of not speaking with one or both parents had resolved any issues or were in the process of doing so. One interpretation of this finding is that the ACD valued the relationship and thought that was worth “fixing.” An important factor is the length of time that has been invested into the relationship. The ACD and the parents have shared a relationship for at least eighteen years. The fact the ACD were willing to resolve the issues that led to the period of not speaking is testimony to the importance of the parent-child bond. Based on previous studies (Cooney et al. 1986, 1994; Lang and Pett 1992; Arditti 1999; Pett et al. 1992), the general conclusion is that a parental divorce has the potential to negatively affect parent-child relationships. However, based on the results of this study, most of the ACD whose parent-child relationships were strained, even to the point of not speaking for a period of time, chose to reconcile and to make amends. Nonetheless, it is important to caution that other ACD might have different experiences in regard to mending or salvaging a strained parent-child relationship. In fact, it is plausible that ACD who have not salvaged strained relationships with their parents were in a sense, “selected out” of my sample.
Since I asked each of the ACD to talk in detail about each of their parent-child relationships over time, I was able to capture the evolution of the relationship. Whereas other studies are cross-sectional in nature, asking about current parent-child relationships for instance, this study is able to account for change in the relationship. By asking about the parent-child relationship before, during, and after the divorce, the “period of not speaking” is seen as a stage in the relationship. Connected to the idea that relationships evolve over time, relationships take work, especially when strained. Based on the stories reported by the ACD, mending the strained relationships was something they worked on over time. In addition, as mentioned earlier, as young adults, they brought much bargaining power to the parent-child relationships. That is, as young adults, they chose to resolve or renegotiate their relationship with their parent.

The intergenerational framework provides a foundation from which to better understand why most of the ACD chose to mend their strained parent-child relationships. As the parent-child relationship evolved over time, certain structural components changed as well. One structural component of the intergenerational relationship is the level of dependency between parents and children. Connected to the dependency component is the power dynamics between the parents and children. A discussion of these structural components will be discussed in greater detail in a following section. Most importantly, a mid to late life parental divorce is a structural situation that creates a need to negotiate or re-negotiate the parent-child tie. For ACD and parents who have stopped talking due to some divorce-related issue, there is now a relationship that needs to renegotiated and an issue to be resolved. An important note is that many of the ACD went on to resolve the issues with their parents and are currently on speaking terms. The
following are examples of individuals who took steps to “mend” the strained relationship as a result of not speaking.

Factors that Led to a Mended Relationship

Initially Derrick had a rocky relationship with his mom following the parental divorce, but things have gotten better and now he lives with her and they have a “good” relationship.

It’s good. It’s gotten a lot better, um, after I graduated from high school, um, and my dad got remarried, things were very rocky with her. Things were very, kind of frightening with her because she wasn’t handling things very well and it kind of came out on me—as the only male of the household. So, I moved out and I lived with my father and me and my mother started rehabilitating our relationship after that. It was a so-so process. At first it was tough because it was hard on me because I’ve always been close to my mother. Now, we’re pretty close—really close actually, I should say, because we do things together along with my sister. It feels just like how it just was when we were first close and that makes me happy.

Gretchen did not speak to her mother for a few years after the divorce, but that had more to do with her mother’s drinking. Now she has an “honest” relationship with her mom. She talked about how her mother’s drinking affected their relationship:

We went through probably a three year period where we didn’t speak at all. I had enough. After the divorce, I had it with her—with her being drunk all the time. I didn’t want her around my kids. So for those three years, I just cut it off. I just cut her out. And then two years ago we thought she was going to die. . . I just didn’t want her taken like that without saying anything. So I established a—I reconnected with her and she was very pleased—which I was pleased with. But I’ve learned. I keep it simple with her. . . I mean, I go see her on the holidays. We call on the phone. Once in a while we’ll go up for a picnic, but that’s about it.

Gretchen explained that she learned a lot from the period of time when she detached from her mother and ceased talking to her. Gretchen is content with her
relationship with her mother currently, even though they are not as close as some mother-
daughter relationships.

For me, it’s honest. It wasn’t honest before. For me it’s honest now. . . growing up and even being an adult with my own children, my mother and I would dance around things all the time. And I just stopped doing that when I decided to have her back in my life. There was no more bullshit. I was very clear with her. “I don’t like your drinking and if you want to see your grandchildren—at least the little ones because the older ones have their own choices, you need to be sober or at least half sober” . . . And she understood that and she seemed to appreciate it.

Brittany talks about how hurt she was when she was not speaking to her father.

Finally after two years, she decided to take the initiative to call her father and resolve the issue.

[We didn’t talk] for two years and that hurt because it was like—when you idolize your father, that is not what you want to happen. . . This used to eat at me left and right. I used to have—I wouldn’t eat. I just was not a very upbeat person. . . So I think what ended up happening was it was one night [and] I had just had enough and I said, “He’s never going to call me so I’m going to have to step up to the plate and be the one to make the phone call.” So I made the phone call one night. I think we talked on the phone for two hours and he apologized. He said he was sorry for anything he might have done or said during that time frame of the divorce and separation and whatnot. You know there was a lot of stuff going on that he didn’t even understand at the time and he just tried to deal with it the best way that he could and we kind of went from there. So it was a slow process from that phone call.

Unlike Brittany, Jennifer refused to be the one to make the phone call to her father. During the year when Jennifer and her father were not speaking, she struggled emotionally because she really wanted to mend her relationship with her father.

Currently, she and her father are very close. She describes how she felt during that period:

It was like it never happened. It went right back to where it was. I think it was more me being stubborn. I was not going to call him and tell him he should apologize. I was going to wait until he realized what he did. It
took forever. It killed me. It took forever. I just wanted him to call me and apologize. I desperately did. And he did. He called and I said, “Thank you. I absolutely accept your apology.” And that was it. And we were right back to where we were before. . . That was it. He’s my best friend. He’s my buddy—always has been. And he always will be.

As is evident from the aforementioned examples, many of the ACD expressed feelings of hurt, disappointment and anger during the period of not speaking with their parent. However, most of them have reconciled and currently have a very positive and strong relationship with their parents. I interpret these stories as evidence that the parent-child relationship is a very important bond, one that is worth salvaging, even if there was much hurt and betrayal involved. Once again, this sample may not be representative of those ACD who have not salvaged their relationships and are still struggling. Time also seems to be an important factor as well. For ACD who had resolved a strained relationship with their parent, time had passed; whereas those ACD who talked about currently having a strained relationship or period of not talking with their parent(s), the parental divorce has been more recent (in the past five years).

Most of the studies that looked at the parent-child relationship (Cooney 1988; Pryor 1999; Lang and Pett 1992) did not take into account the amount of time passed since the parental divorce. I would argue this is a very important factor to consider when addressing a parent-child relationship that has changed in either a positive or negative way. Although the findings from this study are consistent with previous findings, in that the parent-child relationship can be negatively affected by a parental divorce, my research goes one step further by incorporating the element of time. More specifically, an advantage with the data collected for this research is that I obtained a fairly diverse group of ACD in terms of the number of years passed since the parental divorce. That is,
as opposed to previous studies in which the samples were much more homogamous in age (Cooney et al. 1986; Cooney 1988; Pryor 1999), this study consisted of forty individuals who experienced a parental divorce in the past twenty years (See Table 1).

In my initial research questions, I was interested in whether or not strained parent-relationships change over time. Based on previous research that concluded that the parent-child relationship was poorer for a majority of ACD following a parental divorce, I wanted to see if the outcome lasted for many years. The findings from this study indicate that for many ACD, a strained parent-child relationship does not necessarily last forever. That is, even if there is some strain during the initial stages of a parental divorce, the problems tend to be resolved over time. However, this finding should be read with caution since ACD who have not resolved relationship problems may have been “selected out” of this particular study. I now turn to a discussion of intergenerational ambivalence as experienced by the ACD in this study.

**Intergenerational Ambivalence**

According to previous research that has employed the intergenerational ambivalence framework (Fingerman and Hay 2004; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Connidis 2003), intergenerational ambivalence can be experienced on both the structural level and on a psychological level as well. A parental divorce is an example of a structural situation, while the individual’s experience of having “mixed feelings” regarding the parent-child relationship in this particular situation indicates intergenerational ambivalence on a psychological level. Luscher (2005) argues that there is a need for an explicit definition of ambivalence. Furthermore, if there is a clear definition of ambivalence, we can hypothesize that ambivalence is not only inherent in
intergenerational relationships, but some family events like a parental divorce may heighten this ambivalence. This study draws from the theoretical work of both Luscher (2002) and Connidis and McMullin (2002b). Luscher (2002) argues that intergenerational ambivalence is inherent in intergenerational relationships, especially in situations in which individuals want to help another family member, but feel burdened or overwhelmed at the same time (Luscher 2002).

The respondents in the current study were asked to discuss how their parents’ mid to late life parental divorce has affected their lives in general, as well as how it has affected their relationships with their parents and adult siblings. It is important to note that the ACD were being asked to discuss in great detail about the evolution of their parent-child relationships during and after the parental divorce. As a result, I was able to assess the connection between the parental divorce and the changing parent-child relationship.

Based on an analysis of the data, intergenerational ambivalence was experienced by about 25% of the ACD in this sample. Drawing from previous studies (Fingerman and Hay 2004; Pillemer and Suitor 2002; Connidis 2003), I proposed that certain responses would be indicative of an ACD experiencing intergenerational ambivalence. In general, any response that seemed to indicate that the ACD felt unsure or torn about a parent-child relationship or any response that referred to the ACD feeling overburdened with new roles as a result of the parental divorce, were coded as “intergenerational ambivalence.” See Ch. 3 for a more detailed explanation of the operationalization of intergenerational ambivalence.
Intergenerational ambivalence was not asked about directly; instead, ACD were asked to talk about their relationships in the context of the parental divorce. Since there are no agreed upon measures (direct or indirect) of intergenerational ambivalence, there was much discretion of my part, as the researcher, in determining which responses hinted at intergenerational ambivalence as a result of the parental divorce. The following examples capture the intergenerational ambivalence as experienced by the ACD.

Heather’s experience of her parents’ divorce is representative of other ACD who were interpreted as having experienced intergenerational ambivalence as a result of their parents’ divorce. During the divorce which was recently finalized at the time of the interview, Heather was very supportive of her mother, even though she often felt overwhelmed with her mother’s expectations and being “put in the middle.” She talked about their current relationship:

I think we are close. Like she can count on me. But I think she counts on me too much that it just—I feel like she’s the little kid and I’m the mom—like the roles kind of changed. It’s like I—it’s so hard because she wants everybody to do things for her. . . And now being with him [her father] for all these years and not—always depending on somebody, she kind of lost that. She lost that strong will that she had. And now she wants somebody to take care of her. She’s like, “Why don’t you go and see if we can get a house and it has an in-law apartment?” No! No!

I talk to her every day. I see her like three or four times a week. She’s just so depressed. She is so depressed, I just don’t know what to do for her in that way. . . I’m worried about her. I don’t trust her to take care of herself properly. I mean, I trust her with me personally. I know she would never do anything to hurt me or to hurt my son. But I don’t trust her not hurting herself. I think she would if she had the opportunity or if she has nothing to look forward to, I think she would. And I’m just waiting for the phone call. I think—that’s me. I’m on egg shells. I’m just waiting for that phone call.

From the time Heather found out about her parents’ divorce, which was recently finalized at the time of the interview, she was thrown into a new role of caring for her
mother. Heather took on the role of parenting her mother, supporting her socially and emotionally. Although Heather felt obliged to help her mother and be there for her, her statements clearly indicate feeling overwhelmed with this new role and responsibility.

Similar to Heather, Sonya wanted to be there for her mom and would listen, but at times Sonya resented having to listen to her mother. As a result, Sonya struggled at times during her parents’ divorce.

I wanted to be there for her. I really, really did because I knew that she was so hurt and this was so hard for her and so I would listen, but with a closed ear, you know? Because she was telling me things that I didn’t want to know. She was telling me things that she should probably talk to her sisters about or to her friend about, but I guess she thought that since I was an adult our relationship had sort of transformed from mother-daughter to sort of confidants or friends, you know? So, I wanted to be there for her in that way even though it was so hard for me to just sit and listen to all of this stuff. So, I made myself available to listen and I said, “Mommy, I’m here if you want to talk” even though I didn’t mean it. But, I told her—I made myself available to her if she just wanted to talk. So, I just absorbed it. But, just so many things that she said just made me resent her a little bit. . . I would just absorb it but I was kind of like, “Why are you telling me this? Daddy never says things like this about you. Why are you saying these things about him?”

Sonya admitted that she felt bad for her mother. At times, she could identify with her mother and understand, but at other times, she could not identify with her mother.

My mother was celibate for thirteen years or something like that. I mean they weren’t together so she wasn’t having any. . . so I feel for her. . . I sort of felt so bad for her. Um, because my mother did suffer a lot in the relationship. I mean they both suffered, but my mother suffered a lot. She was alone all the time; she was lonely; I mean, just like when I’m away from my boyfriend up here for two weeks and I don’t see him, I’m like longing to be with him. You know, emotionally, sexually, whatever. I just long to be with him. So, to not have that for so long I felt for her. And then during the divorce when all of these things were coming out, I sort of like took my dad’s side. I don’t know because I guess I had been hearing about it for so long and it’s like, “Well why don’t you just get up and leave?” and then I felt guilty for not feeling more bad for her, you know what I mean? Because I’m a woman too and I know what that’s like to not have somebody or to want to have somebody and not. You know,
we have the same thing. I know what that’s like and so for me to be like
mad at her, I felt mad at myself like, “Why can’t you identify with her?
Why can’t you see, you know?” Oh, it was horrible. But, it just. . . I
really feel for her for having to go through that for so long—to be alone
for so long. It’s so hard. It’s so hard. So now I’m very happy that there’s
somebody in her life—very happy. (Sonya)

It is evident that Sonya was uncomfortable at times having to fill the role of a
confidant to her mother; nonetheless, Sonya felt like it was her responsibility as her
daughter to be there for her. Like Sonya, Tim would always listen to his mother. Tim
admitted that he was always comfortable listening to his mom vent. He feels it brought
him closer to mom, but realizes it was not a good thing.

Well, number one. I was young. I needed a mom, not a friend. Number
two—like right now she’s going through this narcissistic period where it’s
all about her—which is really good in some ways, but like gosh—I tried to
kill myself—let’s care about someone else for once. So I feel a little bit
betrayed. Like I was there for her all these years. . . We’re sort of making
up for lost time in a way. I don’t know. I feel more of a little boy than I
did back then just because I’m like forcing myself to not get involved so
much. Like in many ways she’s toxic—in the sense that I’m like a
sponge. I’ll take all her problems—so I like have to force myself to keep
out. So sometimes our emails are superficial, like “How’s so-and-so?”
But “who cares, you know?”

Crystal only talks to her mother because she feels guilty. She feels she cannot be
nice to her mom, but knows and feels she should be.

For a long time—basically from the time that my parents divorced and I
moved out here, she hasn’t really given me any life guidance at all. . . The
reason I do talk to her is because I have a tremendous amount of guilt
towards her. I’m an only child. She doesn’t really have anyone else.
She’s not mentally stable. She can’t take care of herself. She’s gained a
lot of weight. . . She got married. She got annulled. She tries to date. She
has no car. She has poor insurance. She’s hardly making ends meet and
she’s retiring and she has nothing. Like I have more saved for retirement
than she has and she’s sixty years old. So that scares me. And I have a
huge sense of responsibility because I don’t want her to end up on the
street or unhappy, but then again, being with her makes me feel—I don’t
know. I can’t explain it, but I can’t be nice to her. I’m rude. I can’t help
it. . . But ultimately, I do care about her. I want her to get a good job. I
want to buy her a condo so she can live close to work where she can live in better conditions where she doesn’t have to pay a lot of money. I want her to be okay.

As is evident from these examples, a mid to late life parental divorce can suddenly shift the balance of dependency between parents and children. It is important to note that not all ACD will experience heightened intergenerational ambivalence. In particular, many parents did not become dependent on their adult children after the divorce. The key point is that a parental divorce creates a situation in which parents may turn to their adult children for emotional, social, and financial support. Although the structural situation was the same for all ACD, that is, all had experienced a parental divorce, this event or structural situation was dealt with differently on an individual level. Thus, a parental divorce can be viewed as a potential situation in which the parent-child relationship may need to be renegotiated.

The experience of a mid to late life parental divorce creates a situation in which intergenerational ambivalence is likely to be heightened. Although we know that the direction of dependency shifts between the two generations as they age, some ACD may be unprepared for the dramatic shift in dependency that may occur during and after a mid to late life parental divorce. A parental divorce may temporarily disrupt the structural balance between dependence and independence for the ACD (Luscher 2004). Previous studies found that parents may turn to the ACD for emotional, social, and perhaps financial support (Cooney et al. 1994; Lang and Pett 1992). For those ACD who reported a strained relationship with one or both parents, often this strained relationship was a result of the ACD being “put in the middle,” being asked to serve as a mediator between the parents, or asking the ACD to take sides. As a result of being put in this position (a
structural level), the ACD would often report being affected emotionally (psychological level), as they often reported experiencing contradictory feelings about their relationship with one or both parents.

The intergenerational framework is useful in regard to this study in three important ways. First, the intergenerational ambivalence framework can help us to understand why the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce can be emotionally taxing for ACD, especially if the parent-child relationship is strained during the process of the divorce. Prior to research on this topic, it was assumed by many that young adult children would be better able to “handle” a parental divorce since they were no longer living in the household, etc. As has been shown by previous studies and the current study, a mid to late life parental divorce is both similar and different from an early life parental divorce. Due to the distinct characteristics associated with the parent-adult child relationship at the time of a mid to late life parental divorce, the experience is qualitatively different.

In addition to helping us understand why a mid to late life parental divorce can negatively affect family relationships, the intergenerational ambivalence framework also helps to explain why some individuals’ parent-child relationships are negatively affected, while others’ are relatively unaffected. Certain factors were related to experiencing heightened intergenerational ambivalence. Specifically, ACD who were involved in their parents’ divorce in one way or another (being “put in the middle;” having to take sides; or assuming the role of mediator) were more likely to experience intergenerational ambivalence. These are examples of the shifting balance of dependency between the generations. As young adults, who were quite dependent on their parents, some ACD
may experience a complete reversal in which they are the ones provide most of the support to their parents. If this shift is unexpected or unwelcomed, this is likely to put strain on the parent-child relationship. However it is important to note that strained relationships and experiences of “heightened” intergenerational ambivalence change over time.

Most importantly, the intergenerational ambivalence framework is useful in helping us to understand the evolution of intergenerational relationships. Connidis and McMullin (2002b) proposed that future researchers use the concept of ambivalence to study intergenerational relationships to gain a better understanding of the processes of family life instead of focusing on the steady states. Although a mid to late life parental divorce may create a situation in which intergenerational ambivalence is heightened, the level fluctuates over time as individuals negotiate and renegotiate relationships. Connidis and McMullin (2002b) argue that a key point in conceptualizing ambivalence is the idea of negotiating family ties since relationships between family members change over time and are constantly being “renegotiated” (Connidis and McMullin 2002a).

Furthermore, negotiation occurs long after the transition is over; thus parental divorce should not be treated as a discrete transition since divorce sets in motion an ongoing process of relationship negotiation (Connidis 2003). Based on the results of this study, about one-half of the ACD reported strained parent-child relationships initially, but also discussed how their relationships have improved over time. For those ACD who currently have strained parent-child relationships, perhaps they are still in the process of renegotiation. As mentioned in a previous section, there were different factors such as length of time that has passed, that led many of the ACD to “mend” their strained
relationships with their parents. By utilizing the intergenerational ambivalence framework, these experiences can be interpreted as instances of negotiating and renegotiating relationships.

In addition, Connidis and McMullin (2002b) encouraged future researchers to identify the strategies that individuals use to resolve ambivalence in their family relationships. With this particular qualitative study, I was able to ask the ACD about the ways in which they coped with the overall experience of the parental divorce as well as the changing family relationships during and after the divorce. These strategies or processes of negotiation are explained in greater detail in Chapter 7.

In summary, about one-half of the ACD in the current study reported that their relationship with one or both of their parents was negatively affected during the course of the parental divorce. There were various reasons cited by the ACD for the strained relationships, including blaming one parent for the parental divorce, being “put in the middle” by the parents, and/or experiencing role reversal or parentification, in which the ACD assumed the responsibilities of caring for and supporting a parent during the divorce. In addition, many of the experiences of these ACD led to intergenerational ambivalence, especially during the early stages of the parental divorce; however, time appears to be an important factor in regard to the assessment of the parent-child relationship. That is, ACD who experienced a strained parent-child relationship more than five years ago were more likely to have resolved any issues with that relationship when compared to ACD who experienced a parental divorce in the past five years. While these general findings are consistent with previous research, the divergent point of the results of this study is that about one-half of the individuals in this study did not report
that their parent-child relationships were negatively affected. I turn now to discuss this issue.

**Parent-Child Relationship Not Affected by Parental Divorce**

**ACD Involved to an Extent; Parent-Child Relationship Not Negatively Affected**

There were a few ACD who talked about how their parents turned to them for support, but their relationships were not affected by the parental divorce at all. Cooney et al. (1995) found that involvement in the divorce process was generally associated with lower levels of parent-child intimacy. This conclusion held true for the individuals in this study as well with some exceptions. Even though most ACD talked about how being “put in the middle” was a negative stressor in their life, the following ACD were not bothered when their parents would sometimes turned to them for support. Perhaps these individuals were better able to set boundaries than the other group of ACD or it may be that the emotional and social dependency was of a lesser degree. Nonetheless, the following are the experiences of ACD whose parent-child relationships were unaffected by the parental divorce:

Kurt’s mom would vent to him, the oldest son, at times about the divorce, but Kurt would listen and it did not affect him negatively.

Yeah, she vented to me. ‘Cause my brother—I’m like the one she talks to more out of my brother and sister because I don’t know if because I’m older or what, but—my brother’s still kind of like immature and my sister is going through her “high-school-girl” phase. But I was always the one she’d talk to more just because I don’t know. . . She couldn’t understand why everything happened. . . And “I, I, I.” And just talk in general about anything really. . . I listened. . . because I heard it every day. I eventually just “yes-ed” her to death. She had some points where she was blowing some things out of proportion.
Sheila did not let her mother use her as a “crutch” when she wanted to vent, so she didn’t let their divorce affect their relationship.

It was a really hard transition for her and she tried to talk to me about it when she was living with me, but you know there’s this kind of thing where you’re so close to it—I mean, I was close to it because I was her daughter—and so I really didn’t want to be with my mother in that way, I think. So eventually she did go off and find support groups to talk about it.

Brenton became much more supportive of his mother during and after the divorce because he felt like she needed him more. This new role did not get in the way of their relationship at all; in fact, he actually welcomed the new role. He explains:

Yeah... I became more supportive of my mom—whereas before my mom was supported by my dad, at least financially and somewhat emotionally. But now I’m more like the male figure in her life because she hasn’t dated that much—and so is my brother. It’s more like—yeah, I’m her person to talk to. And guys—maybe I’m just off on this, but guys don’t need that as much as girls do—like that emotional support—whether it be like a friend or lover or whatever. But, I’m just like her friend slash supporter as she gets through this journey of life.

**ACD and Parents Have Always had Close Relationship**

Of the one-half of ACD whose parent-child relationships were not affected by the parental divorce, many of the individuals explained that they have always been close with their parents. As such, during the parental divorce, both the parents and children were able to keep the parent-child relationship and the spousal relationship separate. In other words, the family members appeared to have healthier family dynamics in the sense that they did not let any negativity from the divorce spill over into the parent-child relationships. The following are examples of parent-child relationships that did not change over the course of the parental divorce.
Sal always had a decent relationship with his father, but has become a bit closer with him since he is battling cancer. When his parents divorced a couple of years ago, Sal was very supportive of his parents’ decision to divorce and thus he maintained his strong relationships with each of them. Sal manages to visit his parents at least once a month and since his parents have remained friends after the divorce, they all still get together for dinner at least once during Sal’s visit.

My dad—so my father lives in an apartment that adjoins with a larger house and his landlady lives there. So I visit him fairly often, like about the same amount that I visit my mom. I stay at my mom’s house and visit my dad. Often when I’m down there, like if he’s having a doctor’s appointment, I’ll go with him. . . And we went to Ireland last summer. I guess that was about nine months after he was diagnosed and hung out there. On the trip I had a chance to ask him a lot of—I don’t know—like we talked about—I asked him if he was like afraid of dying and stuff like that—trying to get a little bit deeper.

Brenton has always has a good relationship with both parents and feels very close to his mom.

I don’t see her as much as I’d like to. We talk probably on the phone—I mean both my parents once a week. I don’t know if that’s healthy or not because my girlfriend talks to her mom about four times a day. But every time I’m home I see her—I’m home like maybe once a month and I see her a few times. I think we have a really healthy relationship.

With his dad, he says:

I talk to him about once a week, like I talk to my mom. I probably see him—over the course of the last five years, I probably saw him—definitely saw him more than my mom just because whenever I was home I saw him. I’d come home to him and I’d have to make plans to see my mom. It wasn’t totally lopsided or anything. I don’t favor my dad to my mom or vice versa.

Justin has a good relationship with his dad and it has pretty much always been this way. Even when the parental divorce occurred, Justin was initially upset with father, but talked to him about it.
Well, I was a little pissed off at first, you know? So, I guess it went down a little bit at first, but over time it got better, you know? I wouldn’t say—I guess some people when this happens, I imagine they cut other people off—but, no, I think we’re pretty—we’re okay.

[JM: What is your relationship like currently?]

It’s good. Um, but, I mean, he always—I mean, we go out on his boat. I just had him over for dinner the other night. I mean, he’s always tied up with his—it seems like now he’s more busy partying and skiing and doing stuff and being with his girlfriend. He probably has less time now than I think he did before. I think it’s pretty good.

**Parent-Child Relationship Not Close; Never Was Close**

One might assume that if a parent-child relationship was not negatively affected by a parental divorce then it must be a good relationship; however, this was not the case.

In addition to parent-child relationships that remained close before and after the divorce, there were also some that remained unchanged, in the sense that the ACD described the relationship as being poor prior to the divorce and after the divorce.

Richard never characterized his relationship with his mother as “close,” but he respected his mom for being a good role model. He talked about why he respects her today even if he does not consider their relationship to be a close one.

Even though I can’t tolerate her, I love her and have a tremendous amount of respect because she never fell victim to drugs or alcohol which means she didn’t sidetalk. . . She always said what she meant and meant what she said. I respected that. . . So when I go to visit. . . I stop in to say “Hi. How you doing? Do I have any mail there?” . . . I just try to keep it brief and simple just to show my respects and ask her if she needs anything.

Similarly, Jennifer never had a close relationship with her mom.

When I was really small, I don’t remember a lot about—we never really had a—I mean, her and I never really had a tight relationship. I think that this probably now is the closest. . . Our relationship now—it’s good. We talk. It’s very adult. I don’t have the same kind of bond—like I think—like my receptionist at work has with her daughters. It’s not like that. We
talk and we talk about work and we talk about new electronic gadgets—normal things like that. It’s a decent relationship. It’s not really clingy. Like, I wouldn’t call her with my deepest darkest secrets or my biggest problem. She wouldn’t be the person I would turn to for advice.

Molly has had a poor relationship with her father for most of her life. She had not spoken to her father since the age of 16.

I didn’t talk to him for—I barely spoke to him between sixteen and eighteen—maybe two times. He came to my wedding. But I don’t think I talked to him—we moved to [state name] not too long after that—and then it was years until I talked to him again. I’d run into him when I was maybe visiting when I did move back—like run into him at Sears and talk for a minute, “Hey. How are you doing?” That’s about it—until—there was a period somewhere in there—way back—a couple of times off and on where I tried to—“Well, he’s the only father I have. I need to be nice—kind of overcome this stuff—maybe something’s changed.” And then something would happen, so nothing’s ever changed and it never will.

Richard was never close with father growing up; however, after his father passed, he realized he wished he could have spent more intimate times with him.

Well, it wasn’t like a—he wasn’t one of those—he never came to any of my ballgames. He wasn’t a ballgame-type of dad. He would pretty much just work and then he’d drink on the weekends. He had love for us. But I think he felt like he was being—I don’t know. To me, it always seemed like he wanted more out of life than what he had. He didn’t seem happy—like he settled. . . I could see it, but we never had that type of intimacy between us where we could sit down and, “Hey Pop, what’s going on?” And you know what? That kind of bothers me because a lot of things that I would want—that I would want to say to my dad and have that father-son real tight bond thing—I never had that. And he didn’t show much affection towards me so I didn’t feel it towards him. So we had that kind of tough-guy standoffish type of attitude towards each other. “How you doing Pop? Keep it going.” We never really talked about things from the heart. And that’s something that I wish I would have been able to do.

Similarly, Tim was never close with his father. He describes their relationship as being quite superficial especially during the time when Tim was in college.

Well, he wanted me to play basketball. I was the shortest one. I’m not aggressive or competitive at all in sports. I hated it. And so I would cry
and he hated that because I was the first-born and I was supposed to be his athletic star. . . Like a long time ago, he was trying to get us to side with him so he could use us to make her stay with him. . . And so during the final stages—right before it [the divorce] really happened, he started trying to get closer again. He’d be like, “Tell me about school.” But it was like he didn’t care, you know? Just generic questions.

I included the experiences of these ACD who reportedly were never close with one or both of their parents for one main reason. Just because the ACD are not close with their parent currently does not mean that this is a result of the parental divorce. I specifically asked about the history and stages of the parent-child relationship so that erroneous conclusions could be avoided. In addition, although their relationships with their mother or father may not be the best right now, this does not mean that it will not improve in the future. Many parent-child relationships evolve as children go through young adulthood. I now discuss these relationships at a greater length.

**Parent-Child Relationship Evolves Over Time**

Much like any long-term relationship, the parent-child relationship tends to change over time. Thornton et al. (1995) found that there was an improvement in parent-child relationships during the young adulthood years of the children as children become more like peers or equals with their parents. Although the research of Thornton et al. (1995) did not focus on how the role of a parental divorce affects the quality of the parent-child relationship, one would assume that most parent-child relationships evolve even if there are factors, such as a parental divorce, that may alter the parent-child relationship. In this study, the ACD talked about how their relationships with their parents have changed as they have gotten older and become adults. This was true for
ACD whose relationships with their parents were strained due to the divorce as well as for those ACD whose relationships were unaffected by the parental divorce.

**ACD and Parents Become more Equals/Friends**

A common theme as expressed by the ACD is that they have become closer to their parents as they reached young adulthood because they are more like friends or equals. In Arditti’s (1999) sample of 58 college students, she found that mother-daughter relationships appeared to be close in the sample and daughters tended to attach positive attributions with regard to “best friend” status. In this sample, I found that sons were just as likely to refer to their father as a best friend as daughters were to refer to their mother as a best friend. In addition, there were many ACD who became closer to their opposite-sex parent as they got older. The following are some examples of parent-child relationships that have evolved over time.

I think my relationship with my dad really started to strengthen when I went to college. And then when the divorce began, I saw a different side of my dad. I saw his vulnerability. It was the first time in a long time that I’d seen him cry. So, he exposed himself, so we got a little closer then once the divorce had begun. And then I just—I admired him. He did bring some things out that I didn’t want to know about my mother or about the divorce proceedings. But, in general . . .He would take responsibility for things that went wrong and so I just really admired him for that—for sort of taking responsibility and showing his vulnerable side. Like, I got to see the person. I got to know him as a person and not just as my dad. (Sonya)

Now Sonya is very close with her father.

We’re very close. We talk a lot about a lot of things. I see him—I always see him when I go home—at least once. But, I feel like with my dad, I don’t need to see him as often because our relationship is so strong. So, if I go home and I don’t see him, I’m all right. It’s not like, “Oh, I didn’t see my dad.” But, usually I see him every time when I go home. We don’t talk a whole lot on the phone, but like I said, with my dad, it’s more about quality versus quantity. Like, when we do talk, it’s so good; we vibe so
well together that we don’t need to talk that often, you know? . . . So, we have a very good relationship now.

Zack was never very close with his father growing up and always had a distant relationship with him; however, Zack’s relationship with his father improved over time.

After I became an adult, I really grew close to him and then he passed. . . But I just learned to love my father more—understood him as a man. Being a man, I understood him as a man and understood what he went through and why he did certain things that he did. He was never shown love as a child, so he didn’t know how to give it. But he did love—he loved his children. I knew that . . . He loved his kids. And he left us everything—all his possessions—he left it to me, my brother, and my three sisters. He didn’t leave nothing to neither one of the wives.

After his father’s death, Zack was able to realize that his father did care about him even though he may not have expressed it overtly. Zack described a couple important points in their relationship:

When I got married, he was there. . . he helped me with the wedding because I paid for the wedding and he helped me with that. The first time my father ever kissed me is when I got married—the day I got married—when we were standing outside the church and we were receiving everybody. He come and he just came and grabbed me and kissed me on the cheek. And that really touched me a lot—the first time in my entire life. . . When he got sick—when he was dying—he had a stroke and I went down to the hospital to see him and he had this roommate. His roommate was a jazz singer and he told—he said, “My son sings.” So when I came up there my father said—because he never told me I could sing. He would just come. . . But when I went up to the hospital, he told the man—he said, “This is my son right here. You’re talking about a singer. That boy right there can sing!” And I was just like, “Wow!” And he was just like—and then the last time I seen him, he was still alert, but he had the respirator down his throat and he couldn’t talk and he was in intensive care and that’s when I told my brother, “Daddy’s not coming home.” And that hurt. It hurted really a lot when my dad died.

Other ACD talked about how they have become closer to their parents since they are now adults.

“I’m very close to my mom. I’ve always been close to her. She emotionally, you know, is the one who probably knows me best of all.
She’s always been supportive of me and I know she’s always had high hopes for me and she’s been supportive of what I’ve been doing. So, I would say we’re close. We sort of have a fairly equal relationship; we’re sort of like friends. We don’t feel there’s a big distance between us.” (Charlotte)

We’re extremely close. I tell her everything that happens up here with boys and parties; I really don’t hold anything back with her because she’s very understanding. And she actually talks to me about her boyfriend stuff and I mean, she does know that she’s a mother and I’m the daughter, but at the same time, we’re very close—almost like friends I would say.” (Brandy)

I’m very close to my father. He’s been the most help with my own relationship issues. He’s very supportive and we have a lot in common. We have very similar views politically and things like that. I don’t see him very often though; however, we speak much more often than I do with my mother. We weren’t [always] as close, but now we’re very close. (Levi)

Similarly, Heather’s relationship with her mother has evolved over the years.

When asked to talk about her relationship over time with her mother, Heather explained that she was never very close with her mother. In fact, prior to the divorce, which was recently finalized, she was closer to her father. For Heather, she and her mom became much closer with the birth of her son.

At first she was like, “I’m not helping you. You’re on your own.” That’s just my mom. “You’re on your own. I’m not helping you. I’m not doing anything for you.” Christmas time—she gave me—and I cried. I’m not a crier, but I cried. She gave me this huge basket full of all baby stuff—diapers, everything, just little things that you really really need. And right there I knew—I got her. I knew I got her. . . She’s like, “I want you to go back to work.” I went back to work two days later after I had the baby. She’s like, “I want you to go back to work. I want you—I will take care of him.” And she did.

Although Aaron says he was not initially affected by his parents’ divorce, his relationship with his father has evolved greatly over time.

When I was growing up, I was scared to hell of him. My dad never hit me. Okay, he hit me once—slapped me across the face for doing
something really stupid. But besides that, he never really hit me besides spanking. But I was scared. My mom was the disciplinarian and my dad was—he handed out the punishment. So I was always scared. My dad’s a big man. He’s six foot tall and compared to me—my mom’s five feet tall—and I got stuck in the middle. I’m 5 foot 6—whatever. I’d always be like, “I’m sorry dad.”

During the initial stages of the divorce, Aaron distanced himself from all family members, especially his father.

My dad started drinking more, so he’d come to my sports games all drunk. My friends would give me shit. He’d be trashed. I was like, “Oh God.” He’d be trashed and come up to me and show off his new trophy girlfriend or whatever and my friends would be like, “Damn! Didn’t she just graduate a few years ago?”

Now, Aaron characterizes their relationship as being very close.

I go there and he’s one of my good guy friends. We shoot the shit. We talk about anything, you know? We sit down, hang out together, drink a couple of beers, smoke a little pot. My dad is just—he’s like one of the guys. I bring my guy friends back, we’ll kick back, we’ll bring out some beers and chill out, smoke, relax, and we can talk about sex—we can talk about drugs, talk about relationship problems, what’s going on—any sexual things, any questions, things like that.

Brenton explained how his relationships with both parents have evolved into more peer-like relationships. In regard to his relationship with his mother, he said:

It’s definitely different now than it used to be. It’s more like “grown-up to grown-up” as opposed to “mom and son.” Like she—she doesn’t have a ton of money because she’s paying for a mortgage by herself so she doesn’t like lend me $100 every time she sees me. It’s actually kind of creepy that she talks about her boyfriends with me and dating and stuff. But, I don’t mind because I feel like we’re really close. So she talks about that stuff with me and we go on match.com and look at all the guys that messaged her and stuff. So it’s kind of like a friend—more of like an adult friendship—which I like.

When asked to talk about how his relationship with his father has evolved over the years, he explained:
I guess it is more man-to-man which is kind of like my mom. I was kind of like a friend—an adult relationship. My dad still—he sometimes gives me money and supports me in that way and gives me advice and stuff. He’s more—I guess he’d be more of my parent-figure than my mom. And my mom’s more like a—like I said—a friend, kind of thing.

The intergenerational ambivalence framework can also be used to help explain and better understand the evolution of parent-child relationships over time. As noted in a previous section, some ACD may experience heightened intergenerational ambivalence as a result of dealing with changes in the parent-child relationship after a parental divorce. There are various structural sources of ambivalence created by a mid to late life parental divorce; however I focus on the unexpected and dramatic shift in dependency between the generations during the initial stages of a parental divorce.

Initially, a parent may disrupt this balance of dependency by becoming very dependent on the ACD in terms of emotional, social, or financial support. Based on the results of the current study, this shift in dependency heightens intergenerational ambivalence for some ACD. However, this heightened level of intergenerational ambivalence does not remain constant; it changes over time as individuals negotiate and renegotiate relationships. For example, an ACD may initially have a very strained relationship with one parent during the initial stages of the divorce (i.e. experiencing heightened intergenerational ambivalence), but as time passes, the parent may become less dependent on the ACD and the relationship generally improves over time.

Since this study was qualitative in nature, I was able to ask about how the relationship changed over time. So, what accounts for the improvement or “evolution”? Applying the intergenerational ambivalence framework, I would argue that the relationship has been successfully negotiated by the parent and the ACD. There are
various factors that may lead to this renegotiation including the passage of time. One reason may be that over time, parents may depend on ACD less as they learn healthier ways to deal with the parental divorce. In addition, parents are less likely to be venting about the divorce two, five, or even ten years later than when they are in the initial stages of the divorce; thus, parents are not as dependent on the ACD for emotional and social support. Another factor would include whether or not the “dependent” parent has found a new partner. If a parent is dating, cohabitating, or has remarried, then they may not depend on their ACD for as much support. I would argue that this is a main reason why ACD generally responded positively to their parents dating and/or remarrying. Perhaps the ACD were relieved of their responsibility to an extent if there was another individual to “support” the parent.

It is important to note that not all parent-child relationships are successfully renegotiated. Some relationships may not improve over time, especially if the parent becomes too dependent on the ACD. For instance, an ACD may become an enabler, in a sense, if the parent does not choose more appropriate outlets for support. As a result, the ACD may experience psychological or emotional distress or the heightened ambivalence may lead to a conflicted relationship if the source of ambivalence is not dealt with in a healthy manner. In some cases, the ACD ceased talking to a parent because they were overwhelmed with the demands placed on them; others were able to set clear boundaries between themselves and their parents. In Chapter 7, I discuss the strategies used by ACD in dealing with the overall experience of the parental divorce as well as the changing parent-child relationships.
It is important to note that when the ACD talked about their parent-child relationships changing or evolving over time, it was usually a relationship that had changed for the better. Relationships can change from “good” to “poor” over time and still be considered to have evolved. However, since I dedicated an entire section to parent-child relationships that were negatively affected by the parental divorce, I included only parent-child relationships that had improved over time in this section.

In addition, most of the relationships mentioned previously are same-sex parent-child relationships with a few exceptions. This finding is consistent with previous literature on intergenerational relationships that same-sex parent-child relationships are of a higher quality when compared to opposite-sex parent-child relationships (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Connidis 2001). This pattern was also evident when I asked ACD with whom they currently feel closer to—their mother or father. Next I provide examples of ACD who currently feel closer to their mothers.

**Closer to Mother Currently**

When asked, “Which parent do you feel closer to currently?” many ACD responded they were closer to their mother, for various reasons. The following are some of the responses:

My mother. . . ‘cause she would come up [to college] and see me. She calls me more. I go to her family—I basically spend a lot more time with her than my dad. And my dad would never. . . He hasn’t been up to visit me up here since freshman year. . . So, you know, my mom would just do more stuff for me. (Lance)

Emotionally, I would have to say I’ve always been closer to my mother. I think there were a few periods during adolescence where I thought I was closer to my dad and I’ve always been intellectually closer to my dad, but
emotionally closer to my mother just because my mother was always available—emotionally in a way that my dad has not been. (Hope)

Definitely—yeah, I would say definitely my mom. Let’s put it this way. My emotional attachment is much stronger to my mother than it is to my father. My father became—he really sort of made himself absent years ago. So for emotional support, financial support—he’s good for a joke, he’s good for a check-in. Not that I could rely on my mom for a whole lot of—you know, I have much more of an emotional attachment to my mom. . . [Growing up] I didn’t really feel as though I knew my mom. I knew my mom and my dad, you know, they were this unit. But, I think as a result of their divorce, I got to know my mother as a person where I wouldn’t necessarily have gotten to know her as a person before. (Nicole)

Mom, definitely. She’s—I’ve been in a fair amount of trouble over the years and disagree with me as much as she can, as much as she will—just always had my back. And I’ve gotten in some tight spots and she’s shown up. So she’s very protective. She disagrees with a lot of who and what I am—philosophically, politically—but I guess it’s what they say—that mother’s thing. Definitely her. (Cody)

Definitely my mom, I would say. I like to have fun and goof around with my dad, but when it comes down to it, I’m closer to my mom. . . I just feel like if I was dating someone or something; actually this happened last year. Like, I told my mom right away and I didn’t even mention it to my dad. My mom told my dad, but I just feel like more open with her. It’s easier to talk to a girl about things. (Brandy)

Definitely now my mother. . . I was definitely closer with my mother just because she was that type of mother—always hugging, always close like that, but as far as other ways, I was close with my father—video games and stuff like that. (Ben)

Previous research on intergenerational relationships in general concludes that mother-child relationships are closer than father-child relationships (Rossi and Rossi 1990; Connidis 2001). In addition, research on intergenerational relationships post-parental divorce consistently finds that mother-adult child relationships are less negatively affected by parental divorce than father-child relationships (Shapiro 2003; Cooney 1994; Lang and Pett 1992). I found similar results with this study with a greater
number of ACD reporting that they currently felt closer to their mother than their father. Nonetheless, there were some ACD who reported feeling closer to their fathers currently.

**Closer to Father Currently**

Whereas some ACD reported that they currently felt closer to their mother, some said they felt closer to their father even if they were not close during childhood.

As a child, I was scared of my father. He used to yell a lot. And that scared me. He was like a monster. . . Now we have a very close relationship. I talk to my dad about everything—things I wouldn’t even talk to mother about—things that I should be able to talk to my mother about, but I feel like I can’t. . . So, I can go to him and I can talk to him about things and I sort of got to know him by asking him questions about himself like, “Daddy, tell me about when you were a little boy and tell me about how you felt not knowing your dad” and he would get so emotional and just show me himself. So, we’re very close. If I have a problem. . . I always go to my dad. (Sonya)

I feel closer to my dad. . . We’re closer. We have the better relationship. My mom and I have always had an awkward relationship. I guess a relationship with your parents is really at two levels, right? There’s the friendship level and there’s the typical parent level. And I think my dad has fulfilled those roles better in both aspects. . . That son of a bitch was always there. I mean, he was. When the divorce happened, he was like, “Don’t worry about it.” I was like, “Well am I going to need student loans because you have to live on your own?” I mean, I didn’t say that to him, but I was like, “You know I can get a loan”. . . My dad was like, “Bullshit! You’re not taking out a loan. This is my responsibility. I’ll take care of it”. . . I know that when the chips are down, I know my dad’s always going to be there. (Jim)

My father. (And it has a lot to do with—) becoming a parent. And that’s so funny because I never thought I would say that. I mean, I always knew I would be close to my dad and there was a point when I wasn’t speaking to him that I would say, “I don’t care if anything happens to him. He could die tomorrow and I don’t care.” And I think that if something were to happen to my father, I think that would be so crushing to me, you know? Because he’s your father. He’s this idol figure and not a lot of people can say that about their dad. (Brittany)

We got closer since the divorce. I would say definitely closer. I reached out to my dad more to do things with him especially the holidays or just to
make sure that I call him on a regular schedule as opposed to thinking, “Oh I’ll just do it tomorrow night.” I would definitely make time for my dad. And before I would just be like, “Ah, it’s my dad. I’ll see him whenever—not a big deal.” (Melissa)

My father. [father rings in as I’m asking the question]. . . We’ve always had more fun together. . . He’s warm. My mom’s not warm. . . My dad’s like, “Let’s talk. Let’s shop. Let’s go to the movies. Oh there’s a car show seventy-three miles away. Let’s go!” He’s active. He’s fun. . . And maybe it’s a bad reason to have a better relationship, but he is just more fun. He makes me smile. He makes me laugh. . . He’s my buddy. (Jennifer)

An interesting point concerning those ACD who reported currently feeling closer to their fathers is that with the exception of a couple individuals, they all had one thing in common: having a strained relationship with their mother during the course of the parental divorce. For instance, many of these ACD had blamed their mother for initiating the divorce or their mother had become too dependent on the ACD which led to a strained parent-child relationship. Lang and Pett (1992) noted a possible positive result of a mid to late life parental divorce, namely an opportunity for growth in their relationships with another parent, in a situation where the ACD sides with one parent over the other. It seems that this holds true for a minority of ACD in this study.

Lang and Pett (1992) also concluded that the mother-daughter bond is the most resilient relationship in most cases; however, in instances in which the mother-daughter bond is not close, this is often due to issues associated with the parental divorce such as increased dependency on the adult child or emotional problems. It seems as though the ACD in this study fit the pattern found in Lang and Pett’s (1992) research. Thus, the mother-child bond is the most resilient of parent-child relationships even in the event of a parental divorce. Since this research was exploratory in nature, I was able to go beyond making either/or conclusions: closer to mother or closer to father only. Since I had
asked to the ACD to discuss at great length their parent-child relationships, it became
evident that many of the individuals were torn between choosing which parent they were
closer to currently.

**Close to Both Parents, but in Different Ways**

When I asked the ACD with whom they were closer, many responded that they
were close to both parents, but in different ways. The following are a few examples of
the responses I received when I asked the question, “In general, do you feel closer to your
mother or your father?":

Now I would be hard-pressed to say which one. Um, I think when I was
growing up I was always closer to my mother. But, I think that since my
parents have been divorced, I’ve probably been close to both of them. So,
I’d be hard-pressed to choose now... It sounds really flippant, but I
actually think the divorce improved their relationship. I would feel
frustrated with both of them because they were clearly unhappy with each
other, but they weren’t doing anything about it. And gradually, since the
divorce, they seem to have rebuilt themselves as friends. (Charlotte)

I think—as far as a son, I feel closer to my dad. But, they both
give me so many—they both give me different perspectives on life in
different ways. . . Like I said, my dad is more like a leader for me. It’s
like, “This is what you should do. I’ve been through all of this.” My
mom’s more like—I guess she’s more spiritual. She helps me in the little
things in life kind of like—relax—everything’s not a big deal. You need
to slow down, don’t rush through life—I can make it and so can you... I
don’t know who I’m closer to... I’m closer to my dad as a father and son,
but I’m close with my mom almost like a buddy-buddy now. But she’s
still my mom. I always realize she’s still my mom. (Brenton)

I don’t know actually. I live with my mom, so she knows more intimate
things about me. I don’t talk to my dad about my sex life. I don’t really
talk to my mom about it either though. I don’t know. I’m close with them
in different ways. There’s definitely things I can’t talk to my mother
about just because—I mean, I couldn’t talk to my mother about German
silent films. But there are things that I don’t think my father cares about.
I don’t think my father cares about what type of wedding I want to have.
He doesn’t give a shit. (Josephine)
It kind of depends. I can confide in both of them. I can tell them I’m having a bad day or I can tell them in general what’s wrong. . . Before the divorce, I was definitely closer to mother and like I said, I didn’t see too much of my father before the divorce. I guess you can say that the divorce kind of helped me become closer to both of them in kind of a refining way. (Derrick)

The fact that so many ACD in this study reported feeling close to both parents currently was quite surprising to me. Upon a review of the literature on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on parent-child relationships, the conclusion seems to be that a divorce, no matter what age the child, is likely to negatively affect parent-child relationships. Building on this conclusion, I anticipated that this would be the case with my sample as well. Instead, I found that not only did one-half of the ACD report not having a parent-child relationship adversely affected, but there were many who reported being very close to both parents at the time of the interview. This finding supports the conclusion of Cooney’s research in which she stated “it appears that good relations between a divorced parent and child do not preclude equally good relations with the other parent” (1994:54).

**Parents’ Remarriage or Dating Status and Parent-Child Relationship**

An unanticipated finding from the current study, one that has not been emphasized in previous studies, is the effect of their parents’ new dating/remarriage relationships on the parent-child relationships. Many ACD report that they are happy if (and when) their parents are in a relationship, whether they are dating, cohabitating, or remarried, because they reportedly do not want to see their parents lonely. Similarly, the ACD report feeling better just knowing that there is someone there to take care of their mom or dad. In addition, a common response is that “They’re much happier now.”
Many of the ACD mentioned that much of their parents’ happiness after the divorce is a result of having found someone who is much more compatible in terms of hobbies, interests, life goals, etc. It seems that when the ACD see their parents as being happy, this spills over into the parent-child relationships as well. The following are statements by ACD concerning their parents’ new partners:

But has it changed my relationship with him? Not really. I don’t feel like she’s trying to take the place of my mother. I just feel like she’s somebody there for my dad. And I sort of feel—it sort of comforts me to know that she’s there because my mother has us... When my dad had to move out, I was so worried about him being by himself. Not that he couldn’t take care of himself or cook for himself or anything like that, but just to be alone. So I’m comforted by the fact that she’s there for him and that he has someone to be with and stuff. (Sonya)

I guess I accept it, you know, I mean I do accept it, like, I don’t want her to be lonely and unhappy forever, so if she’s happy, it’s you know good that they still get along—her and my dad— and I’m older so I see that. If I was younger, I might not understand it, but I realize that you have to accept life and my parents are not going to get back together, so they might as well be happy. They can’t be alone forever. (Brandy)

They’re perfect together. They’re just perfect. She takes care of him because he needs someone to take care of him. They enjoy the same things. They spend time with her family. She’s got a big family. Every weekend he’s playing cards and they’re watching football and they’re having cake and all kinds of food and they go out to the movies all the time—him and her. He is just happier than can be. Yeah. That’s the best thing. Looking back, it’s the best thing that could have ever happened to him. I’m happy. I’m really happy. (Jennifer)

She’s fine. I guess we just have the normal—like the “Oh [stepmother’s name], you’re my new stepmom.” We give hugs and stuff. I don’t really tell her I love her. I don’t know if I should or not, but it’s fine with me. I’m fine with it. I’ve known her for a few years now... I can tell he’s happier. (Brenton)

(In a very excited voice) Oh I like her. She’s great. She’s nice. She’s always been nice to me—never said a mean word to me. She’s not the brightest crayon in the box, but she’s not dumb. She’s very very hard-working. I’m kind of worried about what’s going to happen in the next ten or fifteen years when my dad starts breaking down and she’s still in the
prime of her life. She’s thirty-four, thirty-five—something like that. And my dad’s getting into his sixties, you know? . . . I like her. . . I had been pushing my dad to get married to her. My dad came and talked to me about it before he proposed. I said, “Yeah, go for it, go for it!” (Aaron)

Based on the results of the current study, overall, young adults seem to be accepting of their parents’ decision to date and/or remarry after a mid to late life parental divorce. This finding is in contrast to previous research on the introduction of a new boyfriend/girlfriend or stepparent into the family after a childhood parental divorce. Upon further thought on why adult children seem to be more welcoming of a new boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse into their parents’ lives, I would argue this may be due to three important factors. First, as young adults themselves who are more mature and more likely to be in the dating scene or married themselves, ACD may be more capable than young children to take the perspective of single dating adults.

Another factor that may attribute to the ACD being more accepting of their parents’ new partners is age of the ACD and co-residence status. Since ACD are no longer living with their parents, ACD may not feel as threatened by the new girlfriend/boyfriend or stepparent, especially if they move in with the parent. I would think that young children of divorce have issues with the stepparent due to factors such as taking time away from their relationship with the biological parent, as well as discipline issues and such. Many ACD report that their relationships with their parents have actually improved since the divorce and report that they enjoy doing things with their parents and new partners.

In addition, adult children are able to step back and acknowledge how unhappy their parents were when they were married. As adults, they seem to accept the fact that
sometimes married individuals may grow apart over time. This theme was repeated numerous times and was almost always discussed along with the idea that their parents are much happier now that they are no longer married. Some ACD even reported that their parents get along even better now, sometimes sharing family dinners together or holidays. ACD are also able to analyze their parents’ marriage from a mature adult lens as well. Specifically, many ACD note that looking back, perhaps their parents should not have gotten married in the first place.

As mentioned in an earlier section, an additional reason that the ACD may report being in favor of their parents dating, cohabitating, or remarrying is that the parents may depend on them less now that they have another individual in their lives. In this way, the parent-child relationship may improve since the ACD would not be put in a situation that is likely to create heightened intergenerational ambivalence.

Once again, time seems to be an important factor in the lives of the ACD. Based on the individuals in this sample, many ACD expressed that they were not very open or accepting to the idea of their parents dating or remarrying after the divorce. However, many explained that after time had passed, they became more accepting of their parents’ new partners, especially if they saw that their parents were happy.

At first I didn’t like him. I was mean to him. He was coming into my house, where I grew up, with my mom, having sex. It took a while. I was a real asshole to him—regretted it—even more so to my mom. I wasn’t directly mean to him, but I was mean to my mom in front of him, making her look bad because the kid looks bad, you know? And now it’s great. We get along great. We have amazing conversations and she takes me out to do some cool stuff and he’s been retired for a few years himself. (Aaron)

I know there’s another person around, so I’ve got to keep that in mind. But, I try to focus on it being just having it be me and him because I knew I needed to re-establish a good relationship with him and work on things
with him and then I can go on to other stuff. So, I didn’t really let it bother me that he remarried her. His choice to get remarried as quickly as he did kind of bothered me, but I just looked at it as, “It’s not my choice; it’s his choice. If that’s what truly makes him happy, then, you know, I’m not going to be like, ‘you can’t do this.’” (Derrick)

At first I didn’t like it as much. It was a little awkward at first being around him. Now, I mean it’s just like normal, so it’s not that bad. He’s usually always there when I go home and it’s not—he’s a nice guy, so.

(Lance)

Brittany had a difficult time at her father’s wedding ceremony; however she has become more accepting of her father’s new wife since time has passed.

And my dad remarried. I had a bit of a falling out with him at first when they got remarried because I . . . just could not believe I was sitting here listening to somebody else be pronounced Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so. It’s like “That’s not who should be up there. My mother should be up there”. . . I’m not lovey-dovey with my stepmother. I don’t want to say I tolerate her because there’s a better word for that. I’ve been more accepting of her. I try to be. She’s made a very good effort. I’m trying to make an effort. She’s never going to replace my mother. I don’t want her to. She’s my dad’s wife. That’s the only title I can give her. . . I’m very thankful for her. She’s done very good handling with my dad. . . I’m glad that he’s met someone to put up with him. I wouldn’t see him with anybody else. If I didn’t see him with her, I’d see him by himself.

Josephine is still in the “Hesitant” stage and admitted that she is not sure if she’s ready to meet her father’s new girlfriend; however, Josephine’s parents were still in the early stages of the divorce process at the time of the interview.

I’ve heard a little bit about her, but I don’t really ask questions because I don’t really think—I don’t know if I’m ready to see my father with someone else. I don’t know if I’m ready for it. I don’t know. Maybe it’s my fault. Maybe I can’t move on. I don’t know . . . Because our phone calls—one of the reasons I don’t like talking to him that much is because it’s all bullshit. Lately, I’ve been trying to say, “What did you do for New Years?” And he said, “Oh [girlfriend’s name] and I did this.” And I’ll say, “Okay.” But I haven’t really said, “Where did you meet [girlfriend’s name]?” How old is she?” I haven’t asked him questions about her. Our conversations sometimes are just bullshit because how many times are you gonna talk about the weather?
Many of the ACD in this study made it very clear that they were not gaining a new stepparent with their parent’s remarriage. They talked about how they were too old to gain a stepparent and referred to them as their parent’s new spouse.

She was all right. The lady—she was nice to me. And she always had kind words for us and always wanted us to come over and visit. But my mother wouldn’t allow it. . . We got to go do stuff. Here’s the thing though. The lady—she never tried to—we called her [stepmother’s name]—never stepmom—none of that. And she was cool with that. She didn’t try to push that new mother, stepmother type of thing. She kept it real for what it was. “That’s your mother and I’m your father’s new wife. Keep it simple.” (Richard)

Well, she is my father’s wife. Somebody—at the wedding—made the mistake of calling her my stepmom. And I didn’t make—she’s always been my father’s wife. I don’t call her “mom.” She’s only like eight years older than me, so—She has been really actually—she’s been very smart. And she is very smart. She is a very highly successful person in her own right. She runs a major mental health program in [a major city]—highly paid, high achiever, and she’s been very smart to keep her nose pretty much out of it. (Nicole)

A parent’s new partner is not always welcomed into the family by the ACD, depending on the circumstances. In cases where the ACD does not like their parent’s new spouse or partner, this tension often spills over into the parent child relationship.

Some ACD have discussed the issue with their parents, while others have kept silent. The following are examples of ACD experiences in which they did not like the new partner:

This is the woman he cheated on my mom with. . . I don’t understand why he’s with her a lot of times. She causes a lot of tension. . . I can’t stand her. . . I mean, I’ve known her for a huge chunk of my life because they worked together. I liked her then, but I didn’t really know her. Now that I know—she causes problems. . . So yeah, I keep it to myself a lot more. I have been like, “Pop, I don’t know why you’re with this woman.” I’ve said this to him. It’s come up like when things have gotten really crazy—either in my life or his life. I’d be like, “I don’t really understand.” I’m never like, “What the fuck’s wrong with you?” But I’m like, “I don’t get it.” (Jim)
I don’t get along too well with her new husband. He’s kind of a loser... He’s socially inept. He is just weird. I don’t know. He’s selfish for an adult. I think he’s pretty selfish. Like we were out to dinner one night and we were with the kids and the wait was like 45 minutes. I told him, “The kids probably aren’t going to be able to stand there for 45 minutes”... He said, “I’ve set my mind on this. We’re doing this.” So, I mean, I don’t know. It’s like we don’t really want to invite him over to our house for dinner because it’s too much work. So, I mean, we’ve been doing some things with my mom without him now which is good. (Justin)

For ACD whose parents are not remarried and not dating, many ACD actually encourage their parents to date and to try to find someone, especially if the other parent is in a relationship. It is almost like the ACD feel it is their responsibility to encourage and build up the self-esteem of their parents to get out into the dating scene. The following are some examples of ACD pushing their parents to date:

I promote it. I want her to date. I want her to find someone that’s as great as she is—as lame as it sounds. But, I tell her to go on match.com more, but she’s like, “No, I don’t want to date. I want to find myself.” She’s all about being independent and she’s totally a stronger, different person now. She’s definitely changed a lot since I can remember her in high school and before that. (Brenton)

I don’t think she wants to (date) right now. I think that would be good for her. And I think I did say, “You just need to get over the little hump, have sex with somebody and you’ll be fine. I don’t mean to be blunt, but that’s what you need to get over it.” Because she’s been so used to being with him, it petrifies her to be with another man. I’m like, “Get over it. Just do it. Shut the lights out and you’ll be fine!” (Heather)

Although there have been numerous studies that have considered the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on parent-child relationships, there has been a lack of attention paid to the role of a parent’s remarriage or dating status on the parent-child relationships. The findings from this study suggest that if a parent is currently remarried or dating, this is viewed positively by the adult children. A main reason provided by the ACD as to why they support their parent’s remarriage or dating has to do with seeing
their parents happy as well as having someone there to support them. I would argue this finding has important implications and there is a need for future research on the role of a parental remarriage on the parent-child relationship.

**Conclusion**

Intergenerational relationships are an important part of family life, as supported by the results of this study. Much like any relationship, the relationships one has with their parents change over time. A parental divorce is a family event that threatens the parent-child relationship. Previous research has provided evidence that parent-child relationships are often negatively affected by a parental divorce, regardless of the age of the children at the time of the divorce (Booth and Amato 1994; Cooney 1988; Campbell 1995). Based on the results of this study, many ACD reported a negative relationship with one or both parents during the initial stages of the divorce. However, about one-half of the ACD reported that their parent-child relationships were unaffected by their parents’ divorce.

The ACD who reported struggling initially with their parents’ divorce all had one thing in common: they all had a parent-child relationship that was negatively affected by the parental divorce. In contrast, the ACD who reportedly did not have a difficult time with their parents’ divorce did not report having a strained parent-child relationship during the course of the divorce. While it is difficult to determine from the current study whether the strained parent-child relationship caused the ACD to report being negatively affected initially or if their negative initial reaction caused a strained parent-child relationship, there were a few main factors associated with the ACD who reported an
adversely affected parent-child relationship. The ACD whose parent-child relationships were negatively affected were those who were more likely to have been “put in the middle”; more likely to have experienced role reversal; more likely to have blamed one parent over the other; and more likely to have taken sides against one parent. These ACD also experienced periods of not speaking to a parent due to issues related to the divorce. However, these strained relationships did not last indefinitely; many of the ACD have resolved any issues they had with their parents and are currently on speaking terms. It appears that the passage of time is an element to consider, since most of the ACD currently not speaking to a parent are also those who most recently experienced a parental divorce.

Associated with the negative effect of a mid to late parental divorce on adult children is the concept of intergenerational ambivalence. In this study, about 25% of the ACD could be interpreted as having experienced intergenerational ambivalence as a result of experiencing the parental divorce. Intergenerational ambivalence was typical of those ACD whose relationships with a parent had been strained during the course of the parental divorce. This finding contributes to the literature since the intergenerational ambivalence framework has not been applied to the phenomenon of a mid to late life parental divorce. In addition, I would argue this finding has clinical implications as well, especially since the ACD experiencing intergenerational ambivalence were also more likely to have reported being negatively affected by the parental divorce.

Interestingly, about one-half of the ACD in this study did not report having a parent-child relationship that was negatively affected by the parental divorce. As a result, they were also the individuals who did not report being negatively affected by their
parents’ divorce. This finding was inconsistent with the majority of studies on the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on parent-child relationships. Most studies (Cooney 1988; Campbell 1995) find that the parent-child relationship is negatively affected. This study moved beyond previous research by focusing equally on relationships that were affected by the parental divorce as well as those that were not affected by the parental divorce. The results indicated that for many ACD in this group, they did not let the issues associated with their parents’ divorce get in the way of their relationship; that is, many of these families had healthier dynamics in the sense that the parents did not involve the children. In other cases, some parent-child relationships were unaffected because they were never close and so the divorce did not negatively impact it.

A common theme among both groups of ACD, those whose parent-child relationships were negatively affected and those whose relationships were not negatively affected, is the idea that the relationships with their parents evolve over time. Many ACD expressed how they have grown closer to a parent now that they are older and can relate more like peers. Similar to previous research (Rossi and Rossi 1990), many of the ACD in this study reported that they are currently closer to their mother. This supports the consistent finding that the mother-child relationship is more resilient than the father-child relationship, especially after a parental divorce. Nonetheless, one of the most interesting findings from this study is the fact that many ACD reported feeling close to both parents, but in different ways. In other words, when I asked with whom they felt closer, the ACD were often torn because they had become close to both of them.

Lastly, a new theme that has not been highlighted by previous research is the effect that a parent’s remarriage or dating status had on the parent-child relationship. The
majority of ACD, especially if their parents had been divorced for over five years, were accepting of their parents’ remarriage or dating. It seems that since the ACD are adults themselves they have a better understanding of relationships and are capable of seeing things from their parent’s perspective especially when it comes to dating or remarriage after the divorce. I would argue this finding has great implications for future research since this has not been looked at as a possible factor that could affect the quality of the parent-child relationship. The most important point from this study is that not all ACD report having their parent-child relationships negatively affected; in fact, some of the relationships improved over time and since the divorce. I now turn to a discussion of the effect of a parental divorce on the sibling relationship.
CHAPTER 6

ADULT SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to being interested in how the parent-child relationship is affected by a parental divorce, I examined whether sibling relationships were impacted in the aftermath of a parental divorce. Most of the research on the influence of a parental divorce focuses on the parent-child relationship. There has been a lack of empirical and theoretical attention to the influence of a parental divorce on sibling relationships with the exception of a few studies (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001; Bush and Ehrenberg 2003). These few studies focused on how and why adult sibling relationships are affected by a childhood parental divorce (Milevsky 2004; Milevsky et al. 2005; Riggio 2001; Bush and Ehrenberg 2003); however, no research to date assesses the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on the adult sibling relationship. (See Ch. 2 for a complete review of these studies). The results from this study make two important contributions to the family literature. First, this is the first research attempt to assess the influence of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult sibling relationships. Second, this study adds to the limited literature on adult sibling relationships in general.

In order to answer my research questions of “Are sibling relationships affected by a mid to late life parental divorce? And if so, in what ways and what does this mean to Adult Children of Divorce?” I asked about their relationship over the years starting from childhood up until the present. Three common themes emerged from the data. First, the majority of sibling relationships were not negatively affected by the parental divorce. That is, many ACD reported that they had a close relationship with their sibling before and after the divorce. Some ACD reported that they currently were not very close with
their sibling, but then again, never were very close. Second, some ACD reported that their sibling relationships were negatively affected by the parental divorce, especially if they “took sides” with a different parent during the divorce. However, as time passed, their relationships improved. Lastly, many ACD noted that their sibling relationships have changed in a positive way over the years, although they did not believe it was necessarily related to the parental divorce. Many talked about how they have become much closer with their siblings as they have gotten older. This theme of the evolution of the sibling relationship is an important one, since there is a dearth of research on the quality of the adult sibling relationship. I discuss each of these themes in greater detail in the following sections.

**Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Adult Sibling Relationships and Parental Divorce**

The theoretical foundation for understanding and explaining the influence of a parental divorce on sibling relationships consists of two frameworks: the buffering hypothesis and social learning theory (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003; Milevsky 2004). Based on the buffering hypothesis, one would predict that sibling bonds would be strong during a parental divorce, with siblings providing emotional and social support to one another during this family transition (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001). In contrast, based on social learning theory (Bandura 1977 as cited in Milevsky 2004), one would predict that children of divorce would have difficulty in maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships since they are lacking an appropriate model of the skills necessary to maintain a positive interpersonal relationship (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003; Milevsky 2004).
There is research that supports both the buffering hypothesis and the social learning theory. The research of Milevsky (2004) and Riggio (2006) provide support for the social learning theory. Milevsky (2004) found that young adults from divorced families do not regard their overall sibling relationship as close or as supportive when compared to the sibling relationships of young adults from two-parent families. In addition, Riggio (2001) found that the young adults whose parents divorced during late childhood or adolescence were more likely than the young adults from the other two groups to report less positive feelings toward their most important sibling relationship. Based on the conclusions from these aforementioned studies, one would argue that sibling relationships are negatively affected by a parental divorce since the young adults are lacking appropriate models of healthy interpersonal relationships.

However, not all studies assessing adult sibling relationships after a parental divorce support the social learning theory. One qualitative study by Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) provides support for the buffering hypothesis. In a sample of 30 young adults whose parents divorced during childhood, most reported that the parental divorce had an impact, either positive or negative, on their relationship with their siblings (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003). Almost two-thirds of the young adults reported that they became closer due to the parental divorce because they had experienced the divorce together and they talked to their sibling(s) about the divorce (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003).

The results of the present qualitative study are consistent with the findings of Bush and Ehrenberg (2003); thus, the buffering hypothesis is the theoretical framework that best explains why many ACD’s sibling relationships are relatively unaffected when assessing the influence of a mid to late life parental divorce on the sibling relationships in
this particular study. With that said, I argue that there are limitations with these two theoretical frameworks, a point that will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. I now turn to the results of this study.

**Most Sibling Relationships Not Negatively Affected by Parental Divorce**

The majority of ACD in this study reported that their sibling relationships were not negatively affected by their parents’ divorce. Some said that they were uninvolved in the divorce. Other ACD reported that their relationships were unaffected because they either did not take sides during the divorce or took the same parent’s side, eliminating a cause for pitting siblings against one another. Some ACD reported that they turned to their siblings for support during their parents’ divorce, thus bringing the siblings closer together. I discuss each of these factors in greater detail in the following sections.

For some ACD, their parents’ divorce did not negatively affect them personally or their sibling relationships. For example, Justin’s relationship with his brother did not really change after their parents’ divorce. Justin was away at college while his parents decided to divorce and his brother was living at home at that point. Like Justin, his brother was relatively uninvolved in the divorce.

He just kind of went about his thing—going to school and kind of –he’s really smart so he was always worried about getting grades and went to college and graduated with almost a 4.0, so he just kind of went into worrying about education more than getting involved too much with that. But, he did takes sides a bit with my mom ‘cause he was living there, but, I mean, he did go out and do stuff with my dad.

Similar to Justin’s experience, Edith explained that she and her siblings were too busy with their own lives to take sides during their parents’ divorce, so their relationships did not change after their parents’ divorce.
I think my younger sisters were too much into their own thing to care. I mean, I was into my own thing and they had just finished college because they finished one year after me because I had taken that year off. So I was new into my thing and neither one of them were doing—who knows? They both moved out West for several years. And they were not using their college degrees and my mom did not like that and my dad did not like that. So I don’t think they talked very much during that phase. And my older sister—I don’t think she took sides, but she is always someone who will at least give the impression that she is listening, even if she is not.

Based on the aforementioned examples, one might conclude that if the ACD and siblings are busy with their own adult lives, then they will be isolated from the parental divorce. However, it is important to note that there were some ACD who mentioned being “busy with their own lives” as a reason that they had a negative experience of the parental divorce. Although Justin and Edith cited the fact that they were “busy with their own lives,” there were other factors that help explain why their sibling relationships (and parent-child relationships) were relatively unaffected. Other factors might include the fact that their parents did not force them to take sides initially, in addition to the fact that they were living hundreds of miles away from their parents and siblings during the divorce.

Other ACD reported that they never really talked to their siblings about the divorce and assumed their siblings were okay with the divorce too. Lance reported that his relationship with his sister was not affected by their parents’ divorce. Lance admits that he currently is not that close with his sister, but explains that they never really were that close and did not actually talk about their parents’ divorce at all.

She—I mean never really seemed that upset. I’m not really—I wasn’t at the time—when I was living at home—as close with my sister. Like she was going on with her life too. She really never made it that known that she was that upset. She sees my dad a lot more often too than my mom—I
mean, than I do. She—like she babysits his girlfriend’s daughter—she babysits for them. She also babysits for my mom’s boyfriend’s kid—grandkids. So she gets along with everyone. I’m sure she’s fine with it.

Unlike Lance and his sister, Brenton and his older brother have always been very close; Brenton even considers them to be best friends. Brenton was busy with his own young adult life and was preparing to leave for his freshman year of college when he found out his parents were divorcing. According to Brenton, since he was so busy with his own life at that time, he did not let his parents’ divorce get in the way of his own life or his relationship with his brother. When asked to talk about his current relationship with his older brother, Brenton had this to say:

He’s like my best friend, for sure. We’ve always been so close. We’ve always—not that an outsider would always see it because most of the time we were fighting with each other, but I think that’s what makes siblings, especially brothers close…I’m going to move in with him and his girlfriend at the end of the semester and he’s so excited for me to live there…but, I think we share honestly 95% of our interests together.

Although Brenton mentioned the fact that he was very busy getting ready for college at the time of his parents’ divorce, he failed to include other important factors such as the fact that his parents did not force him to take sides and made the transition as smooth as possible. Like Brenton, Brandy talked about being very close with her siblings now that they are older. Brandy reported that she is currently close to both of her younger sisters. However, she explained that neither of the sisters took sides during their parents’ divorce and the whole transition was quite smooth. As a result, they maintained close relationships even with Brandy being away at college. When asked to talk about her relationships with her sister closest in age after her parents divorced, Brandy explained:
I think we got closer and we talked about it. It was definitely nice to have something close in age that you could discuss it with and um, I guess that brought us closer, but overall, our relationship didn’t change.

Like Brandy, Hope was away from her sisters during their parents’ divorce, but they still remained close despite geographical distance. Hope’s sisters did not take their parents’ divorce as hard as Hope did. After years of personal analysis and reflection, Hope believes that her sisters were not as affected as she was with their parents’ divorce because they lived at home for more years after Hope left home and so saw more of the conflict and fighting that was going on. She explains:

I think what they’ve said—at different times—different ones of them have said—they saw mom and dad—their marriage being the most in shambles. What [sister’s name] and [sister’s name] have said to me at different times—[sister’s name] and [sister’s name] never really saw mom and—never had the fantasy of the happy family life together. They knew that dad would go to work and then he’d go to bookstores and he’d buy books or what-have-you. My dad was a shop-aholic—still is. So they didn’t have the illusion of a happy family life that I did. So for them it was “Well thank goodness. It’s about time.” And [sister’s name] and [sister’s name] more had that and I think that has more to do with their temperament. [sister’s name] was there and just saw it more than I did.

So although Hope and her sisters experienced and dealt with their parents’ divorce in different ways, they were able to remain supportive of one another and to remain close, despite the geographical distance that has presented obstacles over the years. Although the ACD in the aforementioned examples reported that their sibling relationships were not affected by the parental divorce, it is possible that they did experience buffering without realizing it.

Once again, based on the buffering hypothesis, one would predict that sibling bonds would be strong during a parental divorce, with siblings providing emotional and social support to one another during this family transition (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001).
Even if the ACD did not specifically discuss providing support to one another during the process of the parental divorce, the strong relationship itself may have “buffered” or protected their relationship.

Many of the ACD talked about factors, such as being pressured to take sides, that could have created strain in their sibling relationships, but they did not let that happen. This is similar to the finding that some ACD were “put in the middle” by their parents, but did not let it get in the way of their parent-child relationships. Similarly, some ACD reported that they and their siblings took different sides during their parents’ divorce, but did not let this get in the way of their relationship. This would be another example of the role of the “buffering effect” (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001). An interesting point is that there were other ACD who stated this factor of “taking different sides” as the very reason that their sibling relationship was strained, a point I will discuss in a later section. The following are examples of ACD who took different sides but did not let this get in the way of their relationship.

Although Heather and her sister took opposite sides during their parents’ divorce, their relationship did not change. In fact, Heather believes they have gotten closer since the start of their parents’ divorce. I asked Heather about their relationship during this time:

She was—she didn’t believe that my father did this [their father had been having an extramarital affair]. She was all for my father for the longest time. For the really longest time—she really blamed my mom. And that put a damper on their relationship…And I don’t know what happened, but they don’t talk now. Her and my father haven’t spoke in two years. She turned. She hasn’t talked to my dad in two years.

[JL: Now has this affected your relationship? Did it affect your relationship then when she wouldn’t side with your mom?]
No, because I never judge people because I don’t know what you’re thinking. I don’t know what you’re feeling. I’m not going to judge you. And I think—no, we always kept that separation and I don’t know why. Even with my brother—we always kept things separate. What’s going on with them is going on with them. It has nothing to do with us.

Similar to Heather’s experience, during the time of their parents’ separation and divorce, Derrick and his younger sister took different sides, but they did not let it affect their relationship. He explained their relationship during the early stages of their parents’ divorce:

[JL: Now, did your sister take sides when your parents were going through the divorce? Did she agree more with your mother or your father?]

Definitely with my mother’s side. She took, I think it was right off the back [bat], she was more leaning more towards my mother, definitely.

[JL: And did this affect your relationship with your sister at all?]

Not really, because for a little while, I kind of took her stand on it, but after doing a lot of thinking myself and refining each parent’s relationship, I was able to stay close with both, but I would see her taking the side of my mother because before the whole divorce and separation, she was actually kind of close with my father.

[JL: Before the separation?]

Yeah. I would say she was very close with my father than my mother. So, seeing what he was doing [father was having an extramarital affair] and knowing that it was a big cause of the divorce, it kind of really made her shift the other way and I expected it, so I wasn’t like, “You know you’re a bad kid for doing that,” but I tried to say, “Hey, you kind of got to be objective to both, so.”

Although Robin’s older sister took her mother’s side, Robin did not let that get in the way of their relationship (divorce was in process at the time of the interview). Robin explained that she always felt bad for her sister because she is put “in the middle” much more than herself:
I feel bad for her. It’s definitely. I agree with her siding with my mom, but I feel bad for her that she’s involved a lot more than I am. But, I told her that I was sorry that she was more involved and that I wish I could be more supportive and stuff. But, I told her that I would start getting more involved if she wants me to—like sacrifice my happiness—some of my happiness, I guess. If she wanted me to call my dad more and be there and get involved more, I would. But I don’t think she wants me to really. I mean, she’s—she sees a therapist so she’s fine.

[JL: Is it a common topic of conversation for your two these days?]

Yeah definitely. We always talk about it. She doesn’t talk about it to my other siblings really. So my sister and I talk a lot about it.

As is evident from the previous examples, even in cases in which siblings took different sides, there was still sibling support during the parental divorce. Although the ACD may not have specifically talked about providing social and emotional support to their siblings, as defined by the buffering hypothesis (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001), I argue that “buffering” was in operation.

In addition to ACD taking sides during the parental divorce (even if it did not have a negative effect on their sibling relationships), there were many ACD whose siblings took the same parent’s side during the divorce. Based on the experiences of the ACD in this study, if ACD and their siblings took the same parent’s side, their sibling relationships were less likely to be negatively affected than if they took a different parent’s side. Those ACD who took the same side were also more likely to support one another during the parental divorce, something that reportedly strengthened the sibling relationships. These findings are consistent with the research of Bush and Ehrenberg (2003), in which two-thirds of their sample reported positive influences of a parental divorce on sibling relationships. Specifically, much like the majority of young adults in Bush and Ehrenberg’s (2003) sample, many of the ACD in this study reported becoming
closer with siblings as a result of supporting one another during the parental divorce and experiencing the parental divorce together.

**Siblings Support One Another during Parental Divorce**

Some ACD in this study reported that they provided emotional or social support to their siblings (or vice versa) during their parents’ divorce. When asked to talk in great detail about their sibling relationships over the years, some of the individuals in this study discussed the important role of siblings before, during, and after their parents’ divorce. Thus, the results of this study are consistent with Bush and Ehrenberg’s (2003) research and support the buffering hypothesis, in that the potential negative influence of a parental divorce is lessened if there are siblings to discuss matters with and to help shoulder the responsibilities often bestowed to ACD. The following accounts are examples of ACD who reported that they supported their siblings (and vice versa) during the parental divorce which, in turn, strengthened their sibling relationships.

Derrick describes his relationship with his younger sister as one that is very close. He attributes this closeness to the fact that they have experienced some family struggles together, especially the recent divorce of their parents. According to Derrick, during their parents’ divorce they supported one another:

She’s 15 and I’m 21, so there’s not too much of a gap, but there are differences there. But, me and her definitely have been very close from the beginning. A lot of it is ‘cause we saw our parents—the way we saw them. It kind of just grew from there. Once she was starting to kind of understand what was going on with them—she was upset and she would come to me and I’d be like, “I know this is what it’s like,” but we still have always been very close. We have a lot of things in common.

Since Derrick and sister were so close before their parents’ divorce they talked a lot about it and supported one another. When asked about how their relationship evolved
during this process, Derrick describes the new closeness of their relationship after their parents’ divorce:

It was already really close to begin with, but it kind of brought a whole new closeness to it, because we had that to share and we had each other to kind of build off of and support, you know? Whenever I was down in the dumps, she would come around and help me. The same thing with her. If she was down about it, I would be there for her. It would just give us an outlet for what was going on at the time, so we wouldn’t feel so alone about it or feel too down.

Similarly, according to Hope, since all of the children were young adults when their parents divorced, Hope says their parents’ divorce seems to have brought the sisters together because it gave them something to talk about. When asked to explain what she meant by this, she replied:

I think it brought us closer because it gave us something to talk about. It’s not that we hadn’t been close. . . I think it gave us more to talk about. That’s not the way to say it, but—in terms of their taking sides, what they also have said is that dad is more—easier to talk to than he was. He seems to be more aware of things than he was. I mean we all—holidays we always all spent with my mom. We wouldn’t be spending them with my dad just because he’s not warm and fuzzy where my mom was. So in terms of changing—well it’s something else for us to analyze and some other experience that we’ve been through together, I guess is the way I’d have to say it.

When Tim was asked about his relationships with each of his siblings, he talked about how initially they became closer because they were there to support each other.

I think it [his parents’ divorce] brought us all closer because we all had each other to rely on so that’s what brought us closer together. Also like defending my mom—like brings us closer together. Like me and my sister—who I’m not talking to—like I’ll still defend her to the death and she, me. Like this is between us. . . And she’ll do the same for me. So that brings us close together. I don’t know. The family bonds are still there. I don’t know how to put that into words.
Heather also felt like the parental divorce somehow brought the siblings closer together especially since their parents put them all “in the middle,” creating some strain in which they vented to one another about at times.

And I think, if anything, us kids got closer, you know? I think we really did—more as a family.

[JL: Can you explain that a little more. In what ways or what made you realize that?]

Because that’s all we had. . . We were going through something. We knew we could talk to one another without putting the other parent down, you know? If we were upset with mom, I knew I could go to [sister’s name] and say, “She’s driving me crazy.” And I knew it’s not going to go any farther than that. I knew I could be honest and say I’m feeling overwhelmed and I can’t take this anymore. Or I would call [brother’s name], “I’m overwhelmed. I can’t take this anymore.” I knew it wouldn’t get back to my mom because I’m just letting out steam. I’m not saying anything. I’m just letting it out. That’s the only way I can let it out. And I think that’s why we all three did get closer because that’s how we all feel.

Similarly, Melissa and her brother have always been quite close and supported one another during their parents’ divorce. Her older brother was out of the house at the time, but Melissa talked about how her brother was there to support her when she was still co-residing with her parents during the separation and divorce.

I have an older brother [name]. He’s six years older than me. He was out of the house during this—when all of this happened. He was married and doing his own life. And twenty-five years old and married—I think he had my nephew at that point. I would often go to their house as a retreat on the weekend just to get away from the nonsense and the chaos that was going on. . . He more or less stayed neutral. I mean, he was married, he was working, he was raising a child, he was supporting his wife who didn’t work either. And he just stayed at a distance and was supportive to me, but just tried not to get involved.

When asked whether or not Brenton and his brother talked about their parents’ divorce, Brenton explained that they have talked about it but have not let it get them
down. According to Brenton, they were both supportive of their parents’ decision to divorce and move on with their lives.

I think we did talk about it. I can only remember one time that we got really drunk and we were like crying about it. But I think that was more the drinking and it’s kind of like “at least we have each other” kind of thing. So we got emotional about that. But nothing like—maybe ten times in the last five years and nothing more than like twenty minutes, I guess. I honestly can’t remember the last time that we did (talk about it). It may be in passing now a days, like mom and dad aren’t like together. But, no feelings of sadness or anything. It’s actually like happiness because both of our parents are happier. We’re doing our own thing.

Nicole and her siblings all supported one another during the divorce. Nicole grew up in a family of all daughters. Even before her parents’ divorce, Nicole described her relationships with all of her sisters as very close. During the time of the divorce, all of the sisters sided with their mother because they felt she was “wronged” since their father left for another woman. Nicole explained that all of the sisters talked to each other about what was going on and were supportive of one another. She explained:

We talked to each other. We kind of grouped together a lot and we were raised to kind of circle the wagon and defend against outsiders and so we supported each other quite a bit. . . So we’ve supported each other. Like if my mom was going to take somebody’s head off or something, we didn’t necessarily go after my mother because there’s no sense jumping into the pit, but we would support each other. So the person would call and we’d help soothe them. And to this day, we still do that. . . And a lot of our relationships are built on each supporting each other as we deal with our parental units.

Even today, Nicole and her sisters still support each other when issues arise with either their mom or dad.

I’ve been thinking about what happens when my mom goes and ultimately what happens when my dad goes. And you know, you wonder about the glue because I do think that they hold us to each other. Because there is no family home anymore. . . Like we have no family home. We have my mom’s place and my dad has a place. So when you think about where to gather and where everybody should meet. . . We do it to be with my mom,
but I don’t know when they’re not around—where that will lead us—being that we’re so geographically spread.

Nicole’s experience of the continual sibling support even years after the parental divorce is also consistent with the results of Bush and Ehrenberg’s (2003) study. They found that divorce-related issues, even years later, were cited as reasons that kept the siblings connected over time. Thus, the sibling support that may bring siblings closer during the initial stages of the divorce continues well into the adulthood years. It seems that, despite the parental divorce, there may be times when the parents have to come into contact with one another after the divorce at events such as family gatherings, holidays, graduations, weddings, and funerals. For families in which the parents parted on bad terms, this may lead to much stress for the ACD.

In addition to siblings providing support to one another during the parental divorce, there were some ACD who have been supporting or were being supported by another sibling for many years, even before the parental divorce. This was especially true for those ACD who witnessed their parents’ marital conflict during childhood and adolescence. Since a parental divorce is not a random event, a few researchers have attempted to assess the role of marital conflict or perceived marital conflict on the adult sibling relationship. Panish and Stricker (2001) found that both parental marital conflict and parental divorce was associated with sibling conflict in young adults. Similarly, Milevsky (2004) found that perceived marital conflict led to conflict among siblings. Whereas the results of these two quantitative studies seem to indicate that both marital conflict and parental divorce lead to sibling conflict, the results of this current study suggest otherwise. However, it is important to keep in mind that the data presented from the current study is based on the respondents’ perspective whereas the quantitative
studies are relying on quantitative analysis. In particular, ACD, whose parents fought a lot during childhood and went on to divorce years later, often had close relationships with their siblings because they supported one another during their parents’ fights and marital conflict. In the following section, I provide examples of ACD who currently reported having a close relationship with a sibling due to the experience of supporting one another during their parents’ marital conflict and later the parental divorce. The following examples provide further support for the buffering hypothesis.

Zack was in his thirties when his parents divorced. When asked about his relationship with his brother, Zack tells of a very close relationship with his brother from the time they were very young. Zack recounts memories of when his parents would fight and Zack, as the older brother, would take care of his brother and take him away from all of the conflict in the house. Explaining this protector role of “big brother,” Zack remembers the following situation:

Sometimes when we got older I would just tell my brother, “Let’s go. Let’s go out while they—I’m tired of the arguing.” They was just arguing or something like that and then my brother would just get angry. He’d say, “They make me sick. They can never get along.” I’d say, “Let’s just go. Let’s just go to the park or something” . . . I just wished they would just divorce.

No matter how bad the fighting became between his parents or how much abuse they took from their father, the two brothers would always stick together, supporting one another. Even today they are still very close.

[JL: When your parents would fight and there was a lot of conflict going on, how did you and your brother deal with it?]

I would just hold him because he would be crying and I could never cry. . . If my father hit me, I would just well up. I would not cry. A tear would not come out. And my brother—he would cry and I would always protect him. I would always hold—and when he’d see that happening, I would
just hold him like this and cover our ears ‘cause we didn’t want to hear it—stuff like that. . . He still looks up to me. . . Me and my brother—we’re brothers—in every sense of the word “brothers.” It’s just the two of us and we love each other and [would] do anything in the world for each other.

Like Zack, Molly also had a younger sibling. Molly never had a very good relationship with her father and during her childhood and adolescence she would often get in physical fights with her father. However, since Molly was always close with her younger brother she always had his support both physically and emotionally when she would be fighting with her father. She explained what it was like during these times:

He [brother] would—when my father and I would be fighting, he’d jump in on my side and jump on him, hit him with a chair or whatever, so—and we always went to my room after these things happened and hung out, laughed—wiping the blood, but “Damn that’s funny!” . . . We were never in these things alone and we both recognized how it was just utter madness. It was just utter madness and it was just stupid.

As the previous examples demonstrate, sometimes the marital conflict leading up to the divorce was indirectly responsible for creating close sibling bonds. Bush and Ehrenberg (2003) found similar results, with some of the young adults in their study, explaining that the parental divorce (during childhood) brought their sibling relationships closer because of the siblings supporting one another, especially if an older sibling was assuming the role of caretaker to a younger sibling. Results of this study indicate that the effects of a parental divorce may not be as detrimental as one would think; however, there were some ACD who reported that they currently did not have a close relationship with their siblings, although it may not be related to the parental divorce. I now turn to discuss sibling relationships that are not currently close.
**Siblings Not Close Currently, but Never Were Very Close**

When discussing adult sibling relationships that were not negatively affected by a parental divorce, it is important to note that this does not imply that all of these sibling relationships would be considered a “close” or a “good” relationship. In fact, some ACD talked about current sibling relationships that were strained or “not close.” They reported that they were never close with a particular sibling to begin with, so, in fact, their relationship was unaffected by the parental divorce. In some cases, the siblings simply did not talk about the divorce or they had a “poor” relationship already, so even if there was disagreement regarding the parental divorce, the quality of the relationship was not negatively affected.

Based on the reports of the ACD, one might assume that the parental divorce was not a factor in their overall assessment of their sibling relationships. However, upon further analysis, I argue that perhaps the sibling relationships were affected by the poor quality of the parental divorce. It is of great importance to view parental divorce as a *process* rather than a discrete event that only has immediate implications. A parental divorce, whether it occurs during childhood or adulthood, is a complex family process that has many transitional stages. A parental divorce is often preceded by a period of conflict and separation. Furthermore, even after the legal divorce, family members are often confronted with situations in which the family members must come together at events such as family gatherings, holidays, graduation, weddings, and funerals. Thus, family relationships may change at any point during this process of divorce.

In many of the cases in which ACD reported that their sibling relationships were not affected by the parental divorce because they were “never close,” their parents had a
history of marital conflict and discord. Thus, it is plausible that these sibling relationships may have been negatively affected long before the actual legal divorce, even if they did not realize it. Although I asked the ACD to discuss at length their sibling relationships over time, since I was interviewing “Adult Children of Divorce,” it is likely that they were focusing on the event of the legal divorce rather than the whole process of the divorce. I provide a few examples of ACD who reported that their sibling relationships were not negatively affected by the parental divorce because the siblings were not very close prior to the divorce.

Even though Josephine currently has a very strained relationship with her younger sister, she explains that they never really were close from the very beginning.

I’ve never really liked my sister. When I was younger, I wanted to be an only child. My sister and I are just very different—completely opposites. She’s into money and clothes and brand names and I just want to hug a tree and read some books. I don’t know. I think we were raised the same, but I’m able to take a step back and look at myself and acknowledge when I do wrong things. And I think my sister has a hard time doing that.

With her parents’ divorce in progress at the time of the interview, Josephine explained that her sister is taking their parents’ divorce differently than herself, although Josephine has been admittedly having a difficult time with it too. She explains their difference of opinion:

She’s taking this whole thing very hard because she was very close with my father. So she goes between hating him and loving him and never wanting to talk to him again and disowning him and needing him more than ever. It’s like polar opposites at any moment. She has more problems than I do with my father.

[JL: Did you and your sister talk about the divorce a lot—about how you were feeling?]

Yeah. She’s pretty much always been on my mother’s side. And if I ever said anything positive about my father, she would get pissed off.
Although Josephine’s parents never had a history of marital conflict prior to the divorce, Margaret’s parents did. Currently, Margaret reports that she is not very close with either her sister or brother, although they never were close. Since her parents’ relationship was characterized by much fighting, it is possible that her sibling relationships were affected by this conflict. Margaret explained that one point of contention between the siblings is the fact that Margaret ends up taking most of the responsibility for the caregiving duties with her mother. Margaret talked about how she would characterize her relationships with her siblings:

Um, we’re—we talk on the phone. I wouldn’t characterize us as close at all. I wouldn’t say we have a really close family. We talk on the phone. It’s good. It’s cordial. If something needs to be done—like with our parents, we coordinate that. We get along. When we were growing up, we used to fight a lot, but we get along. We’re very different though. She’s always been in the same job. I’ve jumped around. She tends to be more critical and judgmental—that kind of thing. She’s like, “You’re single. Of course you should do this for mom.” Where she’s married and it’s like she doesn’t have time. But because I’m single, of course I should do these things.

Even though Margaret quickly dismissed her sibling relationships as unaffected by the parental divorce, it is possible that the relationships were affected by the parental conflict prior to the parental divorce. Similarly, although Ben reports that he is not currently close with his sister, he explains that he has always had a rough relationship with his younger sister. Upon further analysis of his sibling relationship, it is seems that his strained relationship with his sister was related to the parental conflict prior to the divorce. Ben explained his parents and sister often blamed him for the “problems” that led to the marital conflict and the eventual divorce. Due to this tension in the family, Ben moved in with his grandparents after having a fight with his father; so by the time his
parents decided to separate and start the proceedings for the divorce, he was not really speaking to his sister.

[JL: What happened to your relationship with your sister right around the time your parents separated and you moved out?]

Um, actually, I’ve really only started talking to my sister better since I’ve gone to college and since I’ve been able to be out of the house and since she was finally able to see that all of the problems in the house weren’t due to me and that everything—my parents’ fighting and everything—wasn’t just due to me. . . Really she doesn’t like me sometimes and sometimes I just gotta deal with it and realize that once she goes to college and sees how things really are and starts to grow up, then I think she’ll understand it better. But over the years, when we were younger though, we didn’t get along very well. She would always be blaming me for the problems—like my mother did and like my father did.

Over time, Ben’s relationship with his sister has improved for various reasons. First, Ben mentioned that she finally was able to see the negative qualities of their father that led him to move out in the first place. In addition, Ben attributes their improved relationship to the fact that she’s getting older.

She’s gotten to the point where just because she had to deal with my father coming home drunk every night, yelling at her, yelling at my mother—everything that went on—him just getting violent and verbally abusive.

Aware of the importance of sibling ties, Ben hopes that his relationship with his sister will continue to improve in the near future. He explained:

“I want to have a good relationship with my sister one day, but right now I think we’re both probably a little too young to have that ‘big brother-sister’ relationship.”

It is uncertain what role a positive sibling relationship would have played in these ACD’s overall initial experience of the parental divorce. It is beyond the scope of this research to make generalizations concerning the connection between the role of the sibling relationships and an ACD’s overall initial experience of a parental divorce. The
majority of ACD in this sample did not report their sibling relationships being negatively affected by the parental divorce; in many cases, the siblings reported that they were actually brought closer together because of the divorce, a finding consistent with the results of Bush and Ehrenberg (2003). Based on the results of this study, one can conclude that the influence of a parental divorce on sibling relationships is not necessarily negative. However, I would caution against making such conclusions since ACD may be unaware of the ways in which their sibling relationships may have been impacted by the marital conflict that led to the parental divorce. I now turn to discuss the minority of cases in which sibling relationships were negatively affected by their parents’ divorce.

**Sibling Relationships Negatively Affected by Parental Divorce**

Only a small number of the ACD in this sample reported that their sibling relationships were negatively affected by their parents’ divorce. For some, their relationships were strained because they took different sides during the divorce, fracturing their own relationship. For others, the overall stress of the parental divorce spilled over into other familial relationships. The following are examples of ACD whose relationships changed during the parental divorce.

During their parents’ divorce, Gretchen and her sister took different sides and this put a great strain on their relationship, hurting each of them differently. When Gretchen was asked about what was the most challenging part of dealing with her parents’ divorce, she replied that it was dealing with the taking of different parents’ sides during the
divorce. Fortunately, according to Gretchen, they were able to overcome their difference and put their relationship ahead of the other issues at hand:

[JL: Can I ask you to talk about how when you two took sides with your parents’ divorce? How did that affect your relationship?]

Well after we realized—a couple of months had gone by and they were into the divorce and as adults I think we both so much wanted to get—I wanted to defend my mother and she wanted to defend my father. We became like unprofessional lawyers defending each other. And after a while because there was so much fighting going on with my—because my parents were calling us too, “Take my side.” Not literally in those words, but we had—I think three or four months had gone by with all this going on. We had, at that point, decided we weren’t discussing it anymore. It was just something we agreed to disagree. To this day, we do not discuss it. It is taboo. . . We weren’t going to tear apart the family anymore than my parents already did. They did—they really did. Everybody took sides. It was a nightmare.

For Sonya, the family dynamics in her household completely changed when her parents decided to go through with the divorce. Especially challenging was the fact that all of the siblings were currently living together with their mother while the divorce was in progress.

Sonya explains how she was fighting with her sisters like they were strangers because of the spillover of all of the tension and stress from their parents’ relationship:

And then their [parents’] relationship—I think it put a lot of stress on everybody because my sisters were fighting a lot—me and my sisters were constantly fighting like we were strangers—not just like siblings fight. We were fighting like people in the street—like, “I hate you!” It was horrible.

[JL: And why do you think that was?]

I don’t know. I think people—I think we were getting pulled to either daddy’s side or mommy’s side. So, it was just this division like, “I side with mommy and you’re wrong.” We felt like we needed to take a side and all of us weren’t all on the same side. . . but I think we were just all more raw and more like on edge because of the divorce, so those things
got multiplied and made into bigger deals than they were. . . That’s why I say that’s what hurt me the most. Because siblings fight—that’s what they do. But, we fought like we were strangers. We fought like we didn’t know each other.

Brittany has one younger brother with whom she is currently not close at all. During their parents’ divorce, they had completely different experiences with Brittany being put “in the middle” much more than her brother. Due to these differences, Brittany was very resentful of her brother at times.

[JL: So you didn’t talk to your brother about your parents’ divorce when it was going on?]

No because he couldn’t see my point of view. He couldn’t see my side. . . He just—he was in a different place. He was being a kid where I was thrown into an adult role. I mean we tried to be brother and sister but he always took off with his friends. . . He wasn’t around. So he didn’t deal with anything. I think if he had to deal with anything, he had to deal with when my dad’s girlfriend moved in who became our stepmother.

Although her relationship with her brother is not much better than during the time of the parental divorce, Brittany expressed her feelings in regard to her relationship with her brother since she’s had a few years to reflect on her own personal experience of her parents’ divorce. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add about her relationship with her brother, she explained:

I love him very much. I wish him the best. I guess it’s not fair to blame him, to be mad at him or to resent him because he was stuck into the same situation that I was thrown into. It’s just they were trying to buy him out. It was whoever could buy his affection enough to side with him. And seeing that now, I see that—I accept it better now than I would then. Looking back at it now, I can accept things for what they are. Back then, it was just, “Why am I being picked over? Why are we being chosen? Why are you using us in the tug-of-war?” And that’s not fair. And I can see that now. Seeing now what each parent had to deal with or not deal with—I can see how that could have affected us or how they took it out on us.
An interesting point is that all of the aforementioned reported a strained relationship with a sibling as a result of “taking different sides” during the parental divorce. When the ACD become involved in the parental divorce, whether they wanted to be or not, family relationships become vulnerable. While siding with one parent may strengthen that particular bond; there are other relationships, including those with your siblings that are likely to be influenced. This seems to be the case for the minority of ACD who reported a sibling relationship that was negatively affected; however, it is important to keep in mind that a sibling relationship may have been negatively affected, but they might not have reported this during the interview if they felt that they were not very close from the beginning. In addition, there were other ACD who experienced “taking a different side” than a sibling, but reported that their relationship was unaffected by this difference in opinion. Although “taking sides” is clearly a factor that could potentially strain a sibling relationship, this is not always the case. In an effort to explain why some sibling ties are relatively unharmed from taking sides, the concept of ambivalence, originally applied to intergenerational ambivalence (see previous chapter), can be extended to intragenerational relationships (Connidis 2005).

**Intragenerational Ambivalence**

Connidis, one of the pioneers in the application and theoretical development of intergenerational ambivalence, came up with the concept of intragenerational ambivalence. Connidis (2005) argues that we can learn more about negotiating ambivalence in all family relationships by studying sibling relationships. Compared to other family ties, adult sibling ties are more voluntary in nature. As a result, sibling ties
are vulnerable to the cultural priority placed on obligation to other family members, especially a spouse, parents, and children (Connidis 2005). In addition, sibling relations typically consist of mixed emotions and socially structured contradictions due to the ambiguity of cultural expectations regarding sibling ties creating a basis for ambivalence. For instance, adult siblings are expected to be friends with their siblings and to feel a sense of family commitment, yet siblings are supposed to limit demands placed on siblings. However, there are certain times during the lifecourse that siblings may call upon another sibling for support. Examples might include family transitions such as an elderly parent’s need for support from adult children; a divorce of a sibling; or the birth of a child.

The intragenerational ambivalence framework can help us to better understand why some adult siblings may experience ambivalence during and after family transitions. More specifically, the sibling may feel some sense of familial obligation to help out, but may feel they do not have the time to help out as much as is requested. At this point in time, these relationships will need to be negotiated. A key assumption by theorists utilizing the ambivalence framework is that all social actors attempt to exercise agency over their own lives (Connidis 2005).

Connidis (2005) has suggested that adult siblings may be linked to one another through joint filial responsibility such as caring for an elderly parent. She explains that this is a case of a situational imperative which requires negotiation among the siblings. She goes on to explain that siblings will vary in their ability to negotiate a particular outcome based on socially structured relations such as gender and class.
Drawing from Connidis’s (2005) work, I argue that the conceptual framework of intragenerational ambivalence is also applicable to the event of a mid to late life parental divorce. A mid to late life parental divorce is an example of a situational imperative that may require adult siblings to take action in supporting one another and their parents (or not); in other words, a parental divorce may demand negotiation of many family ties. Although a parental divorce is an event that has the potential to create a need for adult siblings to negotiate their relationships, not all siblings will have to negotiate sibling relationships. In families in which the parental divorce is a smooth, easy transition with little to no fighting between parents, then it is less likely to create ambivalence. Furthermore, I argue that certain factors would increase the likelihood that the adult siblings would need to negotiate their ties. Specifically, if parents force the ACD to “take sides,” then this would put strain on the sibling relationship.

Based on the results of the current study, many ACD were put in the position of having to “take sides.” Some ACD reported that their sibling relationships were negatively affected as a result of “taking sides,” while others reported that their sibling relationships were unaffected even though they took different sides. Based on the key idea that individuals must act to negotiate the sibling ties that are characterized by ambivalence, I argue that it is those ACD successfully negotiated the ties who reported that their sibling relationships were unaffected. In contrast, those who reported a currently strained sibling relationship had not successfully negotiated the ambivalence.

Connidis (2005) explains that socially structured relations such as age, gender, and class determine whether or not negotiation is likely to be successful. Upon analysis of the results of this study, there were no differences based on age, gender or class.
However, once again, time since the parental divorce seems to be very important. For this reason, I believe it is very important to assess the evolution of the relationship over time. For those ACD who currently have a poor relationship with a sibling, the parental divorce was more recent. This finding is similar to the results of the parent-child relationship, in that even strained relationships tend to improve over time. For example, although Gretchen’s relationship with her sister was strained because they took different sides, after a couple of months, they agreed to disagree. In addition, Brittany has had time to reflect on her strained relationship with her brother and realizes that it was not fair to blame him since he was so young. In sum, whether or not the ACD decided to successfully negotiate their sibling relationships seems to come down to a matter of individual choice. Future research is needed to determine whether or not there are patterns in regard to gender, age of sibling, number of siblings, and other factors.

In addition to being forced to “take sides,” all of the aforementioned ACD who reported a strained relationship with their sibling during the divorce were actively involved in the parental divorce, serving as a mediator and being “put in the middle” by their parents. Interestingly, the factor “being put in the middle” was also associated with experiencing intergenerational ambivalence. Thus, it seems that there is a connection between intergenerational ambivalence and intragenerational ambivalence, another point worthy of future research.

Since there were ACD who reported that their sibling relationships were negatively affected, these findings are consistent with the results of research supporting the social learning theory (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001). However, it is important to note that only a minority of the ACD in this current sample reported a sibling relationship
that was negatively affected by the parental divorce. Previous research concluding that adult sibling relationships are negatively affected by a parental divorce (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001) suggests that the majority of young adults in their samples had conflicted sibling relationships as young adults.

There are a few possible explanations for the conflicting results. First, the research of Milevsky (2004) and Riggio (2001) is quantitative in nature, whereas this study is qualitative. Although our research questions may have been similar (i.e. Does a parental divorce negatively affect adult sibling relationships?), it is possible that there was much variation in the way these questions were asked on the surveys and questionnaires. In this study, I was able to assess the relationship over time to look at the entire context of the divorce since I asked the ACD to discuss how the process of the divorce unfolded over time. This is especially important because rather than viewing divorce as a discrete event, divorce is a family transition that entails a number of experiences over a long period of time. Second, due to the difference in methodology, the sample size for this study was much smaller than Milevsky’s (2004) sample of 305 young adults and Riggio’s (2001) sample of 264 young adults. Although larger sample sizes allow for more generalizable conclusions to be made, that was not possible with the current study. Nonetheless, a goal of this particular research was to provide in depth accounts and generate new concepts as related to the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce from the perspective of the ACD. Lastly, previous research has only looked at the influence of a childhood parental divorce on adult sibling relationships, thus assessing the long-term impact of a parental divorce. In contrast, I was looking at the influence of a young adulthood parental divorce on current adult sibling relationships.
Despite the strengths and weaknesses of qualitative methodology, and of this particular study, there is a great need for future research employing both quantitative and qualitative methods assessing the influence of a mid to late life parental divorce on adult sibling relationships, both in the short-term and the long-term. I will expand on this issue in the concluding chapter. I now turn to discuss the evolution of sibling relationships, a theme common among most of the ACD in this sample.

**Evolution of Sibling Relationships**

Researchers assessing the adult sibling relationship have found that, in general, sibling relationships change over time. Specifically, compared to sibling relationships during childhood or adolescence, sibling relationships during adulthood are characterized by a decrease in conflict (Riggio 2001; Stewart et al. 2001). In addition, sibling relationships become a source of friendship and social support during adulthood (Riggio 2001, 2006). Many of the individuals in this study reported that their relationships with their siblings have become closer over the years, but they explained that they believe it is attributed to getting older and not necessarily related to their parents’ divorce.

I mean, we’ve always been quite close. As she’s grown up, I guess we’ve got more in common, but it’s not due to the divorce. It’s just because she grew up. When she was younger, I was away at college, so I didn’t see much of her for a few years but I think it’s not been since the divorce. (Charlotte)

Me and my brother didn’t really get along for most of our childhood. We were always beating each other up and stuff. But, towards the end of high school, we got really close and we just started hanging out and doing everything together. . . So I guess over the past few years we’ve gotten really close.

[JL: What about with your sister?]
The same as with my brother. We fought a lot and then we just got closer. I think as we got older and could tolerate each other more, it just kind of naturally happened. So, I think we got really close. My sister actually calls me every day. (Kurt)

Although Brenton explained that he’s always been close with his brother, he talked about their relationship getting closer since his parents’ divorce. Unprompted, Brenton went on to explain that he is not sure whether they became closer because of the divorce or as a natural evolution of their relationship as they got older. He explains his understanding of their relationship:

[JL: Do you feel closer to your brother since the divorce?]

Yeah, I think I do. I don’t know if that—I’m sure part of it is because of the divorce but I think as you get older, you feel closer to certain people anyhow—just as a best friend, you know. But I think we’ve gotten closer for—I’m sure that’s a big reason—but we don’t really see it as one.

Like Brenton, Melissa partly attributes her closer relationship with her brother to growing up and maturing. Melissa has since reflected on how her relationship with her brother has changed over the years and is unable to determine whether they became closer because of going through the same family experience or if it has more to do with getting older.

Um, I don’t know if it’s the divorce, but I think it might just be the age thing. I mean, we argued when we were teenagers and then because of my parents’ divorce, I began to confide in him so I became closer to him, although he didn’t really experience everything that I went through. I didn’t really have anyone else to talk to about it because it’s embarrassing because you don’t want to tell your friends and you don’t want to tell colleagues at work or anything about your family or air your dirty laundry. So there’s really no one else to talk to about it.

Molly has always been very close with her brother, even before adolescence. Even as young adults with families, she says they don’t get to talk or see each other as
much as when they were younger, but are still very close. When asked to talk about her current relationship with her brother, she had this to say:

We stopped fighting when we were maybe like ten and eight or something and have been very, very close forever. Right now he’s married, has a baby. We don’t talk anywhere near the amount that I would like to, but I’m just as guilty of not calling. We get along very well and very easily…But I think when we do get together—we were just there recently—his wife’s looking at him like, “I don’t know this person” because we’re sitting there laughing really hard about stupid stuff and I know they don’t do a lot of that. And she has said that, “He never laughs anymore.” It’s like he goes back into being “Old [brother’s name]” so he’s just preoccupied—whatever. I like my brother.

**Conclusion**

Results of this study suggest that a mid to late life parental divorce may have a negative effect on sibling relationships, if the adult siblings are unable to successfully negotiate the ties following the parental divorce. This is especially likely if the ACD are forced to take sides and the siblings are pitted against one another. However, only a minority of the ACD in this sample experienced conflict with their siblings related to their parents’ divorce; the majority of ACD reported that their sibling relationships were not negatively affected. Another important theme that emerged is the evolution of sibling relationships. Many of the ACD discussed how they have become closer to their siblings as they have gotten older and have experienced more things in life. I believe this is an important finding because a sibling relationship is one of the longest lasting familial relationships, yet there is very little research on this important sibling bond.

Although the results of this study contribute to the literature on adult sibling relationships, especially as they are affected by a parental divorce, there are a few limitations of this study. Most importantly, although the ACD were asked to talk about
each of their sibling relationships in detail, I do not distinguish between the experiences of ACD whose sibling groups differed in terms of the number of siblings in the family, the age difference between siblings, or the gender composition of the siblings. In addition, it is possible that some respondents had mixed relations with different siblings. That is, a respondent with many siblings may have had one or more relationships that were negatively affected while others were not affected at all or were affected positively. They may have been reporting on the one relationship that stood out the most for them personally. For purposes of simplicity and since I was looking for more general themes, I did not distinguish between these specific factors.

An additional limitation is that unlike the quantitative studies (Riggio 2001; Milevsky 2004), I was not comparing ACD to young adults from two-parent families or young adults whose parents divorced during childhood. So, it is impossible to make comparisons between young adults from different family structures. Nonetheless, this is a first research attempt to assess sibling relationships after a mid to late life parental divorce; thus it is an important starting point for future research.

In addition, although I asked the ACD about their parents’ relationship history, I was not focusing on how perceived marital quality or marital conflict affected parent-child or sibling relationships like previous research (Panish and Stricker 2001; Milevsky 2004). Instead, I was focusing more on the context of the parental separation and the actual divorce. However, I do acknowledge that it would be interesting to look at the specific role of each of these factors in future research. Despite these aforementioned limitations, this research is a potentially fruitful starting point for future research on adult sibling relationships.
An interesting note is that the results of this study concerning the impact of a parental divorce on adult sibling relationships is similar to the results of Bush and Ehrenberg’s (2003) qualitative study of 30 young adults. Based on an analysis of previous research and the present study, it appears that the qualitative studies (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003; this study) support the buffering hypothesis while the quantitative studies (Riggio 2001; Milevsky 2004) support the social learning theory. The qualitative studies were smaller in size, with 30 adult siblings (Bush and Ehrenberg 2003) and 40 adult siblings (this current study). Both studies used interviewing in which a series of open-ended questions were designed to assess participants’ perceptions of their sibling relationships in the context of parental divorce.

In contrast, quantitative studies such as Milevsky’s (2004) were much larger, administering questionnaires to 305 participants. Participants completed questionnaires regarding their parental marital satisfaction and divorce, general sibling closeness, communication, and sibling support. Similarly, Riggio’s study (2001) included 264 young adults who described one of their sibling relationships using the Lifespan Sibling Relationship Scale, a standardized measure of attitudes toward the sibling in childhood and adulthood. A limitation of these quantitative studies is that they can only make conclusions about the current relationship.

Since this study was qualitative in nature, I was able to assess the sibling relationship over time. For instance, in the current study, ACD were asked to discuss their sibling relationships before, during, and after the parental divorce. Relationships are dynamic and change over time and the qualitative methodology used in this study was able to capture the process of this evolution of these relationships over time. Future
research is warranted to determine if the pattern of qualitative studies supporting the buffering hypothesis and quantitative studies supporting the social learning perspective continues and if so, what accounts for this difference. Nonetheless, there is a great need for both qualitative and quantitative studies since there are few studies on this topic.

Since the results concerning the adult sibling relationships are consistent with the findings of Bush and Ehrenberg’s research, one could conclude that the buffering hypothesis is a great foundation from which to analyze adult sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce. However, it is important to note that out of the 40 ACD in this sample, when asked, about one-half of the young adults reported that their sibling relationships were not affected at all by the parental divorce. Reasons varied for this group of ACD, but included having a close sibling relationship before and after the divorce or not having a close relationship in the first place. Thus, one might conclude that “buffering” was not occurring during the parental divorce because many siblings reported that their relationships were “unaffected;” however, some of the ACD may not have realized that their strong sibling ties were a form of “buffering.”

Furthermore, by starting with the theoretical foundations of the buffering hypothesis and social learning theory, one is making the assumption that a parental divorce always has a negative influence on sibling relationships. Based on previous theoretical and empirical research on the effects of a parental divorce on parent-child relationships, the general conclusion is the same: parental divorce has negative effects on the parent-child relationship. Since there is a dearth of research on the influence of a parental divorce on adult sibling relationships, I can understand why this theoretical starting point is used; however, based on the results of this study, I argue it is time for
researchers to focus less on the negative implications of a parental divorce and become more aware of the positive effects and unaffected aspects of family life. I now turn to address the long-term implications of a mid to late life parental divorce.
A mid to late life parental divorce can be a difficult time for many ACD. Based on the results of the current study, about one half of the young adults reported struggling initially in one way or another. In many cases, the family relationships were strained due to the complexities associated with a parental divorce; in other cases, the ACD reported struggling personally. While it is important to discuss the ACD’s initial overall reaction to the parental divorce, it is just as important to discuss what happened after the initial stages of the parental divorce. For many of the ACD, especially those whose parental divorce occurred more than five years ago, there was a sense of looking back and reflecting on the experience.

For ACD who have had some time to reflect on the parental divorce, many have noted that their lives have changed since the parental divorce. When reporting the long-term implications of the parental divorce, it is important to keep in mind that this is what the ACD say in retrospect. While it is difficult to determine whether or not the parental divorce caused the following changes in attitudes, beliefs, or relationships, it is important to note that the ACD believed that the parental divorce had an effect on their lives. Since this chapter addresses the positive and negative long-term implications of the parental divorce, I focus on the experiences of ACD who experienced the parental divorce more than five years ago, even though some of the ACD who recently experienced the parental divorce still provided advice similar to the ACD who have had more time to reflect on their experience. Since the passage of time is a very important factor to consider when
comparing the experiences of the ACD in the current study, I highlight instances where this is relevant.

In this chapter, I present the main themes that emerged from the stories of the ACD when they reflected on the impact of the parental divorce on their own personal lives. I have divided the themes into two groups: negative implications and positive implications. Under negative implications, I highlight the themes “ACD and Concern for their own Intimate Relationships” and “Holidays are Still Difficult.” Themes included under positive implications include “Less Conflict/Parents are Happier,” “ACD Benefitted from Parental Divorce,” and “ACD Learned Something Positive in Regard to Personal Relationships.” The chapter concludes with a section entitled “Advice to Other ACD,” in which the ACD from the current study reflected upon their own personal experiences, and offered some advice to others who might be experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce. I now turn to discuss some of the themes that were reported by the ACD when asked to reflect on if and how their lives have been affected by the parental divorce.

**Long-Term Implications**

**Negative Implications**

For the ACD who reported being “affected initially” during the parental divorce, many reported being back to normal after time had passed. More specifically, ACD whose parents divorced five or more years ago were most likely to report being “okay” at the time of the interview. In comparison, ACD whose parental divorce was more recent (less than five years ago) were more likely to report still being negatively affected. For
purposes of this study, an ACD was categorized as “negatively affected” at the time of the interview if they reported having a strained relationship with parents or siblings or if they thought they were psychologically or emotionally distressed. As discussed in previous chapters, many of the ACD reported that their family relationships were strained during the process of the parental divorce. For some, they went for a period of time without speaking to a parent or a sibling; however, many of the ACD had resolved the conflicted relationships over time, especially if five or more years had passed since the parental divorce. However, even though the strained family relationships may have been mended over time, the ACD still reported that they were still negatively affected in other ways. For instance, many explained that holidays were still difficult for them. A common theme that emerged from the data from all ACD, regardless of the number of years since the parental divorce, was a concern for their own intimate relationships. This finding is consistent with previous research on the effects of a parental divorce and I discuss the current study’s findings below.

**ACD and Concern for their own Intimate Relationships**

Numerous studies comparing individuals raised by both biological parents to individuals from divorced families find that those from divorced families are more likely to divorce (Amato 1996; Amato and Booth 1991; Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991; Glenn and Kramer 1987). Various studies have demonstrated the link between the stress of a parental divorce and offspring’s marital instability. Many studies find that a parental divorce has many adverse effects on the well-being of children and these effects such as emotional problems, issues of trust, and self-esteem often continue into adulthood.
Other research suggests that the children of divorce have impaired interpersonal skills, resulting from the stress of the parental divorce; therefore, some develop personality traits that might prohibit them from maintaining a stable romantic relationship (Amato 1996; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995). Similar to the findings of Booth and Edwards (1990) Webster, Orbuch, and House (1995) found that children of divorce experience more marital disagreements and marital problems than peers from two-parent families. Specifically, children of divorce reported significant differences in marital interactions, suggesting that they tend to escalate conflict and reduce communication, which in turn increases the chance of divorce. Such findings suggest that the children may be modeling the marital interactions of their parents which helps to explain the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

Additional research focusing on age at the time of a parental divorce has shown that the younger the child was at the time of the divorce, the more problems that child had with adult intimate relationships (Gabardi and Rosen 1992; Oderberg 1986). For example, Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that adult children of divorce (childhood parental divorce) would form unrealistic beliefs about relationships in general. In a similar study, Johnston and Thomas (1996) found that adult children of divorce (childhood parental divorce) had an overall lack of trust regarding intimate relationships and marriage, with many terminating intimate relationships due to a fear of rejection and a lack of trust.

Similarly, previous research has found that a mid to late life parental divorce can have a negative effect on young adults’ marital and family attitudes (Campbell 1995; Lang and Pett 1992; Cain 1989; Connidis 2003; Kozuch and Cooney 1995; and Cooney
and Kurz 1996). Specifically, most of the research suggests that children of divorce are more likely to worry about their own future marriages ending in divorce than children from two-parent families. Kozuch and Cooney (1995) argued that it is important to study the marital and family attitudes of ACD because of their stage of life. More specifically, young adulthood is the time when marriage is more seriously considered.

Similar results were found in the current study. When the ACD were asked about the most difficult part of dealing with their parents’ divorce, one of the most common responses was a concern for their own intimate relationships. This pattern was found for all ACD, regardless of whether or not they struggled initially with the parental divorce and regardless of the number of years since the parental divorce. Having seen their parents’ marriage end in divorce, many of the ACD reported that they began to wonder if their relationships would end up the same. Many reported that they became more cynical about their current intimate relationships. This finding makes sense in light of the previous research that concludes that children with divorced parents are more likely to experience a divorce themselves (Amato 1996; Amato and Booth 1991; Bumpass, Martin, and Sweet 1991; Glenn and Kramer 1987). However, it is important to note that previous research focuses on the long-term implications of a childhood parental divorce.

The young adults in this study differ from the young adults whose parents divorced during childhood or adolescence. Unlike young children or adolescents of divorce, the majority of ACD in this study saw their parents’ marriage end after at least eighteen years. For many of the ACD in this study, since their parents had been together for so long, they were under the assumption that their parents were not likely to divorce if they had not already done so, even if there was marital conflict. This issue of seeing
relatively long marriages end is an important factor that helps explain why ACD are concerned about their own marriages ending in divorce, but it is not a complete explanation.

In an attempt to explain why the majority of ACD are concerned about their own intimate relationships or marriages terminating, previous literature is helpful. For instance, it may be that the ACD, like the children in previous studies (Amato 1996; Webster, Orbuch, and House 1995), have poor interpersonal skills if they are modeling their behavior after their parents’, especially if there was much parental conflict preceding the divorce. Another possibility is that the ACD, having witnessed the dissolution of their parents’ marriage, have developed an overall lack of trust regarding intimate relationships and marriage, a finding of Johnston and Thomas’s (1996) research.

In addition to the aforementioned possible explanations for the ACD’s concern for their own intimate relationships, I argue that there are other factors that are unique to ACD. Based on an analysis of the stories as told by the ACD as to why they were concerned about their own intimate relationships, stage of life seems to be an important factor that makes them sensitive to the issue of their own intimate relationships. Unlike children who are under the age of eighteen when their parents divorce, ACD are likely to be involved in a serious relationship and some may even be married already. Young adulthood is a stage of life when individuals are dating and thinking about marriage and starting a family. Thus, thinking about how their own personal relationships may be affected is not something that is far off in the future, which is the case for children or adolescents whose parents divorce.
For individuals who grew up most of their life with their married parents, they may see their parents as role models from which to base their own relationship. But, when their parents divorce after so many years of marriage, the young adults may begin to question the strength of a marriage in today’s society. With the increasing social acceptance of divorce in general, and more specifically the increasing number of mid to late life parental divorces, it is no surprise that many ACD become more skeptical about relationships and marriages. After all, if it could happen to their parents, it could happen to them; the following are evidence of ACD expressing how their views toward marriage changed after the dissolution of their parents’ marriage:

I’m always afraid that my own marriage or relationship will end up like this. . . That’s my biggest fear that it will end like that because I really don’t want to have a divorce when I get married. (Brandy)

It has affected my own romantic relationships severely. Now, I am much more cynical about romantic relationships. (Levi)

I don’t think I would ever get married. I really don’t. I don’t think I ever will get married. I know nothing’s guaranteed anymore. No matter what it is, it doesn’t matter. Nothing in life is guaranteed. You always kind of live in that fantasy world that everything’s going to be okay, but that doesn’t happen. It’s sad, but it doesn’t. (Heather)

As is shown in the aforementioned examples, many of the ACD expressed worry and concern that their own relationships will end in a divorce. For others, they explained how their views on marriage changed after seeing their parents’ relationship end in divorce. The following are examples of ACD whose attitudes changed.

At the time of the interview, Sonya, whose parents recently divorced, was still struggling with her parents’ divorce. She explained how her attitude toward marriage in general had changed since her parents’ divorce.
My attitude toward marriage has changed. I always wanted to get married when I was younger and now I’m not sure. I like the idea of being able to just walk away if things don’t work out. . . It would be nice to be committed to somebody forever, but I’m just not sure if people are supposed to be together forever, you know what I mean?

Initially, Derrick felt the same way as Sonya, in that his views on marriage and relationships were more pessimistic after his parents divorced. However, after a few years had passed, he came to realize that not every marriage that ends in divorce.

At first, I started looking at relationships a lot differently and marriage and stuff. . . A kid sees his parents split after a marriage, get a divorce—he or she probably wouldn’t think too highly of marriage. That was me for a little bit. Now, I kind of stay away from that. Now, I know that’s not every marriage.

Rachel, recently married, expressed worry and uncertainty about the future of her marriage. She explained that her parents had served as role models of a strong marriage, especially since they were married almost thirty years; however, her views are now tainted with hints of doubt.

I had always looked to them [her parents] for advice. . . as the divorce was being closer to being final, I got engaged. And I was planning my wedding and I was asking my mom about her wedding, but in the back of my mind, I was like, “What if this happens to me?” They were together almost thirty years. . . I’m still kind of hesitant about what’s going to happen in the future for [husband’s name] and I. I mean we’re in love right now and I probably will always love him, but I don’t know what is going to happen in the next twenty-seven years.

For these ACD, they were aware that their views toward marriage changed after seeing their parents go through a divorce. An interesting note is that the ACD regarded the actual divorce as the defining event that made them more skeptical of getting married, not the fighting between the parents that may have taken place for years before the legal divorce. It is quite possible that the interparental conflict leading up to the divorce was a more influential factor on the ACD’s marital and family attitudes. For ACD who realize
that their views have changed, it may be easier to place the blame on the parental divorce rather than actually assessing the family dynamics that may have led up to the divorce in the first place. In fact, Kozuch and Cooney (1995) have found that interparental conflict has more negative effects on ACD’s marital and family attitudes than the occurrence of divorce. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that it may not be divorce, per se, that leads to the changed attitudes. Nonetheless, ACD expressed great concern over whether or not their relationships may end in divorce.

**Holidays are Still Difficult**

In addition to the ACD reporting a concern about their own personal intimate relationships, others also reported that they were still negatively affected in other ways. For instance, many explained that holidays were still difficult for them, even five, ten, or twenty years later. The following are statements by ACD who explained that the holidays do not get any easier as time goes on:

I guess when it happened I was also at a very transitional phase in my life. Like I was really like, “Screw this! I’m not even going home for the holidays.” It didn’t bother me as much. . . As time’s gone on it’s like, “It would be nice to have a real holiday” . . . I mean, it still bothers me. I hate the holidays. I really do. . . I hate that my kid’s not going to see the holidays that I saw with like fifteen people around the table. That’s really sad for me. I think that sucks and there’s nothing I can do about it. It sucks and it makes them stressful, you know? It’s definitely the loss of something that I thought was really special. (Jim)

I mean, it’s difficult enough when you’re dating someone and you have to decide whose parents to go to, but then when you have to decide between your own two parents, it’s like too much. And it makes me lie to my parents. (Edith)
As is evident from the aforementioned examples, even for ACD whose parents divorced more than five or ten years ago, holidays can still be a difficult time. For some, the logistics of celebrating with both parents is a stressful task; for others, the holidays are a sad reminder of their former family life when their parents were still together. I now turn to a discussion of the positive implications of the parental divorce, as reported by the ACD in this study.

Positive Implications

While there is supporting evidence that a parental divorce has various potential negative effects for children, there are also positive effects. This is a point that is often overshadowed in the literature. Sometimes these benefits are not realized until after time has passed, so it is important to keep in mind that the ACD were reflecting on their personal experiences of the parental divorce. In fact, ACD whose parents divorced more than five years ago were more likely to discuss positive long-term implications. Based on the results of this study, although about one half of the ACD reported negative experiences, there were many ACD who talked about the positive benefits of the parental divorce for all members of the family. As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the positive experiences include a strengthened parent-child relationship or adult sibling relationship. But, the positive experiences extend beyond the family relationships; many of the ACD reported that their own personal lives had been positively influenced as a result of the parental divorce.

During the course of the interviews, many of the ACD talked in great detail about how the divorce had benefitted them personally. For some ACD, their parents were
much happier and there was a lot less conflict in the house and this spilled over into their
own lives. Other ACD reported that they had benefitted personally from the divorce; that
is, they believe they had grown as an individual due to this experience. In addition, many
of the ACD reported that they had taken something away from their parents’ relationship
and had learned what to do and what not to do in order to avoid the dissolution of a
relationship. I turn now to discuss each of these themes in greater detail.

**Less Conflict/Parents are Happier**

Many of the young adults in this current study emphasized that their parents were
so much happier since the divorce. This theme was reported by many ACD, regardless of
the number of years since the parental divorce. There are a couple of different
explanations for this finding. First, ACD whose parents recently divorced may be
framing the parental divorce in relative terms. That is, especially if their parents’
mariage was conflict-ridden, then they may actually see the divorce as a relief, despite
the fact that they may have had a tough time dealing with the experience. Kurt explains
his experience:

> It’s less stress, less fighting. And when I go home, I don’t have to hear
about the problems they have. I can just relax and hang out and talk to
everybody. So, yeah, I think it’s made everybody’s lives a lot easier, to be
honest. (Kurt)

Second, for ACD whose parental divorce was more than five years ago, they may
have changed their views about the divorce as time as passed. More specifically, even
for ACD who may have struggled initially with the parental divorce, they may have
resolved some of the negative issues such as a strained parent-child relationship and may
be better able to see the parental divorce from the perspective of their parents. The
following are examples of ACD who saw the parental divorce as beneficial since there was less conflict afterwards and the parents were happier after the divorce:

But, during that time, like, we still went out to dinner as a family; we still went on vacations and we still do go out to dinner. They have a really good relationship, actually, so it’s healthy and they get along really well, which is good. . . And when I go home, I don’t have to hear about the problems they have. I can just relax and hang out and talk to everybody. So, yeah, I think it’s made everybody’s lives a lot easier, to be honest. (Brandy)

We [ACD and siblings] still live with my mother. . . my parents now are a lot closer than when they were married, so my father’s always at the house, fixing something or . . . just the way they get along with each other. It’s like they make a better team now than they did when they were married and living under the same household. (Sonya)

Upon an analysis of the data, it became evident early on that many of the ACD believed that there were benefits of their parents’ divorce. Two of the main benefits, as reported by the ACD in the current study, included less conflict in the household after the divorce and seeing their parents happier. For ACD who grew up in a conflicted household, they welcomed the peace and quiet that resulted from the divorce. This was an especially important benefit for college students who were still residing with their parents when they were home from college on breaks and in the summer. In addition, this is a reason why this theme was most likely to be mentioned by ACD whose parents had divorced within the past five years. Nonetheless, the issue of the ceasing of conflict in the household is relevant to all ACD who spend time with their parents visiting or on the holidays. Many of the ACD mentioned that it was nice to be able to visit one parent and not have to worry about whether or not their parents would be fighting while they were home.
Although one assumes that the conflict between the parents would be minimized following the legal divorce when they are no longer living together, one must keep in mind that this does not mean that there is no longer any conflict between the parents. There are certain factors that might lead to the parents’ relationship continuing to be conflicted even after the legal divorce. For instance, there are times when the parents may have to come together in certain situations such as holidays, family gatherings, weddings, and funerals. These situations may create an atmosphere in which conflict might arise. In addition, the reason for the divorce also plays an important role. If the parental divorce was due to infidelity, abuse, or another issue in which there are likely to be feelings of anger, resentment, and/or blame, then there is more reason to expect conflict during and after the divorce. Nonetheless, many of the ACD were able to view the parental divorce as a positive experience because they no longer had to deal with the fighting between their parents.

In addition to being happy that there was no longer conflict in the household, many of the ACD reported that they realized that their parents were much happier after the divorce. For many of the ACD, they expressed a desire for their parents to be happy. There are a few possible explanations as to why parental happiness was important to many of the ACD. First, many of the ACD were becoming closer with their parents as they were getting older and thus, they became more concerned about their emotional well-being. Second, seeing their parents happy might have been especially important to those ACD who provided emotional and social support to a parent who had a difficult time with the divorce. In these cases, perhaps the ACD would welcome that parent remarrying and getting on with their life since they had struggled so much initially.
An additional factor to consider is that the ACD are better able to understand their parents’ perspectives. In particular, since they are young adults, involved in relationships, with families, and carrying other responsibilities, they understand what it means to be an adult in society. Compared to younger children of divorce, ACD might be better able to understand why it is so important to be happy, even if this means leaving an unhappy marriage or choosing to remarry. Furthermore, when the ACD see that their parents are happy, it is likely that this spills over into the parent-child relationship as well.

Lastly, an additional factor has to do with the amount of time that has passed. ACD whose parents divorced more than five years ago, for instance, have had more time to reflect on the experience and to perhaps mend strained family relationships that might have resulted from the experience. This point of family relationships mending over time is discussed in greater detail in chapters five and six. It is plausible that if the ACD were interviewed five years later, there may be more ACD who report additional positive benefits of the parental divorce. I now turn to discuss how the ACD have reportedly benefitted personally from their parents’ divorce.

**ACD Benefitted from Parental Divorce**

While some ACD benefitted indirectly through seeing their parents happier after the divorce, many also reported benefitting personally as a result of the divorce. Many of the ACD reported that their family relationships had improved greatly since the parental divorce; others reported that the parental divorce helped to mold them into independent young adults. It is difficult to confirm whether these effects would have occurred regardless of whether or not the parents divorced; but according to the ACD, they believe
the parental divorce was an important factor. The following are the experiences of ACD who believe they have benefitted personally:

I think my parents’ divorce benefitted me greatly. I think most people see divorce negatively, but I actually felt it had a positive effect on my relationships with my parents and generally within the family. And I think, perhaps, that’s something people don’t think of when they think of divorce. In my case, I felt—I could see my parents didn’t want to live together and I wanted them to be happy and if that meant living separately, then I think that was a good thing, you know? (Charlotte)

I’m happy that it happened in my life. . . I don’t think I would have done a lot of the things that I have done since then if it weren’t for their divorce because it forced me to change. . . I was in [city name] living there by myself just because I wanted to do stuff like that and I don’t think I would have done that if my parents hadn’t separated or divorced really. (Brenton)

I think it [parent’s divorce] made me grow up in a way. . . I think divorce is like a death and death makes you grow up in ways—it just makes you grow. So it made me grow in ways that I wouldn’t have otherwise. I wish that my parents could have lived happily ever after. . . I would have to say that it deepened me. It made me sadder, but it deepened me. (Hope)

It has made me a better, more responsible adult and parent. As much as I really hate to say this, it’s probably the best thing to ever happen to me. . . Initially, it was like my life is over. What do I do? How am I going to ever have faith or trust in people? How am I ever going to manage to be on my own? But you survive it and I think going through that makes you stronger. (Brittany)

Although only a few aforementioned examples are provided as evidence of the positive benefits experienced by the ACD, a common theme was that many of the ACD felt they had benefitted personally from their parents’ divorce. It is important to note that the greater the number of years that have passed since the parental divorce, the greater the likelihood that the ACD reported experiencing positive benefits. The examples provided by the ACD in the current study centered around three main themes: personal growth;
improvement in family relationships; becoming a stronger individual. I discuss each of these themes in greater detail.

Many of the ACD reported that they had experienced personal growth as a result of experiencing the parental divorce. Some talked about how the experience made them a stronger individual. It should be noted that this theme was more likely to be reported by those who struggled during the parental divorce. Individuals are more likely to view trying experiences as opportunities of personal growth. For many of the ACD, they did struggle initially, both emotionally and psychologically; however as time passed, they were able to deal with the issues and move on with their lives. As a result, these ACD were able to look back on the experience and take a different perspective; for many, they were able to view the parental divorce not as a terrible experience that created a lot of strain in their life, but rather as an experience from which they were able to grow personally. Once again, the issue of time since the parental divorce is of great importance. I argue that ACD whose parents divorce occurred some time ago are more likely to view the parental divorce from a more optimistic perspective.

In addition to experiencing personal growth, some of the ACD reported that they benefitted from the parental divorce because their family relationships, including parent-child and adult sibling relationships improved afterwards. These family relationships may have improved after the divorce for a variety of factors including less conflict in the household; more specifically, parents may be better able to maintain their relationships with their children when they are not dealing with a divorce. In addition, perhaps the parents were less likely to burden the ACD with details about the marital relationship after the divorce; if this was the case, then the ACD might be more likely to invest more
time and energy into the relationship. Another reason that family relationships might have improved, according to the ACD, has to do with the spillover effect. That is, if the parents are happier after the divorce (especially if time has passed and they have moved on with their lives), then this happiness is likely to positively influence the parent-child relationship. There were various cases in which the ACD referred to the fact that their relationships with parents had generally improved after the divorce and they attributed much of the change to the fact that their parents were personally much happier. This was especially in cases in which the parent(s) had gone on to remarry. If the parents were happy with their new marriage, then the children interpreted this positively and often remarked, “If they are happy, then I am happy for them.”

Although the ACD reported that they believed their family relationships improved as a result of the divorce, it is important to note that perhaps the quality of these relationships would have improved anyhow since they were getting older. This point was discussed in greater detail concerning the evolution of family relationships, specifically parent-child relationships and adult sibling relationships. (Please see chapters five and six, respectively.)

An additional benefit of the parental divorce, as reported by the ACD, is that they believe the experience led them to become more independent. This theme was more likely to be reported by younger ACD, especially those still in college or under the age of twenty-five. Such a discrepancy makes sense since they would be more likely to be dependent on their parents in various ways than older ACD who may have their own marriages, families, and career. Although young adulthood is a transitional time period in which young adults are establishing independence from their parents, some of the
ACD noted that the experience pushed them toward independence. A few explanations can be offered as to why the ACD felt that the parental divorce made them more independent than before the divorce. First, they might realize that they need to be able to provide for themselves since family relationships may be altered after a parental divorce. For an ACD who went for a period of time in which they did not speak with a parent, this may have served as a realization that one cannot always depend on others for social, emotional, or other support. In addition, ACD may have taken the opportunity to do things on their own, to establish their independence before they were married themselves. For example, Brenton moved to another city temporarily to experience something different and believes that he may not have done such a thing had his parents not divorced.

It is also possible that more of the ACD may have experienced positive benefits such as growing individually or becoming more independent even though they did not report such benefits in the interview. I did not specifically ask about ways in which they felt they experienced positive effects from the divorce. In an effort to avoid a bias, I simply asked for their stories; perhaps if I included a specific question about positive effects of the parental divorce, results would have been more varied. Nonetheless, upon reflection, many of the ACD reported that their lives had been positively influenced personally as a result of their parents’ divorce. In addition to benefitting personally from the parental divorce, many ACD reported that they learned how to manage their own personal relationships using their parents’ relationship as a model. I now turn to discuss this topic.
ACD Learned Something Positive in Regard to Personal Relationships

Many of the ACD, regardless of the number of years since the parental divorce, reported that they learned how they want to handle their own personal relationships. However, ACD who experienced the parental divorce more than ten years ago were more likely to report this than ACD who recently experienced a parental divorce. Perhaps this pattern exists because these ACD are more likely to be older and thus more likely to be married or in a serious relationship than younger ACD who just experienced the parental divorce.

Similar results were found in Lang and Pett’s (1992) study of ACD. Using their parents’ relationship as a model, many of the ACD in the current study reported that they learned what not to do as well as what to do in their own personal relationships. Not surprisingly, most of the ACD reported that they would do things differently in their own relationships. It is interesting how critical the ACD can be of their parents, even if they are not married themselves. Nonetheless, a common theme was that the ACD wished to learn from their parents’ mistakes. The following are examples of ACD learning from their parents’ relationship.

I’ve learned, you know? . . . I know what not to do in a marriage because I watched these two crazy people for years screw each other up. . . . I think if you can’t learn from something, why bother? And I truly learned from it. (Gretchen)

I probably learned more what not to do than what to do. So I definitely didn’t repeat any patterns that they did. Like my father’s a philanderer. I’ve never cheated on any girlfriend—ever. I have a very downward view of that kind of disloyalty. (Cody)

A recurring theme noted by the ACD is that they took something away from their parents’ divorce. For some ACD, they had great respect for the way their parents
handled the divorce situation; however, they did not talk about having learned something that could be applied to their own personal relationships. Perhaps this is because divorce has a negative connotation and individuals are more likely to refer to learning from mistakes as opposed to learning from positive role modeling. Most of the ACD who talked about “taking something away” from the parental divorce experience, they adamantly stated that they would never handle a relationship the way their parent(s) did, as is evidenced by the following examples:

Richard has learned something positive from his parents’ conflicted relationship that eventually ended in divorce. He explained that if he sees the relationship going in a negative direction, he is quick to get out of that relationship instead of continuing it like his parents’ relationship.

Well, I think because it showed me that if something don’t work, you can waste a lot of valuable time. . . trying to get a square into a circle and sometimes you have to see it for what it is and some separation is good. . . I’ve been in relationships. . . Instead of me being like my parents and try to ride it out for years and years and years, being miserable, I just chose to come to terms with it if it’s not working.

Jim had recently had his own marriage problems, but from his own experience of his parents’ divorce and how it initially affected him, he decided that he would not put his daughter through a parental divorce. Instead, Jim chooses to work through the “rough patches” in order to salvage their marriage.

You know—when me and [wife’s name] had trouble—I think—I’m not sure if we solved all of the problems we had—at least to my happiness. But I feel like, “Well I’m not going to put my daughter through that.” Like it would take a lot more for me to get divorced because I went through it.
It is interesting to note the two different perspectives as offered by Jim and Richard. Both Richard and Jim had seen their parents’ marriage fall apart, yet the two of them were affected differently and as a result, they took something different away from their similar experience. Richard, who did not struggle initially, reported that he learned to terminate a relationship early on if it is not working. In contrast, Jim, who struggled initially, refuses to put his child through a divorce since he feels he was negatively affected by it. These two examples demonstrate the great diversity in the responses of the ACD to the parental divorce. Nonetheless, the underlying motive seems to be the same for the ACD who expressed concern for their own intimate relationships. They do not want their own marriages or future marriages to end in divorce; however, they have different strategies for avoiding a divorce. For some, they are determined to avoid situations that put them at risk for a divorce; for others, they adamantly state that they will take measures to make a marriage work.

A Note on ACD’s Reflections and “Benefits”

Upon an analysis of the reflections of the ACD, something stood out when comparing the positive and negative implications, as revealed by the ACD. In particular, a pattern emerged in which the ACD were more likely to report on positive outcomes of the parental divorce, despite the fact that they may have struggled initially with the parental divorce. It is almost as if they were attempting to rationalize their experiences. Perhaps these accounts of the ACD were constructed after the parental divorce, as a means of understanding and making sense of the parental divorce as well as their response to it.
Drawing from the social psychology literature, Davis (2000) explains that accounts are often used by individuals trying to understand negative life events and adapting to them. Furthermore, accounts are story-like constructions that help the individual make sense of stressful life events that may have made little sense at the time. According to Davis (2000), accounts serve various purposes including the following: to facilitate coping, to gain a greater sense of control, and to achieve closure on certain life events.

Based on the literature on “accounts-making,” I argue that ACD may have been providing accounts rather than objective and impartial descriptions of their experiences when asked to reflect upon their experiences. ACD might have felt that it was okay to have struggled initially with the parental divorce, but not to admit struggling years later. While it is difficult to say whether or not these positive implications and “benefits” are accurate accounts of their true feelings, it is important to note that these reflections were reported by the ACD. It is possible that the respondents might have neglected discussing more of the negative implications. Based on the accounts of the ACD, it seems that even if life was difficult during the early stages of divorce, things do get better over time. While it would be nice to think that this is true for all ACD, it is important to keep in mind that their lives might have been better if the divorce and the parental conflict had not occurred at all. Once again, the accounts might serve to help the ACD make sense out of their experience, but they tell us little about the objective realities of a parental divorce years later. I will now discuss the advice offered by the ACD in this study.
Advice to Other ACD

Researchers working within the intergenerational ambivalence framework (Connidis and McMullin 2002a; Luscher 2005) encouraged future researchers to identify the strategies that individuals use to resolve ambivalence in their family relationships. As Luscher (2005) pointed out, future research should focus on the different levels of awareness involved with experiencing intergenerational ambivalence. Since I was interested in utilizing the intergenerational ambivalence framework, a goal of my research was to identify the strategies used by the ACD to deal with the changing family relationships, including both the parent-child and the adult-sibling relationships during the course of the parental divorce. In cases in which the ACD appeared to be experiencing intergenerational ambivalence, an additional goal was to identify the strategies that the ACD used to negotiate this ambivalence.

For purposes of this study, strategies were operationalized as the behaviors or actions that ACD used to deal with the sometimes challenging experience of the mid to late life parental divorce. In the final part of the interview, I asked the ACD what strategies they used in dealing with their parent’s divorce. To clarify, I asked what advice they would provide to other young adults who just found out that their parents are divorcing. The responses varied depending on whether or not the ACD reported being personally affected in a negative way. For those ACD who reportedly had a rough time with the parental divorce, they were more likely to suggest counseling or staying out of the middle of the divorce. Specifically, for those who were put “in the middle” by their parents and forced to take sides, they adamantly encouraged not taking sides. In contrast, ACD who did not reportedly have a negative experience were more likely to offer more
optimistic advice. For example, many of the ACD who reported that their parents’
divorce was “no big deal” advised other ACD to keep in mind that your parents will be
happier in the end. In addition, they were more likely to encourage others to realize that
your parents will be happier this way.

Most of the advice offered by the ACD in this study centered around four main
themes. The most popular advice was “do not take sides,” followed by “take care of
yourself.” Other advice suggested that the ACD try to understand the divorce from their
parents’ perspectives. Lastly, some of the ACD encouraged others to talk to others about
their experience and to seek professional counseling if necessary. Much of the advice
was based on their own personal experiences. For some, they offered certain advice
because upon reflection, they felt this would have been better; for others, they actually
used these strategies and found that it worked for them. Despite the motivations
underlying the advice offered, much of the advice was along the same lines. I turn now
to discuss each of these suggestions in greater detail.

Do Not Take Sides

One of the most frequent responses when ACD were asked what advice they
would give to young adults experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce was to not
take sides. Previous research (Cooney 1986; Campbell 1995; and Lang and Pett 1992)
found that ACD reported experiencing loyalty conflicts or being forced to take sides
during the divorce. About one half of the ACD in this study experienced loyalty conflicts
during the process of the divorce. An interesting note is that many ACD offered this
advice, regardless of whether or not they themselves were forced to take sides by their
parents. However, those who were put in the middle a lot and were forced to take sides,
were quite adamant about warning others of the negative ramifications of such actions.

For many of the ACD offering such advice, they have had time to reflect on their experience and perhaps realize that taking sides may not have been the best decision.

The following are examples of advice offered by those who they themselves took sides but wished they had not.

I would encourage them to stay out of it, to not discuss what the other parent has discussed with them because you’re always getting tapped for information. (Kathryn)

Just make sure that you treat both of them equally and don’t appear to favor one or the other... and try not to feel so guilty about maintaining relationships with one or the other—or not. (Nicole)

The best thing is to remove yourself from the center of it. You can’t take sides. You can’t and should not involve yourself because it would consume you. (Jennifer)

I would say try and stay out of it as much as possible. Don’t let it wrap you up. Don’t let them wrap you up in it and don’t let yourself get wrapped up in it... Not that I’m saying, “Don’t be there when people need you.”... But be guarded. Be cautious. Everything’s very transitional, so be very cautious. (Jim)

Even those who did not take sides, for a number of reasons, felt that this was the best way to deal with the situation.

You have to understand that sometimes it just doesn’t work. And the only thing that you can do is show each one of them the love—the same amount of love whether they were together or not. (Richard)

Don’t take any sides. That’s between your mother and father. Just love both of your parents and just don’t show any favoritism. Don’t show—even if you do feel that one was wrong and the other one was right, just keep that—show both parents that you love them because both of your parents love you. (Zack)

It’s easy initially to pick sides and to be like, “I know why. It’s his fault or her fault and this and that.” I think you really need to listen to each person’s point of view and ask them why they think things didn’t work out. (Justin)
Although there were various underlying reasons for providing the advice “Do not take sides” many of the young adults in this current study felt that other potential ACD should be warned about this issue. While I believe it is good advice, it is important to keep in mind that there are various factors that may lead one to take sides between parents. For instance, in cases in which there was a history of spousal abuse, child abuse or infidelity, the ACD may blame one parent and automatically “side” with the “victimized” parent. It is important to keep in mind that a parental divorce is a complex family event in which all family members are involved indirectly or directly.

The issue of “taking sides” is a complex one. There are many factors involved in whether or not an ACD does “take sides” with one parent over the other. Factors might include the quality of the parent-child relationships up until the time of the divorce; reason for the parental divorce (infidelity versus falling out of love); history of the marital relationship (conflict-ridden or not); and whether or not the parents make the divorce a smooth transition for the ACD (i.e. whether or not they “put them in the middle”).

In addition to the aforementioned factors, it may be difficult for the ACD to put the advice “do not take sides” into practice. A parental divorce can be a very emotional time for all family members. Emotions such as anger, resentment, disappointment, relief, happiness, love, hate, and sadness may surface during the divorce process. During such an emotional time, it may be difficult for individuals to not take sides. While doing so can be viewed as a very rational step to take, individuals do not always act rationally if they are emotionally involved. Furthermore, for ACD who may be experiencing inter- or intragenerational ambivalence, they may be feeling torn or unsure of where their
loyalties lie. As a result, especially for the ACD who is experiencing ambivalence and feeling pressure to take sides, they may be even more emotionally involved in the matter than an ACD who is not being pressured to take sides. In fact, many of the ACD who did take sides during the parental divorce now realize that they should not have; in hindsight, they have learned what not to do and caution others to remain neutral. However, there may be some divorces in which “taking sides” is justified, such as in cases of marital violence. Thus, there is likely to be much variation depending on the circumstances of each parental divorce.

Since the parental divorce can be viewed as a structural situation that creates intergenerational and/or intragenerational ambivalence, it is of great importance to identify the strategies used to deal with the resulting ambivalence. The issue of “taking sides” is an element of the parental divorce that might lead some ACD to feel torn or unsure of what they should do. In fact, for the ACD in the sample that could be identified as having experienced inter- or intragenerational ambivalence, “taking sides” or being “put in the middle” were common issues for the majority of them. Furthermore, by “taking sides,” many of the ACD experienced strained parent-child and/or adult sibling relationships. For instance, some ACD reported that they immediately sided with the one parent who was “wronged” by the other, but then felt very torn and conflicted because after some time, they wanted to work on their relationship with the other parent, but felt guilty because they felt like they were betraying the other. To further complicate matters, some of the ACD experienced loyalty conflicts with siblings as a result of “taking sides” with one parent over the other. Based on the experiences of the ACD in the current study, the ACD who took sides but wished they had not are examples of individuals who
did not use successful strategies of dealing with ambivalence; nonetheless, their advice to “not take sides” would be a suggested strategy for dealing with the resulting inter- and intragenerational ambivalence.

However, it is important to note that not all ACD offering such advice are basing it on learning what “not to do.” Some of the ACD chose not to take sides from the very beginning, resisting attempts by their parents to “put them in the middle.” By setting such rules and boundaries, the ACD were able to ease the transition of the divorce process and focus on themselves and their family relationships. These would be examples of successful strategies used to avoid or manage inter- or intragenerational ambivalence. In addition, there were also those ACD whose parents did not force them to take sides; the divorce was a relatively smooth transition. For some of these ACD, the parents explained that the divorce was between the parents and that the children should not be involved. In such cases, the ACD did not have to deal with the emotional distress that may accompany taking sides, resulting in strained family relationships. Thus, although there are different underlying reasons for offering the advice “do not take sides,” many of the ACD strongly advised against doing so based on their personal experiences.

Take Care of Yourself

In addition to the advice of “not taking sides,” another common piece of advice offered by the ACD in this study was to remember to take care of oneself during the parental divorce. Interestingly, this advice was more likely to be offered by young ACD, especially those who had experienced the parental divorce within the past five years. One possible explanation for this discrepancy might be due to the fact that the parental
divorce was so “fresh” in their lives. Another explanation might be that the young ACD were acknowledging the importance of being in the transitional phase into young adulthood. Nonetheless, upon reflection, many of the ACD offered this advice, regardless of whether or not they had taken care of themselves during the parental divorce.

Many of the ACD advised others to realize that the divorce was something between the parents and that the children should not feel responsible for the divorce. Although none of the ACD in the sample reported that they felt directly responsible for their parents’ break-up, still many adamantly stated that ACD should not feel like they did something wrong. Based on this disconnect between what advice the ACD offered and what they actually experienced, there are a few possible explanations. First, it is possible that some ACD may have felt indirectly responsible for their parents’ break-up although they may have been reluctant to report such a belief in the interview. Based on the current study’s findings, I would argue that those ACD who struggled initially would be more likely to offer this advice if they themselves had felt that way and in turn, struggled initially due to this feeling.

Keep on doing what you need to be doing in your own life. Don’t stop your life because of something your parents are doing when it’s not your fault. It’s your parents’. (Josephine)

Like just let it go. It’s not—my parents’ divorce is not my fault. It’s not my issue. It has nothing really to do with me. I’m a victim of a casualty. My advice would be to let it go. It’s their life, not your life. That’s what I’m trying to do myself. (Tim)

However, it is also possible that ACD, whose parents went out of their way to make the parental divorce an easy transition for the children, were simply reiterating what
their parents had told them during the divorce process such as was the case with
Brenton’s family.

I don’t know what kind of advice I could give them because honestly it
was such an easy thing. . . I’d say just think of it with a positive mind and
realize that it’s better for both of your parents and you can make the best
of the situation. . . It’s not your own fault, so don’t blame yourself for it.
(Brenton)

Other ACD who did not struggle initially with their parent’s divorce provided
very optimistic advice, based on their own personal experiences. Unlike the ACD who
struggled initially with their parents’ divorce, those who reportedly did not have a tough
time took more time to think about what advice they would give to others. Many noted
that the parental divorce was such an easy transition for them that they did not know what
advice to offer. Nonetheless, many of them offered very optimistic statements regarding
the long-term outcomes of the parental divorce such as the following:

Try to take it in stride. Yes, it does impact your life, but it doesn’t impact
your life so much where it has to be your main focus. You gotta have
your own life too. (Rachel)

I don’t even know. . . I can imagine some people would take it really
hard. . . I would tell people to talk about it, you know? But, I mean, it’s
not the end of the world, I guess. . . Ours was just clean—like that’s it.
(Lance)

Just love them [parents] and accept them, but at the same time focus on
yourself because if you get too caught up or upset about it, you have to
remember that it’s not the end of the world. It doesn’t directly affect your
health or your physical well-being and that’s all that matters. (Brandy)

Many of the ACD encouraged others to remember to take care of themselves.
This advice seems to be in response to the circumstantial situations of a mid to late life
parental divorce. For example, since the ACD are young adults during the parental
divorce, there is a chance that the parents will turn to them for emotional and social

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support or involve them in some way. Young adulthood is transitional stage of life in which the child is becoming independent from their parents. Thus, during this stage of life, a parental divorce may create a situation in which the young adult is “put in the middle.” This position has been shown to have negative effects on the family relationships and findings from the current study suggest this too. Despite whether it is in retrospect or based on what the ACD actually did, the advice of “taking care of yourself” is a top suggestion by the ACD in this study.

*Understand the Divorce from your Parents’ Perspective*

One of the most interesting pieces of advice offered by the ACD is that they encouraged others to understand the situation from their parents’ perspectives. Many emphasized the fact that parents are human beings with flaws and faults; others gave advice to be very objective. This is connected to the idea of taking sides. More specifically, it seems like many of these factors are intertwined. The ACD who are able to be objective and take the role of their parents would also be more likely to not “take sides” or to blame one parent over the other. It also helps if the parents helped to make the divorce a smooth transition for the children by not involving them or pitting them against one or the other.

Based on the results of the current study, the advice about understanding the divorced from your parents’ perspective and being objective was more likely to be offered by ACD who were relatively uninvolved in the parental divorce and as a result, did not struggle personally. The following are suggestions by these ACD:
I would say that the biggest thing is it doesn’t matter if you’re 18 or 95, just be an adult about it, you know? You reach a certain age; you have to face reality and just realize that it doesn’t change who they are at all. Just love them and accept them. (Brandy)

It’s hard, but try to look at your parents as two human beings. . . they’re human and they’re capable of flaws and they’re capable of making mistakes and poor judgment. And that’s just part of their character. You have to love them for the whole baggage—the ups and downs, ins and outs. (Richard)

I’d say the best thing you can do is be objective. . . it was easy to put the black hat on my father early on. Everybody did. He committed infidelity and that’s the cardinal sin, blah, blah, blah. But you know, it takes two. So try to be objective because everybody’s got a hand in this. (Cody)

I think you should put it in perspective and understand the point of view of the mother and the point of view of the father. . . And they don’t do it to hurt you. They’re doing it because they want to live their lives happily ever after. And if they stay together for you, it’s because they cared. They wanted you to grow up in a stable family. (Crystal)

I think they have to sit back and look at it from their parents’ perspectives that they just did the best they did with what they had. I mean how would we have gone through it if we were them? Would we have handled it the same way given the resources that they had? (Brittany)

One advantage that all of these ACD have of course is that they have had time to reflect and think about what worked for them or what did not work. That is, if they may have handled the situation in a way that did not work out for the best, then it makes sense that they would advise against doing such a thing. However, it is important to keep in mind that each family situation is different. Some families transition through the parental divorce with great ease, leaving family members relatively unscathed. But for others, the divorce can be a messy ordeal, one that severs family ties temporarily or permanently.

Since family transitions such as a parental divorce are not always expected or a smooth process, the family dynamics and interactions may be emotionally-driven as opposed to rationally-driven. As mentioned previously, ACD who experience inter- or
intragenerational ambivalence are less likely to act rationally since they are emotionally torn in two or more directions. For some ACD, it may be easier to understand their parents’ motivations for divorcing, depending on the circumstances. An important factor to consider is the situational circumstances surrounding the divorce; ACD may be more likely to understand the divorce from their parents’ perspectives under certain situations. For example, a divorce in which the parents simply fell out of love and decided to pursue their own interests (still remaining friends afterwards) may be more likely to be interpreted differently by ACD than if one parent is caught having an affair. While the advice offered—to understand the divorce from your parents’ perspective—may be viewed as “good” advice, one must remember that it is coming from those who have already been through the parental divorce and have had time to reflect on what worked and did not work.

**Talk to Others/Seek Counseling**

In addition to the advice “do not take sides,” “take care of yourself,” and “try to understand the divorce from your parents’ perspective,” some ACD encouraged others to talk to others about their experience and how they were feeling. Some suggested talking to someone about your feelings; while others specifically mentioned seeking counseling. Previous research (Cooney et al. 1986; Cooney and Kurz 1996) has found that ACD are more susceptible to emotional problems, especially during the initial stages of a parental divorce. Specifically, Cooney and Kurz (1996) found that ACD had higher levels of depression and a greater need for professional help than peers from two-parent families. Although I did not directly ask whether or not the ACD had emotional problems or had
received professional counseling, there were ACD who had sought professional help
during the initial stages of the divorce. In fact, all of the ACD who suggested counseling
had been to counseling themselves. The following are suggestions regarding talking to
others as offered by ACD in the current study:

Reach out and try to find other people that are going through the same thing—even though they might think that, “I’m going through this alone. No one knows what it’s like.” There’s definitely other people out there that are going through similar situations—probably not exact, but just to try to reach out. Or maybe if there’s a support group or counseling—depending on how they feel. But, I think the worst thing to do is not to talk about it. (Melissa)

I would also encourage them to start a support group if there’s not one in their area. Whether it’s faith-based or not faith-based, it doesn’t really matter. I think the sadness is still real. (Kathryn)

I’d say that in the beginning, it definitely feels like it’s the worst thing that could ever happen to you and it feels like you’ll never get through it or you’ll never survive, but in the end, you’ll see that things will slowly start to get better. . . just seek comfort with those who make you feel good and who are always there for you and things like that. I mean, I went to the counseling center just to deal with things and if you need to, seek professional help. Don’t be afraid to say, “I’m struggling with this.” And get help when you need it. (Sonya)

What advice would I give? Seriously? Therapy. It helped me. I saw a therapist and she helped. (Josephine)

Not surprisingly, those who suggested counseling were those who had sought professional help themselves. It seems as though those ACD who themselves sought counseling and suggested this resource for others assume that most ACD will have as tough of a time as they did, based on their own personal experience. However, as is supported by the results of this study, many ACD do not have a difficult time. An important note is that even though about one half of the ACD in this current study reportedly struggled initially with their parents’ divorce, only a few went to counseling.
There are various possible explanations as to why many of these ACD did not seek professional help.

First, perhaps the ACD did not consider counseling due to the common assumption that young adults, compared to young children or adolescents, should be “better able” to deal with a parental divorce. Another reason might be that the ACD were trying to be the “strong one” in the family, especially if they were serving as a mediator between their parents. If these ACD would have sought counseling, then perhaps they feared that they would have failed to live up to their own, as well as others’ expectations within the family. An additional reason might have to do with the negative stigma attached to counseling. Several studies (Surgenor 1985; Halgin, Weaver, Edell, and Spencer 1987) have shown that individuals who do seek professional help have more positive attitudes toward help-seeking than those who have not; thus it is no surprise that the ACD who did seek counseling encouraged others to do so. However, not all individuals have a positive perception toward seeking professional help. In fact, studies have found that people who perceive a stigma associated with help-seeking are more reluctant to obtain professional counseling (Kushner and Sher 1991; Amato and Bradshaw 1985). For those who perceive this negative stigma, there is a societal assumption that if an individual is receiving counseling, whether it is psychological or some other type, there is something “wrong” with the individual. Since this negative stigma exists, perhaps many ACD were reluctant to take such steps, despite the fact that they were struggling and could have benefitted from counseling.

In addition to the aforementioned reasons, there is also the possibility that many of the ACD did not have access to professional counseling services. For example, Ben,
Josephine, and Sonya sought professional counseling services at their colleges or universities. These services are provided free to all students; therefore, this is a resource that is available to all college students who are having a difficult time dealing with their parents’ divorce. However, it is important to note that professional counseling is out of the reach of many ACD, specifically young adults who do not go to college (and are likely to be of a lower social class) as well as young adults who cannot afford counseling. The fact that colleges and universities provide readily available and free professional counseling is a great resource for the young adults who may have a difficult time with their parents’ divorce when they are in college; however, those who do not have such a resource may be at a disadvantage compared to those who can afford professional help.

**Negotiating Intergenerational Ambivalence**

Although I did not directly ask the ACD about experiencing ambivalence during the course of the parental divorce, it was clear that some of the ACD in this particular study were experiencing ambivalence. While I did not ask them specifically about how they dealt with the ambivalence, I asked in other indirect ways. As mentioned in the preceding sections, the ACD were asked what advice they would provide to other young adults who were going through a parental divorce. The advice provided by those individuals that I interpreted as experiencing intergenerational ambivalence had common themes. For example, these ACD were more likely to suggest “do not take sides,” “take care of yourself,” and “seek counseling.” This finding makes sense since those who experienced intergenerational ambivalence were also more likely to have struggled initially, during, and after the parental divorce.
For ACD who experienced intergenerational ambivalence, they were also likely to have been “put in the middle” by their parents and asked to serve as a mediator. These situations reportedly caused great stress for the ACD because the ACD wanted to be there for their parents, but became overburdened by the expectations and responsibilities associated with these new roles. As a result, many of the ACD struggled personally. Some became emotionally distressed and sought professional counseling to get through the difficult time. While each of the ACD handled their situations differently, it is clear that upon reflection, many of them stated that they would do things differently if they had to go through it all over again. For instance, they realized that perhaps taking sides and providing support to one parent had a negative effect on their own personal life. Thus, it is no surprise that most of the ACD who experienced intergenerational ambivalence also suggested counseling.

**Conclusion**

During the interviews, many of the ACD discussed not only what occurred in the midst of the divorce, but also what happened since the parental divorce. For many of the ACD, especially those who experienced the parental divorce more than five years ago, there was a sense of looking back and assessing how things have changed since the divorce. This chapter presents the patterns and themes that were characteristic of the ACD’s stories as they were looking back and discussing long-term implications and providing advice for other future ACD. It is important to note that the ACD in this study have an advantage of hindsight over those who are currently experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce. All of the ACD in this study have had time to reflect upon their
own experiences, whether it has been one month or 20 years since their parents’ divorce. As a result, the advice they offered was based not only on their immediate personal experiences but also on what they have learned as a result of the experience. For the ACD who had a tough time initially, it seems that they were especially likely to have given some thought as to what they would do differently if they were to experience the parental divorce all over again. This was especially true for those ACD who had experienced intergenerational ambivalence. Without hesitation, most of these ACD offered many tips and advice for others.

Interestingly, the ACD who did not struggle initially did not respond as quickly when asked to provide advice to other ACD. It seems as if they were content with their decisions in the way they handled the parental divorce; therefore, they had not really thought about what they would do differently. It is also possible that those who did not struggle initially were able to take care of themselves during their parents’ divorce. Perhaps they were the ones who sets rules, limitations, and boundaries and refused to take sides or get “put in the middle” by their parents. It is also possible that they were able to see the positive outcomes of the parental divorce including less conflict in the home and having parents who were happier living separately. If this is true, then those ACD who did not struggle initially were simply offering advice based on the strategies that helped them deal with the parental divorce. Nonetheless, they were still able to offer similar advice in line with other ACD including the following: do not take sides, take care of yourself, try to understand the parental divorce from your parents’ perspectives, and talk with others about it and/or seek professional counseling if necessary. I have just discussed some of the long-term implications of parental divorce and the strategies used
by ACD along with advice given to other ACD. I now turn to discuss theoretical and practical implications along with directions for future research.
CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to better understand if and how a mid to late life parental divorce affects family relationships, specifically the parent-child and sibling relationships. Unlike a parental divorce during childhood, a parental divorce when one is a young adult is not as common, although the rate is increasing. Thus, there is not as much research on the effects of a parental divorce on adult children of divorce (ACD). This study builds upon the vast literature on the effects of parental divorce on children as well as the intergenerational relationship literature. The results of this study are similar, yet different from the more general literature on the effects of divorce on children. The major findings focused on the overall initial reaction of the ACD, the parent-child relationships, the adult sibling relationships, and the more lasting positive and negative implications of the divorce. In this conclusion, I provide an overview of the major findings of this dissertation. I also discuss theoretical and practical implications of my findings and discuss the limitations of this study as well as suggest areas for future research.

Summary of Findings

The current study was motivated by a desire to better understand if and how family relationships, including parent-child and adult sibling relationships, are affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Findings from this study suggest that a mid to late life parental divorce has the potential to negatively affect the ACD’s overall well-being and more specifically the parent-child and sibling relationships. With that said, it is
important to note that many ACD did not perceive the parental divorce to be a negative experience. In Chapter 4, I suggested that one of the key findings is that about one-half of the respondents reported being initially affected negatively by the parental divorce while the other half reported that they were not. It is important to note that I was reporting the ACD’s experiences as they were told to me, so it is possible that some ACD were not revealing all of the negative aspects. For those ACD who were initially affected, they were also likely to have had a parent-child relationship that was strained during the process of the parental divorce. In contrast, the ACD who seemed to have a much easier time dealing with the parental divorce did not report that their parent-child relationships were negatively affected.

Although the ACD were easy to categorize into one of the two groups, explaining why some ACD struggled initially while others did not proved to be a very difficult task. Upon a quick review of the data, one might argue that certain “unhealthy” dynamics associated with the parental divorce such as being “put in the middle,” taking sides, going through periods of not speaking with family members, or having psychological issues, would likely cause a strained parent-child or adult sibling relationship. In turn, the resulting strained relationships might make it more likely for the ACD to report being negatively affected.

While making such causal connections would provide an explanation for the difference between the two groups, I am unable to do so since I cannot determine a causal order. It is possible that some of these “unhealthy” dynamics were present prior to the divorce and thus had a different effect on their experience. Although I cannot make any causal conclusions, it is important to talk about all of these aspects as intertwined factors.
More specifically, if ACD experience any combination of the aforementioned unhealthy family dynamics, they are more likely to report being negatively affected by the parental divorce. Thus, it may be that these unhealthy dynamics co-occur, without one or any causing other dynamics. Future research is needed to assess the implications of these factors.

For those ACD who reported a strained parent-child relationship, an interesting note is that this did not necessarily last for many years. For many ACD, strained relationships mended over time and the initial stress from the parental divorce diminished. I asked each of the ACD to discuss in great detail their parent-child relationships before, during, and after the divorce. By doing so, I was able to capture their perceptions of how the relationships evolved over time and whether or not they attributed any change in their relationships to be related to the parental divorce.

One of the main guiding research questions for this study was “How does the parent-child relationship change after a mid to late life parental divorce?” In addition, “What kinds of meanings and interpretations do ACD give to the experience? and How are the experiences of ACD similar or different for sons and daughters?” In Chapter 5, I suggested that like a parental divorce during childhood or adolescence, a divorce during young adulthood can also put strain on the parent-child relationship, even when custody is not an issue. Previous research has provided evidence that parent-child relationships are often negatively affected by a parental divorce, regardless of the age of the children at the time of the divorce (Booth and Amato 1994; Cooney 1988; Campbell 1995). However, a parental divorce does not necessarily mean that the parent-child relationship is doomed.
Based on the results of this study, ACD who reported that a parent-child relationship was strained due to the parental divorce also discussed the important role of the following factors. Some of the main factors included the degree to which they were involved in the parental divorce; specifically whether or not they were “put in the middle”; whether they experienced role reversal; whether they blamed one parent for the divorce; and whether or not they took sides. Those ACD who experienced one or more of the following factors also reported having a strained parent-child relationship. Some ACD reportedly went for a period of time without speaking to one or both parents, depending on the circumstances; however, a strained relationship was temporary in many cases. Once again, causal conclusions cannot be made; instead, it seems that many of these issues co-occur. In addition, based on the results of the current study, gender did not seem to be an important factor in terms of which ACD are more likely to report a strained relationship.

Another important issue to consider within the context of the parent-child relationships is that of intergenerational ambivalence. An additional research question guiding my research was “Do ACD experience heightened intergenerational ambivalence as a result of the parental divorce?” and if so, “How does the gender of the ACD shape their experience of heightened intergenerational ambivalence after the parental divorce?” In the introductory research agenda in Chapter 3, I suggested that the framework of intergenerational ambivalence would be a useful perspective from which to understand how and why parent-child relationships might be negatively affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Specifically, intergenerational ambivalence is a concept that describes an experience in which individuals want to help another family member but feel
burdened or overwhelmed at the same time. For purposes of the current study, I proposed that a mid to late life parental divorce might put the ACD in a situation where they become overwhelmed with issues associated with the divorce, if they were involved to some extent. More specifically, I proposed that ACD who were “put in the middle” by their parents or forced to take sides would be the ones more likely to experience intergenerational ambivalence. Furthermore, ACD who were “put in the middle,” for instance, might want to support their parent(s) during this family transition, but might feel that their new roles as mediator and/or confidante might be taking up too much time or energy.

As mentioned in previous chapters, there are measurement issues associated with intergenerational ambivalence and I did not ask the ACD directly whether or not they experienced it; instead, upon analysis of their stories, I determined whether or not it seemed like they had experienced intergenerational ambivalence. Based upon my analysis, I found that only a minority of the ACD in the current study experienced intergenerational ambivalence. In addition, ACD whose parent-child relationships were strained during the parental divorce were more likely to have experienced intergenerational ambivalence, based on my subjective categorization. Previous research (Pett et. al 1992) found that female respondents were more likely than male respondents to report struggling with the parental divorce; in addition, female respondents reported taking on new kinkeeping roles in the family after the parental divorce. Based on the results of the current study, there were no real gender differences in terms of who experienced intergenerational ambivalence. Drawing from previous research (Pett et al. 1992), it would seem that female ACD would be more likely to experience
intergenerational ambivalence especially if they are more likely than male ACD to assume new responsibilities such as kinkeeping. Future research could assess these new roles such as kinkeeping to determine what effect they have on one’s perception of the parental divorce experience. Since this is one of the first times that the intergenerational ambivalence framework has been applied to the phenomenon of a mid to late life parental divorce, future research is needed to determine whether or not this is a useful framework from which to understand and interpret a parental divorce.

An important theme that emerged for all of the ACD, regardless of whether or not the parent-child relationship was strained, is the evolution of the relationship. As young adults and middle-aged adults, the ACD in this study reported that their relationships have changed in many ways over the years. In particular, many mentioned that they became more like “equals” with their parents after becoming a young adult. In addition, many of the ACD reported that they currently felt close to both parents, but in different ways. In fact, many could not determine with whom they felt closer because they had become closer to both parents as they got older.

It is also important to note that the parents’ current marital status had an impact on the parent-child relationship. Interestingly, for the majority of ACD whose parents had gone on to remarry or date, the ACD reported that they were happy with this situation. Once again, I am unable to conclude that the parent’s marital status causes a positive parent-child relationship; it is impossible to determine what comes first. It may be that a positive parent-child relationship to begin with makes it more likely that the ACD would be more accepting of a parent’s new partner. Or it may be that a new partner
for the parent takes some of the stress from the aftermath of the parental divorce off of the ACD. Future research is needed before any causal conclusions can be made.

As mentioned previously, only about one-half of the ACD in this study reported that a parent-child relationship was negatively affected by the parental divorce. Most qualitative studies focusing on the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on parent-child relationships (Cooney 1988; Cain 1989; Campbell 1995) conclude that the parent-child relationship is negatively affected, suggesting that the majority of ACD experienced a strained parent-child relationship. However, a limitation of these previous studies is that they failed to explain in great detail as to why the relationships were negatively affected.

In the introductory research agenda in Chapter 3, I was interested in determining how one’s place in the early adulthood transition influenced the parent-child relationship after the parental divorce. Specifically, I was proposing that ACD who were more settled in their adult lives with perhaps a career and family at the time of the parental divorce (more likely to be older ACD) would be less likely to report having experienced a strained parent-child relationship. Based on the results of the current study, age at the time of the parental divorce did not seem to influence whether or not the parent-child relationship was affected. In fact, it was difficult to pinpoint the exact factors that determined whether or not the parent-child relationships would be negatively affected; however, the results suggested that certain factors made it less likely that the relationship would be negatively impacted including the following: parents did not force the ACD to take sides; the ACD was not “put in the middle;” the ACD did not blame one parent over the other; and the parents tried to make the process a smooth transition for the ACD. The
aforementioned is not an exhaustive list of important factors; there appears to be much variation between families as well as among individual family members. Future research is thus needed to try to more effectively determine why some parent-child relationships are affected while others are unaffected.

In addition to being interested in parent-child relationships in the context of a parental divorce, my research was also guided by the question “How do adult sibling relationships change after the parental divorce?” Similar to this study’s findings regarding parent-child relationships, results of this study suggest that a mid to late life parental divorce may have a negative effect on sibling relationships. These findings were discussed in Chapter 6. Although only a minority of the ACD in this study reported that a sibling relationship was negatively affected, a parental divorce has the potential to strain this relationship, especially if the siblings take different sides during the parental divorce or are pitted against one another by the parents. These results are consistent with the findings of Bush and Ehrenberg’s research (2003), which provided support for the buffering hypothesis. According to the buffering hypothesis, one would predict that sibling bonds would be strong during a parental divorce, with siblings providing emotional and social support to one another during a parental divorce (Milevsky 2004; Riggio 2001). Thus, one might conclude that the buffering hypothesis is a great foundation from which to analyze adult sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce. More specifically, if ACD reported that their sibling relationships were positively affected or “unaffected” by the parental divorce, one could argue that a “buffering” was occurring.
In the current study, there was a minority of ACD who reported that they had become closer to one or more siblings during the parental divorce, as they turned to one another for support during their parents’ divorce. Furthermore, about one-half of the young adults reported that their sibling relationships were not affected by the parental divorce. Initially, one might dismiss the idea that “buffering” might have taken place if the ACD did not report the exchange of sibling support during the divorce. However, it is important to keep in mind that even though some ACD might have reported that their sibling relationships were “unaffected” by the parental divorce, a “buffering” might have been taking place without their knowledge or recognition of this process. If this were the case, the number of ACD who experienced a “buffering” effect would be even greater, providing even more support for the buffering hypothesis.

Another important theme that emerged is the evolution of sibling relationships. Previous research findings suggest that adult sibling relationships are important potential sources of social support (White and Reidman 1992). Similar to the parent-child relationships that evolve over time, many ACD noted a change or evolution of their relationships with siblings over time. Many of the ACD reported that they had become closer as they had gotten older. Both of these themes are important since there are a limited number of studies on adult sibling relationships in general, and especially as they are affected by a parental divorce. Nonetheless, there are limitations with this study regarding adult sibling relationships, a point that will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

In addition to being interested in the ACD’s experience during and immediately following the parental divorce, I was interested in the ACD’s assessment of their own
lives, including family relationships, after some time had passed. In Chapter 7, I present some of the “lasting” positive and negative consequences of the parental divorce as well as advice for other ACD. Although I had only a small subsample, I was able to suggest some long-term implications of a mid to late life parental divorce. An overriding theme from all ACD, whether or not they identified themselves as having an overall negative experience with the parental divorce, is a concern for their own intimate relationships. Many of the ACD expressed concern that their own relationships or marriages would end up just like their parents’ did. Nonetheless, many of the ACD reported positive changes overall including personal growth, learning something about themselves, getting to know a parent or sibling better, or learning what not to do in a relationship. Thus, it is interesting to see how ACD interpret or “reinterpret” the parental divorce after time has passed. In a later section of this chapter, I discuss the implications of the ACD providing accounts of their experiences and the implications that this has for making generalizations based on their stories.

An additional research question asked “What strategies are used by ACD to deal with changing parent-child relationships as well as adult sibling relationships after the parental divorce?” In an attempt to understand some of the strategies that the ACD used during their own personal experiences, they were asked what advice they would provide to other ACD experiencing a parental divorce. The most common suggestions included the following: do not take sides, take care of yourself, try to understand the parental divorce from your parents’ perspectives, and talk with others about it and/or seek professional counseling if necessary. I have just provided an overview of the major findings of this study; I now turn to a discussion of the contributions to the literature.
Contributions to the Literature

Based on the findings from this sample, a mid to late life parental divorce has the potential to influence the parent-child and sibling relationships in many ways. While it was originally thought that ACD whose parents divorced after they were 18 years or older would be relatively unaffected by a parental divorce, previous research (Cooney 1988; Campbell 1995; Lang and Pett 1992) along with this study suggest otherwise. Many of the findings reported here for adult children of divorce are similar to patterns observed for children of divorce. Importantly, there are some noted differences.

Like children and adolescents who experience a parental divorce (Amato 1988; Wallerstein 1985), some ACD in the current study reported that their overall well-being was affected by the parental divorce. Similar to their younger counterparts, some ACD were emotionally distraught during the initial stages, becoming withdrawn and angry. Others reported that their relationships with their parents were negatively affected during and after the parental divorce. An important difference, though, between the two groups is that the ACD have a more voluntary relationship with their parents. That is, they have an advantage over children under the age of eighteen.

Another similarity between younger children and the ACD is that they now had to adjust to holidays and other family rituals that change following a parental divorce. Like minors, ACD now have to split the holidays or arrange to celebrate with their parents separately. Many of the ACD in this study reported feeling overwhelmed by these changes and often longed for the family holidays that were spent together as a family unit.
Much of the research on the effects of divorce on children (both minors and ACD) (Amato 1988; Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White 1984; and Wallerstein 1985; Kozuch and Cooney 1994; Webster et al. 1995) concludes that children of divorce are more likely to have less stable intimate relationships. Children of divorce are more likely than children from two-parent families to see their own marriages end in divorce. Although a few of the individuals in this study were divorced themselves, I was focusing on their experiences of the parental divorce rather than their own marital history. Nonetheless, a majority of the ACD in my study expressed a sincere concern for their own intimate relationships. In other words, for almost all of the ACD, regardless of whether or not they were in a relationship or married, many feared that their own marriages would end up like their parents. In addition, many reported that they were uncertain about commitment and the future of their intimate relationships. These results suggest that no matter what age you are when your parents divorce, there are similar implications.

Previous research has noted that some parents will try to use the children as pawns to gain information about the other parent (Amato 2000; Wallerstein 1985; Cherlin et al. 1991). This is mostly seen in cases in which the parents are still fighting after the divorce, especially in cases of shared custody arrangements. Interestingly, many of the ACD in the current study reported that they too were used as pawns by their parents. In these cases, this was referred to as being “put in the middle,” or being forced to take sides. Results of this study indicate that this is an unhealthy situation, as many of the ACD who were put in such a position reported having a difficult time with the divorce. Moreover, these ACD were more likely to have reported having strained parent-child and/or sibling relationships. In addition, they were also more likely than other ACD to
report being depressed or in need of counseling as a result of dealing with their parents’
divorce. Results of the current study do not suggest any causal conclusions; instead, the
ACD who struggled initially also reported experiencing many of the other “unhealthy”
family dynamics.

Another way that the experience of the ACD differed from that of minors is in
their responses to a parent’s remarriage. Interestingly, many of the ACD were happy that
their parents had gone on to remarry. While there certainly are some children and
adolescents who are happy to see their parents remarry, many are resistant (Cherlin et al.
1991). This point is elaborated on in Chapter 5, but I would argue that the ACD have an
advantage over minor children and adolescents. Since the ACD are no longer residing
with their parents, they do not have to deal with the typical stepparent-stepchild issues
that are the focus of much of the research on stepfamilies. This dissertation not only
contributes to the more general vast literature on the effects of a parental divorce, but it
also adds to the much smaller subarea of mid to late life parental divorce, to which I now
turn.

Although research on mid to late life parental divorce is a fairly new topic in
family literature, there have been numerous studies since the late 1980s that have
investigated this phenomenon. Some of the studies (Amato and Booth 1996; Aquilino
1994a; Booth and Amato 1994; Bonkowski 1989; Fintushel and Hillard 1991; Foster
2006; Pryor 1999) focus on how the parent-child relationships are affected by a divorce.
A major limitation of past research (Aquilino 1994a; Cooney et al. 1986) is that many of
these studies conclude that the parent-child relationship is affected by a mid to late life
parental divorce but failed to explain how the relationships changed over time. This
study was able to take a closer look at how and why the parent-child relationship changes during the context of the parental divorce. In addition, I was able to suggest certain factors that were likely to put a strain on the parent-child relationships.

Furthermore, there are no studies that focus on the evolution of the parent-child relationship in the context of a parental divorce. This pattern of evolution emerged from the data as many of the ACD discussed how their relationships with their parents had changed over time. Since I had asked the ACD to talk in great detail about their relationships with both their mother and father, a more complete understanding of the evolution process was revealed. Most of the ACD reported that they felt closer to their parents and attributed this to something that simply “happened” as they got older. For the ACD who had a strained relationship with their parents, the evolution of the relationship was not as smooth of a transition as it was for ACD who did not have a strained relationship with their parents. The ACD who went for a period of time without speaking to one or both parents would be an example of an obstacle that got in the way of the smooth process of the evolution of the relationship. Applying the intergenerational ambivalence perspective, successful renegotiation of this relationship is necessary before the relationship can evolve to the next level—that of becoming like equals or friends. Many of the ACD noted the importance of the parent-child relationship as they got older. Even for the ACD who had a strained relationship, I argue that those who successfully renegotiated the parent-child relationship—that is, made amends—were the ones who reported a positive or close relationship with their parents at the time of the interview.

An additional contribution of this study is that I present experiences of how adult sibling relationships may be affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Although
previous research Bonkowski 1989; Fintushel and Hillard 1991; Foster 2006; Pryor 1999) has focused on the parent-child relationships in the context of a divorce, there are few studies that have looked at the adult sibling relationship. Only a few studies (Milevsky 2004; Milevsky et al. 2005; Riggio 2001; Bush and Ehrenberg 2003) focused on how and why adult sibling relationships are affected by a childhood parental divorce. However, no research to date assesses the impact of a mid to late life parental divorce on the adult sibling relationship. The current study is one of the first research attempts to understand adult sibling relationships in the context of a mid to late life parental divorce. Since I was assessing both parent-child and adult sibling relationships, I was able to provide a more complete understanding of how certain family relationships, such as a parent-child relationship, might influence sibling ones as well.

Similar to the parent-child relationship, the theme of the evolution of the adult sibling relationship was relevant as well. Since there is a dearth of research on adult sibling relationships, in general, there are also few studies that look at the evolution of the adult sibling relationship, especially in the context of a parental divorce. In the current study, many of the ACD reported that they had become closer to their siblings as they had gotten older. While previous research has neglected to explain the evolution of the adult sibling relationship from the perspective of ACD, the current study emphasizes the importance of the evolution of the relationship. In addition, a mid to late life parental divorce can inhibit the positive evolution of the adult sibling relationship if the sibling relationship is strained during the parental divorce. Since the phenomenon of a mid to late life parental divorce is the most recent research interest in the divorce literature, we know the least about this phenomenon in comparison to the research on parental divorce.
during childhood. Thus, my research contributes to this developing subfield of divorce literature.

**Limitations of the Current Study**

While the results of this study make important contributions to the literature on the effects of divorce on children and family relationships in general, this study is not without its limitations; however, these limitations point to potential areas for future research. Most importantly, the fact that the sample for the current qualitative study was a convenience sample is a major limitation. While there were many reasons for the convenience sample, including time and financial constraints, the results of this study are non-generalizable. For example, results of this study indicated that the majority of parent-child relationships that were negatively affected by the parental divorce mended over time. Since this sample is non-representative of the larger population, one cannot conclude that all strained relationships mend over time. Although the qualitative nature of the study provided in-depth, rich accounts of ACD’s experiences of a parental divorce, I recognize that the use of convenience sampling is a major limitation. However, the findings from this qualitative study provide a foundation for future research that might build upon this study.

In addition to the limitation of convenience sampling, the sample for this study was biased in other ways as well, including in terms of age composition, race and ethnic composition, gender, and the number of years since the parental divorce. I address each of these limitations in greater detail. In terms of current age and age at the time of the parental divorce, the current study’s sample was composed of many young individuals.
One criterion for inclusion in the sample was that the ACD had to have been between the ages of 18 years and 34 years of age when their parents divorced. Nearly 50% of the sample reported a current age between 18 and 23 years; in addition, nearly 75% of the sample experienced the parental divorce between the ages of 18 and 25.

This bias was not surprising since the literature supports the idea that many mid to late life parental divorces occur after the children leave the home, especially if the parents stayed together “for the sake of the children.” Nonetheless, there are limitations with generalizing about young adults’ experience of a parental divorce, especially when much of the data was provided by very young adults. The experience of a parental divorce is likely to be quite different depending on one’s age at the time of the parental divorce. An ACD who was 18 years old at the time of the parental divorce is likely to be at a different place in their life at the age of 34.

In addition, since many of the ACD in the current study were young and had experienced a parental divorce within the past 5-10 years, there were few ACD from which generalizations about long-term implications could be drawn. While there were about five ACD who experienced the parental divorce more than 15 years ago, this sub-sample is too small to make generalizations. Future samples that are more diverse in terms of age at the time of the parental divorce and the number of years that have passed since the parental divorce would greatly enhance our understanding of the long-term implications of a mid to late life parental divorce.

Other limitations of the sample of the current study include little variation in terms of gender, race and ethnicity and social class. One area of selectivity bias has to do with gender of the ACD. Although there was an almost-equal number of men and
women in the sample, there were more women (22) than men (18). I found no real
gender differences between male ACD and female ACD, in terms of who is more likely
to report struggling initially with the parental divorce, more likely to have a strained
parent-child relationship, or more likely to take sides. Previous research (Pett et al. 1992)
found that females were more likely to report being highly disrupted by their parents’
divorce than males, although Pett et al.’s study included 115 ACD. Another gender
difference from Pett et al.’s (1992) study was that female ACD were more likely than
male ACD to have taken on a new role of keeping family traditions alive after the
parental divorce. While it is difficult to speculate whether gender differences are to be
expected, the sample size of the current study is a limitation. Perhaps with a larger
sample, gender differences might have been more salient. Future research with larger
samples is needed to determine whether or not the experience of a parental divorce is
similar or different for males and females.

The lack of diversity in terms of race/ethnicity and social class is a more serious
concern in terms of sampling bias. Although I strived to obtain a diverse sample, this
proved to be a difficult task considering the small population of ACD. As a result, the
majority of ACD in this sample were white (36); two identified as Black, and two were
multiracial.

In addition to the limitation of racial/ethnic diversity, there was also a social class
bias of the sample. Social class was determined by asking about their education level,
their current occupation and employment status, the occupations of their parents, and
education levels of their parents. A majority of the sample (29 ACD) described
backgrounds that could be characterized as middle-class, while eleven ACD indicated
backgrounds that could be characterized as poor or working class. Thus, the results of the current study are based on mostly a white, middle-class sample of ACD. Future research that obtains a more diverse sample in terms of race/ethnicity and social class composition would be more generalizable to the larger population of families experiencing a parental divorce.

An additional issue of selectivity bias has to do with criterion stating that in order to qualify for the study their parents must have legally divorced. While I was interested in the effects of a parental divorce on family relationships, it is important to consider that spouses often separate without going through the legal divorce process. Although a separation is similar to a legal divorce in many ways, the adult children would have been ineligible for my study, according to the criteria set during the recruitment process.

Another limitation of my study has to do with the issue of reporting bias from the ACD. I cannot be certain that the experiences that the ACD shared with me are accurate portrayals of what really went on and how it affected them (or not). In fact, a pattern emerged in which the ACD were more likely to report on the positive effects of the parental divorce, despite having struggled initially during the early stages. It is possible that the ACD were painting a more optimistic picture of their experience because they might not have been able to reflect on their experience and to see it from a broader perspective. It is also possible that the ACD were providing accounts of their experiences, rationalizing the parental divorce process in a way that helped them make sense of their experiences, especially if they did struggle initially. In addition, it is also plausible that the ACD may have unintentionally glossed over some of the more negative issues that were related to the parental divorce. Since I was asking for their story, I did
not want to present any loaded questions by asking them about negative experiences specifically associated with the parental divorce. As a result, it is possible their stories are not accurate representations of their experiences.

In addition to the aforementioned limitations, an important issue to consider is that with this study of ACD, I am only capturing one side of the story—that of the ACD. Due to financial and time constraints, a major limitation of the current study is that only one member of each family was interviewed. Thompson and Walker (1982) argue that family researchers should pay attention to the methodological problems that result from the improper study of dyads. They state, “failure to adhere to these practices results in family research that does not actually study relationships and, worse, results in ambiguous or false conclusions about relationships” (Thompson and Walker 1982: 898). A more complete understanding of family relationships in the context of a parental divorce would include perceptions of all members of the family, or at the very least, both members of a dyad (if focusing on specific family relationships).

In regard to the findings concerning adult sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce, there are some limitations with the data and the findings. First, although the ACD were asked to talk about each of their sibling relationships in detail, there was much variation in the data provided concerning their adult sibling relationships. Since I was looking for more general themes in regard to the adult sibling relationship, I did not distinguish between the experiences of ACD whose sibling groups differed in terms of sibling size, the age difference between the siblings, or the gender composition of the siblings. As a result, all of the experiences were combined together while common themes were pulled out.
An additional limitation is that unlike the quantitative studies assessing sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce (Riggio 2001; Milevsky 2004), I did not compare ACD to young adults from two-parent families or young adults whose parents divorced during childhood. Thus, it is difficult to say whether or not a parental divorce increases the likelihood of negative sibling relationships. While results indicate that a parental divorce has the potential to negatively affect some sibling relationships, it cannot be answered directly since I did not have a comparison group of non-ACD. In addition, in this study, since I was focusing on the context of the parental divorce, I did not take into full account how marital conflict or perceived marital quality affected the family relationships like other research (Panish and Stricker 2001; Milevsky 2004).

A very important limitation of the current study is that I am unable to explain why some ACD are negatively affected by the parental divorce while others report not being affected at all. For the ACD who reported struggling initially, they discussed in great detail how their well-being had been affected, how their relationships with parents and siblings had changed, as well as other issues. But, for the other group of ACD who reported that they did not struggle initially with the parental divorce, they seemed to have dismissed it as “something that happened” in their lives. In fact, many of these ACD were very nonchalant when discussing the parental divorce. Interestingly, there were certain factors that I thought would lead an ACD to report struggling initially such as: being shocked/surprised; being put in the middle; or taking sides, for example. However, this was not the case. Although the ACD who struggled initially were also more likely to report experiencing certain factors such as taking sides, or having a strained parent-child relationship, for example, I cannot say for certain that one aspect causes the other. It is
possible that the difference between the ACD who struggle with the parental divorce and those who do not struggle can be explained by the fact that some individuals are more resilient than others. Future research is needed to disentangle these factors and to provide a more complete explanation of not only how the two groups of ACD differ, but why.

Although the current study is not without its limitations, the findings from this study suggest many avenues for future research on mid to late life parental divorce, intergenerational relationships, adult sibling relationships, and the inter- and intragenerational ambivalence framework. Directions for future research are discussed in a later section. I now turn to discuss theoretical and practical implications.

**Theoretical Implications**

Based on previous work that has utilized the intergenerational ambivalence framework (Luscher and Pillemer 1998; Connidis and McMullin 2002a,b; Connidis 2003, 2005), I proposed that it might be a very useful framework from which to better understand how a mid to late life parental divorce affects family relationships. Conceptualizing “intergenerational ambivalence” proved to be a difficult task, especially since there are no agreed-upon measures of intergenerational ambivalence. However, based on previous work that has utilized the framework, it became evident early on during the data analysis process that some of the ACD were indeed experiencing intergenerational ambivalence.

While intergenerational ambivalence was not experienced by a majority of the ACD, a mid to late life parental divorce is a situation which creates the potential for intergenerational ambivalence to be heightened. Upon analyzing the data, if the ACD
indicated that they felt unsure or torn about a parent-child relationship or overburdened with new roles as a result of the parental divorce, then they were categorized as having experienced intergenerational ambivalence. It is important to note that there was much discretion on my part in determining whether or not intergenerational ambivalence was experienced. Once again, this was a difficult task since I was not asking about intergenerational ambivalence directly.

Based on the results of this study, the ACD who were “put in the middle,” forced to take sides, and/or experienced parentification, were the ones who could be characterized as having experienced intergenerational ambivalence. In addition, it was these same ACD who were most likely to have had a strained relationship with one or both parents. A key idea associated with intergenerational ambivalence is the need for negotiation of these family ties, especially when ambivalence is heightened. Utilizing this conceptual framework, I suggested that the ACD whose parent-child relationships mended over time, were the ones who had successfully negotiated the intergenerational ambivalence. While I cannot conclude that successful negotiation of intergenerational ambivalence causes a mended strained parent-relationship, based on the theoretical work of Connidis and McMullin (2003), a successful negotiation implies a strained relationship that has been mended. Connidis and McMullin (2002a) note that successful renegotiation is central to maintaining positive relationships. Although my sample contained quite a few ACD who currently had a strained relationship with one or both parents, it remains unknown if they had successfully negotiated this ambivalence or not. Future research would benefit from longitudinal samples that followed the same ACD over time, perhaps five, ten, fifteen, and twenty years later to better assess how the family relationships
evolve over time. The evolution of both parent-child and adult sibling relationships was an important theme in the current study.

The strategies used to successfully negotiate and renegotiate family relationships are important components of understanding how and why some relationships are maintained while others are not. Connidis and McMullin (2002a) suggested that future research identify what strategies are used by individuals during the successful negotiation of family ties. In an effort to build upon past research, I asked all of the ACD what strategies they had used during the process of the parental divorce. To be more clear, I asked them what advice they would provide to other ACD who were experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce. The hypothetical advice they provided included strategies they had personally used or ideas about what they would do differently. Strategies included not taking sides, setting boundaries, taking care of yourself, seeking counseling if necessary, and taking a period of time without speaking to one parent.

This study contributes to the literature on intergenerational relationships since the intergenerational ambivalence framework has not been applied to the phenomenon of a mid to late life parental divorce.

Drawing from the intergenerational ambivalence framework, I also went one step further by proposing that the intragenerational ambivalence framework (Connidis 2005) be utilized for understanding adult sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce. I argued that a parental divorce is an example of a situational imperative that may require negotiation of sibling relationships in addition to parent-child relationships. After all, a parental divorce is a family event and based on the results of this study, ACD are often put in positions that affect their family relationships. For instance, ACD who
took a different side from their siblings often reported having a strained relationship with them. Similar to the ACD experiencing intergenerational ambivalence, ACD who were able to mend the strained relationships were those who successfully negotiated the ambivalence.

Although this study is the first attempt to utilize the intergenerational and intragenerational ambivalence framework to enrich our understanding of family relationships in the context of a mid to late life parental divorce, there is much work to be done. While I argue that the frameworks are useful, there are many issues that need to be addressed. For instance, there needs to be more clear standards of conceptualizing and measuring inter- and intragenerational ambivalence. In addition, future research would benefit from identifying strategies that ACD use to deal with the heightened ambivalence during the family transition of a parental divorce. Nonetheless, I believe both the inter- and intragenerational ambivalence frameworks are fruitful approaches for better understanding how family relationships are (or are not) affected by a mid to late life parental divorce. Furthermore, I argue the inter- and intragenerational ambivalence “concepts” will be useful for helping individuals as well as clinicians who may encounter ACD or other family members that may be struggling during a parental divorce. This is especially important since the ACD experiencing intergenerational ambivalence were also more likely to have reported being negatively affected by the parental divorce. I now turn to a discussion of practical implications of this research.
Practical Implications

Findings from this study suggest that experiencing a parental divorce, even during one’s adult years, can affect one’s well-being. Based on the results of this study, many ACD reported struggling emotionally with depression or simply being overburdened with the nuances of being put in the middle or being forced to take sides between parents. About one-half of the ACD in this study reported struggling initially in one way or another. Furthermore, about one-half of the ACD reported a strained relationship with one or both parents and/or siblings during the process of the divorce.

While some individuals assume that adult children are better able to “handle” a parental divorce if they are older than 18 years or are no longer residing in their parents’ home, research suggests otherwise. The results of this study are consistent with previous studies (Amato 2000; Wallerstein 1985; Cherlin et al. 1991; Cooney 1988; Lang and Pett 1992) in that a parental divorce has the potential to affect children, including young children, adolescents, and adult children. Although the experiences and situations may be different, depending on the age of the children, the overall results are similar.

Some of the ACD in my study had sought counseling in order to help them deal with the parental divorce. For those who did struggle initially, they were also the ACD most likely to suggest counseling for other ACD who might be experiencing a mid to late life parental divorce. Even the ACD who did not struggle initially offered advice that encouraged ACD to take care of themselves mentally and to not let family matters take a toll on their own personal lives.

For counselors and other mental health professionals who might encounter ACD, it is important to recognize a parental divorce as a family transition that has the potential
to disrupt the ACD’s personal lives as well as family relationships. While it might be easy to offer advice such as “do not take sides,” “avoid being a mediator,” and “do not let their divorce affect you,” it is not that simple. Based on the results of this study, all ACD are different and come from unique backgrounds. It is imperative to keep in mind that there is much variation based on previous family dynamics. Thus, it is important to gain a complete understanding of the family history, including parental marital satisfaction and conflict, parent-child relationships, and adult sibling relationships. The most important issue is to avoid dismissing the issue as something that does not or should not affect the ACD. While it is true that many ACD are unscathed and unaffected by a parental divorce, there are just as many who might be traumatized and in need of a professional counselor who can offer an outside perspective.

**Directions for Future Research**

Although the current study provides contributions to various literatures including divorce, in general; mid to late life parental divorce; intergenerational relationships; adult sibling relationships; and inter- and intragenerational ambivalence theoretical work, this study is not without its limitations. Future research can build upon the findings of the current study, keeping in mind this study’s limitations and attempting to improve upon some of those limitations. I will now discuss some directions for future research based upon the limitations of the current study.

In terms of sampling issues, future research should strive for a sample of ACD that is much more diverse than that of the current study. Samples that are larger than 40 and more diverse in terms of race/ethnicity and social class would be beneficial as well.
In addition, the current study was also biased by a sample of very young adults and ACD who recently experienced a parental divorce. While it is important to discuss issues that pertain to ACD regardless of their current age or age at the time of the parental divorce, it is just as important to discuss the significance of their age at the time of the parental divorce. In addition, future research should make a concerted attempt to recruit individuals who were older than age 25 at the time of the parental divorce. Future studies that can afford to be more selective should seek ACD who experienced a parental divorce more than ten years ago. Perhaps there are differences in the experiences between very young adults and older young adults. As the rate of mid to late life parental divorces increases, it will be more feasible to obtain a more diverse sample in terms of age at the time of the divorce as well as current age.

As mentioned earlier, a major limitation of the current study is the issue of interviewing only one member of the family. A main goal of the current study was to assess if and how family relationships were affected by a parental divorce. However, since only one child was interviewed, we are provided with only part of the “story.” Future research that interviewed all members of the family would be very beneficial since a parental divorce is likely to be perceived and interpreted differently by members of the immediate family. In addition, family experiences are dynamic and strained relationships between parents and children or between adult siblings are likely to affect other relationships in that family as well.

In order to better understand the complexities of the family relationships, future research would benefit greatly from interviewing more than one member. While interviewing all family members would present financial and time constraints, in order to
get a more complete understanding of if and how family relationships are affected by a parental divorce, future researchers could interview at least both members of a relationship. For example, for researchers interested specifically in the parent-child relationship, both the mother and child or father and child could be interviewed. Better yet, both parents and the child could be interviewed. For researchers interested in adult sibling relationships, all siblings could be interviewed to compare their experiences of the parental divorce.

While interviewing and obtaining data on all members of the family could present financial obstacles for future researchers, doing so would greatly contribute to our understanding of if and how parent-child and adult sibling relationships may be affected by a parental divorce. It would be interesting and more accurate to interview all members of the family to compare their experiences of the parental divorce. Many additional questions could be explored if all additional members of the family were interviewed. Regarding the parent-child relationships, one could see if both parties, (i.e. the parent and child) agree on the status and evolution of the relationship over time. In addition, if one or more siblings were interviewed, comparisons could be made concerning their perceptions of the parental divorce. Since families are dynamic and individuals can have different interpretations of the same events, I would argue that perhaps there would be disagreement about the relationships, especially those that were negatively affected by the parental divorce. Future research that accounts for all members’ perceptions, or at least more than one, would enrich our understanding of how and why these relationships evolve as they do.
As mentioned previously, future research is warranted to determine why some ACD struggle initially with the parental divorce, while others do not. Based on the findings of the current study, I was able to describe how the two groups of ACD differed, but I was unable to determine why. For instance, compared to the other group of ACD, ACD who reported struggling initially with the parental divorce were also the ACD who were more likely to have experienced a strained parent-child and/or relationship, more likely to have been “put in the middle,” more likely to have attributed emotional or psychological problems to the parental divorce, and more likely to have sought counseling. Although I can argue that these experiences are intertwined, I cannot make any causal connections. More specifically, based on the current study, I am unable to argue that if an ACD is put in the middle, then they will struggle initially and have a tough time with the parental divorce. In fact, there were ACD in the current study who were put in the middle, but still did not report that they had a tough time initially. While it seems logical to make such conclusions, based on previous research that focuses on the effects of divorce on children, I am unable to do so.

Future research would benefit if such a causal explanation could be established. While I highlighted important factors that played a role, future research needs to assess the implications of various factors that might play an important role in distinguishing between the two groups, including marital conflict (before, during, and after the parental divorce), perceived marital quality, age of the ACD, gender of the ACD, and/or involvement in the parental divorce.

Results of the current study indicated that parent-child relationships that were reportedly strained due to the parental divorce, mended over time. More specifically,
especially for those ACD who went for a period of time without speaking to one parent, as time passed, the issues were resolved. Future research is needed to determine if this pattern is found among larger samples of ACD and if “time” does heal or if there are other factors that are responsible.

Although previous research has not looked at adult sibling relationships in the context of a mid to late life parental divorce, there are ways that future research could better address some issues. One major limitation is that I was concerned with overall findings of how the adult sibling relationships were affected and asked each ACD to talk about their relationships with their siblings. As a result, some focused on their closest relationships or only relationships that were negatively affected by the parental divorce; others simply glossed over all of the siblings, highlighting age, quality of the relationship, or other characteristics. In addition, I did not distinguish between the experiences of ACD whose sibling groups differed in terms of sibling size, the age difference between the siblings, or the gender composition of the siblings. As a result, all of these experiences were combined with more general themes pulled out of the data.

Future research could take into account these various factors including the age composition of the sibling group, number of siblings, and birth order. In addition, specific data collection could be obtained on each and every sibling relationship since some ACD tended to only talk about one sibling relationship, focusing either on a very close relationship with one sibling or focusing on one that was strained for various reasons. Furthermore, future research focusing on the adult sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce should interview all siblings instead of just asking one individual about their relationships with siblings before, during, and after the parental
divorce. Based on the reports of ACD in this study, not all siblings had the same experience. In other words, one sibling may have struggled initially while another was relatively unaffected. Future research should interview all siblings to determine what factors such as age, gender, previous family dynamics, reason for parental divorce, and closeness to parents account for different experiences. In addition, future research would greatly benefit from studies that specifically disentangle what factors protect some sibling relationships from being negatively affected by a parental divorce.

Quantitative studies, in addition to qualitative studies, would greatly enrich our understanding of the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on family relationships. For example, future research on adult sibling relationships would benefit from quantitative studies that compare ACD to young adults from two-parent families or young adults whose parents divorced during childhood. In addition, future research should also try to disentangle the specific role of various factors such as marital conflict and perceived marital quality since the current study did not assess these factors.

Results of this study are consistent with previous research supporting the buffering hypothesis as it pertains to the assessment of sibling relationships in the context of a parental divorce; however, future research is warranted to determine if the pattern of qualitative studies supporting the buffering hypothesis and quantitative studies supporting the social learning perspective continues and if so, what accounts for this difference. Nonetheless, there is a great need for both qualitative and quantitative studies since there are few studies focusing on adult sibling relationships and parental divorce. Despite these aforementioned limitations, this research is a starting point for future research on adult sibling relationships.
Lastly, although results of this study suggest that the conceptual frameworks of inter- and intragenerational ambivalence are useful for understanding family relationships in the context of a parental divorce, there is a great need for future studies measuring ambivalence. Quantitative studies, in which ambivalence can be measured in a more systematic way, would contribute greatly to this area. Qualitative methodology is limited in a sense since one cannot ask directly about experiencing ambivalence. Furthermore, it is a very subjective topic when conducting interviews. An advantage of quantitative studies is that questions can be created in such a way that measures ambivalence, thus eliminating any questioning as to whether or not ambivalence was experienced.

In addition to a need for future quantitative studies assessing inter- and intragenerational ambivalence, I believe that quantitative longitudinal studies would contribute greatly to the literature on the effects of a mid to late life parental divorce on family relationships. Specifically, since the evolution of family relationships was an important theme in this study, it would be interesting to see if future studies find similar results by relying on a more systematic analysis of relationships over time.

**Conclusion**

As the rate of mid to late life parental divorce continues to rise, there will be an increasing number of ACD. There is much to be discovered about this population of ACD; thus this study has both practical and theoretical implications. Although ACD have similarities with children of an early parental divorce, as suggested by the results of this study, there are also many differences. This dissertation serves as an initial attempt better understand the experience of a mid to late life parental divorce from the
perspective of the ACD. I chose to focus on four main topics: initial reaction of ACD to the parental divorce; the parent-child relationships; the adult sibling relationships; and the long-term implications for ACD. While results of this study shed light on all four of these topics, it is up to future research to build upon these findings. In addition, since this study was one of the first to apply the inter- and intragenerational ambivalence frameworks, there is a great need for replication of these findings.

A parental divorce can indeed negatively influence family relationships and the well-being of family members; however, based on the results of this study, just as important is the finding that about one-half of the ACD reported that they were not affected at all. With the increasing rate of mid to late life parental divorce, this area of research will continue to grow. The current study serves as a foundation for future research, both qualitative and quantitative, investigating the mid to late life parental divorce and family relationships.
REFERENCES


Halgin, RP; Weaver, DD; Edell, WS; and Spencer, PG. 1987. “Relation of Depression and Help-seeking to Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help.” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 34:177-185.


TABLE 1

Demographics of Sample

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th># Years Since Parental Divorce</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-23</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-29</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>36-41</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>11-15: 6</td>
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<td>16-20: 9</td>
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<td>Working 8</td>
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<td>Lower 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other 0</td>
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<td>---------------------------------</td>
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

- You are obviously here because you are willing to discuss how your parents’ divorce has impacted your life. I will be asking you to talk about your experience in general; more specifically, I will be asking you to discuss at length your relationships with your mother, father, and siblings.

I. ACD Life Now

- Could you tell me about your life now?

- (Are you currently in a relationship? If so, could you talk a bit about your current relationship?)

- (Are you currently in school, working, and/or raising a family?)

- (What are holidays like with your family?)

- (How often do you see your family?)

- (What is a typical day like for you?)

II. ACD Life During Initial Stages of Parental Divorce

- If I had asked you when you were initially dealing with your parents’ divorce, would your story be different?

- (How many years has it been since your parents’ divorce?)

- (What was your life like at the time when you first found out about the divorce?)

- (Were you in school, working, in a relationship?)

- (What were holidays like before your parents’ divorce?)

- (Could you discuss your reaction upon first hearing of your parents’ divorce?)
- (Were you surprised? Why or why not?)
- (Who do you feel was to blame for the divorce and why? Who filed the divorce papers?)
- (Why do you think your parents divorced?)
- (What reasons would your mother give as to why they divorced?)
- (What reasons would your father give as to why they divorced?)
- (What reasons would your siblings give as to why they divorced?)
- (In what ways do you feel like your life changed as a result of your parents’ divorce?)
- (Some ACD say that they become burdened as parents turn to them as sources of emotional, financial, and social support during this family transition; what was your own experience?)
- (What would you say was the most challenging part of dealing with your parents’ divorce?)

III. Relationship with Mother
- Now I’m going to ask about your relationships with your parents.
- Could you tell me about your current relationship with your mother?
- (How close do you live to your mother?)
- (How often do you see your mother?)
- (How often do you communicate with your mother?)
- (What was your relationship like with your mother before the divorce?)
- (What was your relationship like with your mother during the initial stages of the divorce?)
- (In what ways has your relationship with your mother changed since the divorce?)
- Is your mother remarried, dating, or cohabiting at the present time? If so, how has this impacted your relationship with her?
- (Can you describe your relationships with your mother’s side of the family?)
- (In what ways have these relationships changed since your parents’ divorce?)
- Is there anything else you’d like to add regarding your relationship with your mother?

IV. Relationship with Father

- Could you tell me about your current relationship with your father?
- (How close do you live to your father?)
- (How often do you see your father?)
- (How often do you communicate with your father?)
- (What was your relationship like with your father before the divorce?)
- (What was your relationship like with your father during the initial stages of the divorce?)
- (In what ways has your relationship with your father changed since the divorce?)
- Is your father remarried, dating, or cohabiting at the present time? If so, how has this affected your relationship with him?
- (Can you describe your relationships with your father’s side of the family?)
- (In what ways have these relationships changed since your parents’ divorce?)
- In general, do you feel closer to your mother or father and why?
- (Did this change as a result of the divorce?)
- Is there anything else you would like to add?
V. Relationships with all Adult Siblings
- Now I’d like to talk about your relationships with your siblings.
- Can you tell me about your relationships with each of your siblings?
- What do you have in common with each of your siblings?
- What is a common topic of conversation with each of your siblings?
- (With whom do you feel the closest and why?)
- In what ways has your parents’ divorce impacted your relationships with your siblings?
- (Did any of your siblings take sides? If so, how did this affect your relationship with him/her?)
- (In what ways do you feel closer or more distant to your siblings since your parents divorce and why?)
- Are there any other siblings you have left out?
- Is there anything else you’d like to add regarding your sibling relationships?

VI. Personal History:
- What is your current age?
- How old were you at the time of your parents’ divorce?
- How long have your parents been divorced?
- How long had your parents been married?
- How many siblings do you have? Gender and ages?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What is your mother’s highest level of education?
- What is your father’s highest level of education?
- What is your mother’s occupation?
- What is your father’s occupation?
- Were they divorced when you left home?
- Have you co-resided with your parents at any time since your parents’ divorce?
- What is your marital status?
- Are you currently in a relationship?
- If so, how long have you been in this relationship?
- Do you have any children?
- If so, how many? Gender and ages?

VII. Conclusion

- All in all, how do you think your parents’ divorce has impacted your own life?
- In your experience as an ACD, what strategies have you used in dealing with this family transition?
- Lastly, do you know any other ACD who would be interested in participating in this study? If so, would you be willing to provide them with my contact information so that they can contact me if they are interested?
APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT FLYER

Seeking Adult Children of Divorce for Interview Study!!!

- Are your parents divorced?
- Were you between the ages of 18 and 34 when your parents divorced?
- Did your parents divorce within the past 20 years?

If you can answer YES to ALL 3 of these questions then you are eligible to participate in a 90 minute interview. You will be paid $10 as a token of appreciation. If interested, please call 518-312-5566 or email JL197565@albany.edu for more information. Thank you!

*This research has been approved by the University at Albany Institutional Review Board*
APPENDIX C: NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT

Newspaper Advertisement:

Researcher seeking adult children of divorce for interview study. Must have been between ages of 18 and 34 when parents divorced. In addition, the divorce must have occurred within the past 20 years. If eligible, participants will be paid $10. Interview to last approximately 90 minutes. For more information, please call 518-312-5566 or email JL197565@albany.edu. This research is being conducted through SUNY-Albany and has been approved by the Institutional Review Board.
APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

An Exploration of the Effects of Mid to Late-Life Parental Divorce on Intergenerational Relationships

Consent Form
I understand that by signing this consent form, I am agreeing to participate in a research study entitled “An Exploration of the Effects of Mid to Late-Life Parental Divorce on Intergenerational Relationships.” This study will be conducted by Joleen Loucks, a doctoral student at the University at Albany, State University of New York. I understand that this is a research study designed to investigate the experiences, histories, and relationships with family members of adult children of divorce.

Upon agreement to participate in this study, I agree to participate in a qualitative interview that will last approximately ninety minutes, conducted by Joleen Loucks. During this interview, questions will be asked regarding my parents’ divorce in general, the impact of my parents’ divorce on my own life, the impact of the divorce on my relationships with my parents, and the impact of my parents’ divorce on my relationships with my siblings. I will be asked permission to allow this interview to be audio-taped. Also, I will be paid $10 for my participation. There is a moderate risk of becoming upset as a result of some of the questions that will be asked. I understand that if I so desire I can contact the University Counseling Center at 518-442-5800 or the Capital District Psychological Services Center at 518-442-4900 if I need professional assistance.

I understand that:

- All personal information obtained for the purpose of this study will be kept confidential.
- My name will not be included in any reports or publications resulting from this study.
- There are no costs to me for participation in this study.
- My participation or refusal to participate in this study will in no way adversely affect me.
- My participation is voluntary and I may refuse to answer questions or may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I may otherwise have been entitled.
- There are no physical risks involved in participating in this study.
- One copy of this document will be kept together with the research records of this study.
- I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

As a participant in this study, it is my right to contact the Investigator Joleen Loucks at (518) 312-5566. In addition, if I have any questions regarding my rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or if I wish to report any concerns about the study, I may contact the University at Albany Office of Research Compliance Office at (518) 437-4569 or orc@umail.albany.edu.
_____ I have read and understand the information provided regarding this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

_____ I give permission for the qualitative interview to be audio-taped for the purpose of transcribing.

_____ I do not give permission for the qualitative interview to be audio-taped for the purpose of transcribing.

Name________________________________
Signature_________________________________

Address______________________________
Date___________________________________