ABSTRACT

COVERT PROCESSES: LOYALTY CONFLICTS, CHILD INVOLVEMENT, AND PARENTAL ALIENATION AS MEDIATORS OF THE LINK BETWEEN INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AND COLLEGE STUDENT ADJUSTMENT

by Julie Anne Swanson

The purpose of the present study was to test the hypothesis that the three covert interparental conflict processes of loyalty conflicts, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation would differentially mediate the relationship between overt interparental conflict and adjustment in college students from both intact and divorced families. Self-report questionnaires were utilized to assess exposure to overt and covert interparental conflict processes during childhood and present levels of internalizing, externalizing, and difficulty navigating the stage-salient developmental task of establishing satisfying intimate relationships. Structural Equation Modeling was used to analyze the data. Each of the four models tested failed to meet the stringent fit criteria utilized in the present study. The discussion of the results focuses on speculations as to how the models could have been improved in order to produce a better fit, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.
COVERT PROCESSES: LOYALTY CONFLICTS, CHILD INVOLVEMENT, AND PARENTAL ALIENATION AS MEDIATORS OF THE LINK BETWEEN INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT AND COLLEGE STUDENT ADJUSTMENT

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Introduction

Over the last three decades, America has been witness to an increase in the prevalence of the non-traditional family (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Although the divorce rate has been decreasing within the last few years, approximately 43% of marriages will end in divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Early in the 1960’s almost 90% of children spent their childhood and adolescence in homes with two biological, married parents, however, the intact family is only a reality for 40% of children in America today (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). An estimated one million children in America experience parental divorce each year (US Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Research suggests that divorce has adverse effects on children although there is less agreement as to the size and significance of these effects (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Children of divorce have been shown to differ from children in intact families in the following ways: poorer school functioning (Amato, 2001; Kelly, 2000), lower perceived cognitive competence (Forehand et al., 1991; Hetherington, 1999), more behavior and emotional problems (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999), less social competence and more difficulty in interpersonal relationships with peers and authority figures (Amato, 2001; Forehand et al., 1991; Kelly, 2000), less trust and intimacy in relationships with parents as well as more difficulty individuating from the family of origin (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Johnson & Nelson, 1998), and lower levels of self-esteem (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1999).

Early research on the subject of divorce tended to focus mainly on the disadvantages of having an absent father. This conceptualization was based on the family composition model of divorce, and most studies using this conceptualization failed to take into account mediating or moderating factors occurring in the situation of divorce such as the passage of time, individual differences, and family process variables. More recently attention has been paid to the diversity of patterns that ensue following the discrete life event of parental divorce. More focus has been directed towards the factors that may constitute the divorce experience rather than the mere fact of divorce as determinants of children’s adjustment (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998) have provided a concise overview of the five main perspectives that have been used in researching the association between parental divorce and
child adjustment. Besides the family composition perspective already mentioned, the other perspectives include (a) individual characteristics associated with risk and vulnerability, (b) stress and economic disadvantage, (c) parental distress, and (d) family process. Although there is empirical support for all of these perspectives, the Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella review supports the family process perspective as being the most explanatory regarding the link between parental divorce and child adjustment. Without family process disruptions, the other factors hypothesized to influence the relationship between parental divorce and child adjustment have been found to be, for the most part, irrelevant (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). The finding that the dynamics involved in the process of the family appear to be more salient to child outcomes as opposed to the actual divorce experience was replicated in the 2004 study by Peris and Emery. Bearing these findings in mind, the family process perspective will be utilized in the present study; also, several individual characteristics of particular interest to the family process perspective will serve as covariates. These will include age at the time of parental divorce, gender, current developmental stage, and family structure. The next section will introduce the main family process factors to be utilized in the present study; the section following that will discuss the individual characteristics that will serve as covariates in the present endeavor.

Family Process Factors Influencing Child Adjustment

Two specific family process factors have been identified through research as having the greatest influence on child adjustment regardless of family structure; these factors include (a) interparental conflict and (b) parent-child relations (Margolin, Oliver, & Medina, 2001). The association between the quality of the parental relationship and child outcomes is an accepted presumption across a variety of theoretical perspectives (Grych & Fincham, 2001). Specifically, interparental conflict has been found to be one of the most salient predictors of children’s well-being before and after divorce, and it has been shown to be a better predictor of child outcomes than even divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Peris & Emery, 2004). Given that the link between interparental conflict and child adjustment has been supported by previous research, the present research is driven by the question of how and why this link exists. The purpose of the present study involves an exploration of a relatively new concept in the family process literature, that of covert conflict. This type of conflict is characterized by passive-aggressive strategies for managing interparental conflict that tend to involve children in
some way. Three types of covert conflict are specifically delineated in the present study; these types include (a) loyalty conflicts/triangulation, (b) child involvement in interparental disputes and (c) parental alienation. It is hypothesized in the present study that the relationship of interparental conflict to young adult’s overall level of adjustment as well as to his or her ability to achieve success in navigating developmentally stage-salient tasks will be mediated by exposure to the covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement, and parental alienation.

*Individual Characteristics and Vulnerability (Covariates)*

*Age of child at the time of parental divorce.* A review of the literature suggests mixed findings in terms of the relationship between child’s age at the time of parental divorce and children’s adjustment to the divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Dreman, 2000; Enos & Handal, 1987; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Howell, Portes, & Brown, 1997; King, 2002). Several reports suggest that younger children, especially children under the age of six at the time of parental separation, may fare worse in the long-term than those who are older (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Howell, Portes, & Brown, 1997; King, 2002; Woodward, Fergusson, & Belsky, 2000). These findings coincide with the view that preschoolers are most vulnerable given that their level of cognitive development may interfere with their ability to form an accurate understanding of the events occurring around them. Young preschool children do not have the capacity for formal operations thinking nor the ability to understand complex relationships, and the identity of these young children is primarily tied to that of their parents (Emery & Kitzmann, 1995; Howell, Portes, & Brown, 1997). Adolescents have been viewed as having better adjustment to parental divorce due to cognitive maturity allowing them to comprehend the dynamics underlying reasons for divorce as well as their greater ability to turn to external social support, however, several studies have found equally negative effects for older children or adolescents experiencing parental divorce (Enos & Handal, 1987; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990).

Conversely, existing evidence suggests that older children and adolescents are more often exposed to the covert processes that are the central focus of the present study (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996, Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press,
Loyalty conflicts seem to become more common when the child reaches school age (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). In contrast, exposure to loyalty conflicts seems to decline as children reach early adolescence; at this age, children are more likely to cope with previously existing loyalty conflicts by aligning with one parent in a coalition (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Replicated in the study by Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (in press, 2005), findings suggest that older children are more likely to engage in rejection of a parent than are younger children. In the present study, for young adult college students from divorced families, the age of the young person at the time of parental divorce will serve as a covariate.

Gender. One individual variable that has long been considered to be important in the study of child outcomes associated with interparental conflict and parental divorce is child gender. In terms of interparental conflict, either experienced in intact or divorced families, research indicates that boys and girls are exposed to similar levels of conflict. Both boys and girls are adversely affected by exposure to interparental conflict, and both have been found to exhibit similar kinds of adjustment problems to it (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kerig, 1998). Conversely, other research suggests that girls are more likely to react to their parent’s conflicts with internalizing problems and by self-blaming, whereas boys are more likely to react by withdrawing from the conflict or, upon reaching adolescence, to react with hostility and involvement especially in cases of physical conflict (Cummings, Zahn-Walker, & Radke-Yarrow, 1984; Hetherington, 1999).

In considering exposure to parental divorce, early research tended to suggest that boys are more harmed by their parents’ divorce than are girls (Emery, 1982; Kurdek, 1981). More recently, studies have found that adjustment to parental divorce is similar for both boys and girls (Amato, 2001). Following their parents’ divorce, both boys and girls are equally vulnerable to experiencing the development of behavior problems, depressive symptoms, low cognitive agency, and decreased social responsibility (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Although boys appear to be the most troubled in pre-adolescent years with an increase in conduct and behavior problems, as children of divorce reach adolescence, evidence indicates that the effects of divorce on girls may become more apparent, especially regarding subsequent relations with the opposite sex (Amato, 2001; Dreman, 2000; Forehand et al., 1991). Long-term negative effects of parental divorce have been found for both men and women (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995).
When covert processes and gender are considered, mixed results appear. One study found that sons and daughters were about equally likely to align with one parent against the other (Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005), whereas others have reported that females are more likely to be placed in loyalty conflicts (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). The finding that females are more likely to be exposed to covert processes was interpreted by the authors in light of research suggesting that because of the higher priority females tend to place on harmonious interpersonal relationships, females may experience more distress when put in the position of having to choose between their parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). Although the focus of the present research does not include the effects of gender on young adult adjustment, this variable is still an important one to consider and will be included as a covariate in the present study.

Current developmental stage. Children with histories of exposure to high levels of unresolved, frequent, intense interparental conflict exhibit a range of maladjusted outcomes (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 2001). Evidence suggests that children as young as two years of age are sensitive to the content of interparental conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Although in adulthood many children exposed to high levels of interparental conflict are as well-adjusted as their peers from non-conflicted families, evidence suggests that quite a few others continue to experience long-lasting problems (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Gyrch & Fincham, 1999). Parents with high levels of acrimony who later divorce exhibit poor problem-solving and conflict resolution skills; therefore, the children of conflicted parents have reduced opportunity for exposure to more appropriate models (Amato, 1999; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

In his 1999 article, Amato describes the life-course perspective, a perspective consistent with the recent increased focus on risk and resiliency. According to this perspective, events in the family of origin still affect children upon reaching adulthood. When comparing adults raised in happy intact families, adults raised in conflicted intact families, and adults raised in families of divorce, those who grew up in conflicted intact or divorced homes report statistically significant lower levels of happiness in their own marriages (Amato, 1999). The same held true when these three groups of adults were compared on measures of conflict and instability and on measures of overall well-being. Adults from happy intact families had lower levels of conflict and instability in their own marriages as well as the highest levels of overall happiness and satisfaction whereas
high levels of conflict and instability as well as lower levels of overall happiness and satisfaction were the norm found for adults from conflicted intact and divorced families (Amato, 1999). Amato (1999) concluded from his findings that interparental conflict lowers children’s long-term well-being and that divorce lowers it even further. The purpose of the present study includes a focus on the degree of success with which adolescents’ from conflicted or divorced families who have been exposed to covert processes navigate the transition into adulthood. The primary population of interest utilized in the present study will be college students.

The developmental psychopathology perspective suggests that as children from conflicted families transition into adolescence and adulthood, difficulties with stage-salient issues such as the ability to form satisfying and intimate relationships outside of the family may surface (Emery & Kizmann, 1995; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Prior to adulthood, issues surrounding the development of these types of relationships are not as much of a priority in the average person’s life; upon reaching the transitions associated with adulthood, these issues may become the focal point of development. A recent study by Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, and Tellegen (2004) provides support for the supposition that the successful navigation of stage-salient developmental tasks in childhood and adolescence is an important predictor of positive outcomes in adulthood. As issues surrounding the ability to form and develop healthy intimate relationships outside of the family are likely one of the most salient developmental tasks for young adults, these will, therefore, serve as the key dependent variables focused on in the present study. As noted previously, the present study will utilize college students from both intact and divorced families as the primary population of interest in an effort to determine the role of covert processes in children’s long-term outcomes.

*Family Process and Interparental Conflict*

One of the major family process disruptions contributing to the compromised adjustment for children in both intact and divorced families is interparental conflict. As mentioned previously, interparental conflict is one of the strongest predictors of child-well being before and after divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). In intact families, unresolved, frequent, intense marital conflict harms children (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Grych & Fincham, 2001; Herzog & Cooney, 2002; Jenkins & Smith, 1991). Children whose parents will later divorce begin to show problems in adjustment
many years before the divorce, and children in families with high marital conflict exhibit many of the same problems in adjustment as those in divorced families (Amato & Booth, 1997; Amato & Keith, 1991). Although it is true that immediately after divorce, children in divorced families exhibit greater adjustment problems than those in high-conflict, non-divorced families, when divorce is associated with a move to a more harmonious, less-stressful situation, children in divorced families have been found to be more similar in adjustment to those in intact families with non-distressed marital relations. Children who experience parental divorce but who also experience the change to a less-stressful environment have also been found to be higher in social responsibility and cognitive agency and lower in externalizing and internalizing behaviors than children in high-conflict, distressed, intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Bauserman, 2002; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Peris & Emery, 2004).

If conflict subsides with divorce or if an abusive parent is removed from the home, divorce may be in the best interests of the child (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1992; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley, 1999). However, following divorce, parental conflict often increases (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Approximately 10-25% of couples continue to experience moderate to high levels of hostility and conflict after the initial post-separation period (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Continuing high levels of post-divorce interparental conflict are detrimental for children and contribute to their exhibiting a wide range of maladjusted behaviors and attitudes (Amato & Keith, 1991; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Kitzmann & Emery, 1994; Johnson & Nelson, 1998; Lee, 1997). Children are at a considerably higher risk for developing psychosocial problems when parents remain embittered and actively hostile after the divorce (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997). In young adults, several aspects of adjustment are significantly predicted by post-divorce continuing conflict, including externalizing and internalizing problems, low self-esteem, impaired social, cognitive, and academic functioning, pessimistic views toward marriage, and lower quality romantic relationships (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Only about one quarter of divorced parents have a cooperative, mutually supportive relationship (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992).
Coparenting Conflict and Covert Processes

Empirical evidence suggests that the frequency of interparental conflict in both intact and divorced families may be less predictive of child outcomes than the type of conflict the child is exposed to (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Much research has been undertaken concerning children’s adjustment to high levels of overt verbal or physical interparental conflict. Children exposed to hostile, aggressive, and poorly resolved acts of overt verbal conflict such as threatening, yelling, insulting, or name-calling, as well as acts of overt physical violence tend to exhibit more problems in adjustment and well-being (Grych & Fincham, 1999, 2001). Evidence suggests the same type of outcome for children who are more often exposed to child-related points of contention (Grych & Fincham, 1999, 2001). Children have been found to be more negatively affected by conflict between their parents when the conflict revolves around issues related to themselves.

Following these reports is the finding that interparental conflict related to the coparenting relationship is more salient to child adjustment than conflict related to the spousal relationship. Camara and Resnick (1989) found that the level of conflict regarding issues relevant to the spousal role was less predictive of child adjustment as compared to the level of conflict regarding issues relevant to the coparenting role. Coparenting dynamics within families have been found to be at least partially distinct from marital and parent-child dynamics (Belsky, Crnic, & Gable, 1995; McHale, 1997). Evidence exists suggesting that parenting itself may mediate the conflict-adjustment link (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). Positively correlated with child adjustment to divorce is cooperative parenting between ex-spouses (Grych & Fincham, 1999). Why might interparental conflict associated with coparenting produce greater maladjustment in children? Although sparse, recent research has begun an attempt at answering this complicated question. This research suggests that conflict related to the coparenting relationship may often take the form of covert processes characterized by the utilization of passive-aggressive tactics that tend to draw children into the conflict (McHale, 1997; Bradford & Barber, in press, 2005, Buehler et al., 1994). Katz and Gottman (1996) found evidence that distressed couples more often exhibit hostile-competitive coparenting and differences in child involvement in parental disputes. Along the same lines, other findings suggest that hostile-competitive coparenting evidenced during infancy is predictive of child aggression 3 years later (McHale, Kuersten, & Lauretti, 1996).
Of particular importance to the present study is the finding that covert processes may constitute a factor separate from that of interparental conflict (McHale, 1997). Therefore, it may be possible that, given the findings that conflict associated with coparenting is more detrimental to children’s well-being, covert processes themselves may mediate the link between interparental conflict and child adjustment. Described by Stone, Buehler, and Barber (2002), covert conflict processes involve the management of interparental conflict through indirect means involving children and parental competition. According to Stone, Buehler, and Barber, examples of covert conflict include trying to get the child to side with one parent, using the child to get information about the other parent, having the child carry messages to the other parent because one does not want to pass on the information him or herself, and denigrating the other parent in the child’s presence. Although the focus of the present study does not include an examination of these links, several recent studies suggest an association between covert conflict processes, psychological control, and parent-child boundary dissolution (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Bradford & Barber, in press, 2005, Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005; Margolin, Oliver, & Medina, 2001). Accumulated research concerning the topic of covert interparental conflict suggests that this type of conflict may be present in both intact and divorced families (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991, 1996; McHale, 1997).

The conceptualization of the processes described above by Stone, Buehler, and Barber (2002) as being of the covert type of conflict is relatively new, however, a review of the literature suggests that the processes involved in covert conflict have been studied to an extent (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991, 1996; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001; Camara & Resnick, 1989; Christensen & Margolin, 1988; McHale, 1997). One of the biggest drawbacks in the literature focusing on these processes is that of the inconsistency with which the constructs are labeled and defined. Subsequently, one of the aims of the present study involves the creation of more explicit categories for each of the processes that have been recently named as elements of covert conflict (Bradford & Barber, in press, 2005; McHale, 1997; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002).

A review of the literature on children’s involvement in interparental conflict suggests that there are three distinct ways in which children might become inappropriately involved in their parents’ conflicts. For example, feeling “caught in the middle” of a loyalty conflict has a negative effect on children’s well-being (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan &
Heiges, 2001; Camara & Resnick, 1989; Christensen & Margolin, 1988; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). A loyalty conflict occurs when a child is explicitly or inexplicitly made to choose between their parents in some way. This construct has also been referred to in the literature as triangulation; therefore, in the present study, the constructs of loyalty conflict and triangulation will be used interchangeably (Minuchin, 1974). A second process related to interparental conflict that places children at risk for developing problems is that of child involvement, the experience of being involved or used in the parental disputes (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). A third process related to interparental conflict is that of parental alienation, the essence of which involves exposure of the child to the denigration of one parent by the other (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 1998). In the present study, it is hypothesized that each of these covert processes will mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and young-adult adjustment in both young adults from intact and divorced families of origin. Recent findings have indicated that adolescents in intact families and adolescents in divorced families are affected by triangulation in similar ways (Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). Previous research using both objective measures of triangulation and subjective measures of loyalty conflicts found evidence that these dynamics mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and child adjustment on dependent measures of self-blame, behavior problems, depression, and anxiety (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). A more recent study by Grych, Raynor, and Fosco (2004) found evidence that, not only does triangulation mediate the link between interparental conflict and both internalizing and externalizing problems, as the level of interparental conflict increases, so does the likelihood that adolescents will feel caught in the middle or triangulated into parental conflicts. Research also suggests that psychological control, associations of which have been found with parental alienation behaviors, serves as a mediator of the relationship between interparental conflict and youth internalizing behaviors (Fauber et al., 1990; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2004).

**Loyalty conflicts/triangulation.** One of the ways by which parents demonstrate covert interparental conflict processes is through the utilization of “loyalty conflicts” also known as “triangulation.” As mentioned previously, a loyalty conflict/triangulation occurs when a child is explicitly or inexplicitly made to choose between their parents in some way and becomes inadvertently “caught in the middle.” Minuchin (1974) is credited with contributing the original
conceptualization of triangulation. From Minuchin’s perspective, the concept of triangulation is one of three types of rigid triads including triangulation, detouring, or the forming of parent-child exclusive coalitions. In his book on structural family therapy, Minuchin (1974) describes triangulation in the following way: “In triangulation, each parent demands that the child side with him against the other parent. Whenever the child sides with one, he is automatically defined as attacking the other. In this highly dysfunctional structure, the child is paralyzed (p.102).”

Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991; 1996) have studied the same phenomena but have to chosen to refer to it as the experience of “loyalty conflicts.” In one of their studies, adolescents recorded their experiences in the post-divorce family and verified the toll that loyalty conflicts take on these adolescents’ lives (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch). Participants in this study described explicit ways of being forced to choose between their parents; this included parents going so far as to ask the child whom he or she loved the most. In other cases, parents were less explicit and did not demand a direct choice, however, they taxed the child with decisions about with whom to spend the holidays, with whom to live, or simply with whom to spend time on a particular occasion. Narrative examples of loyalty conflicts were provided in the Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) article: “Well, sometimes they used to try to put me on the spot and ask me about which one I’d rather live with in front of the other (p.218),” “[When] they were going to split up…we had to choose who we were going to go with…I didn’t want to leave my mom or dad (p.218),” and “My mom wants me, and my dad wants me at the same time that weekend, and he’s making us choose (p.218).” This research by Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996), as well as the 1991 study by the aforementioned authors, found that daughters more than sons tend to be affected by loyalty conflicts. While the link between feelings of being “caught in the middle” was clearly related to higher levels of depression and anxiety for both sexes, the effect was found to be somewhat stronger for females. Older adolescents were found to be slightly more likely to feel caught than younger adolescents; the authors suggest that the increases in maturity that accompany the transition into older adolescence may inflate the child’s potential for becoming involved or for involving themselves in loyalty conflicts (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan & Heiges, 2001).

Besides the evidence that the study by the aforementioned authors provides for the negative consequences associated with the experience of loyalty conflicts, the study also
questioned what factors might increase adolescents’ feelings of being caught between their parents. As we suggested earlier, the role of parents as coparents was implicated. Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) found that the most powerful predictor of adolescents’ feeling caught in loyalty conflicts between parents was the coparenting relationship. Adolescents least likely to feel caught between their parents were those whose parents were involved in a supportive, cooperative coparenting relationship. Coparenting relationships marked by high discord and hostility as well as low cooperative communication were associated with an increase in the adolescents’ feelings of being caught in a loyalty conflict. The aforementioned findings provide support for the hypothesis that the relationship of interparental conflict to young adult adjustment may be mediated by the degree to which the child finds himself/herself forced in a loyalty conflict or forced to choose between his or her parents in some way.

Child involvement in parental disputes. In the present study, the concept of “child involvement” will refer to the child’s experience of being used in the interparental conflict. Two examples of this appearing in the study by Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) are parents refusing to communicate with one another and making the child responsible for passing messages back and forth between them and, in cases of divorced parents, children being asked to report on the home of the other parent after returning from a visit, thus making the child into a “spy.” The central feature of “child involvement” is the child’s experience of becoming somehow used to further the aims of one or both parents in conflict. Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) study suggests that the more adolescents experienced triangulation with their parents by being asked to carry messages between parents or by being asked questions about the other parent, the more depressed and anxious they were and the more they participated in deviant behavior. The following narrative example of an adolescent’s feelings concerning being placed in a triangulated position was available in the 1996 study by Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch: “…they both thought I was against them, and they’d always use me as an in-between instead of talking to each other. They’d tell me what they were upset at the other person for, and they’d expect me to tell them that, and then I was out of bounds (p.217).”

Parental alienation. The third mediator identified is termed “parental alienation.” This experience involves the child being made to listen to one parent denigrating the other; what we are labeling “parental alienation” here may be utilized by one or both parents for the purposes of negatively affecting the child’s relationship with the opposite parent, thus creating a “coalition”
or exclusive partnership between child and denigrating parent (similar to the coalitions described by Minuchin (1974) as one type of rigid triad). Conversely, parental alienation may be utilized simply to strengthen the bond between one parent and the child at the expense of the child’s relationship with the other parent. McHale’s (1997) construct of covert coparenting in intact families is similar to the concept we are espousing here; McHale hypothesized that the child’s sense of confidence in the family is shaken when parents use the time they share alone with the child to speak negatively of the opposite parent and to focus exclusively on their own relationship with the child as opposed to supporting the relationship between the child and the opposite parent.

According to Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996), the denigration of one parent by the other may put children in the uncomfortable position of needing to defend the criticized parent. At times, the experience of constant denigration of one parent by the other can lead to the formation of unhealthy coalitions or partnerships between the denigrating parent and the child; data suggest that such types of alignments are relatively common in situations involving high levels of interparental conflict (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005). The degree to which strong coalitions between parents and children is related to child adjustment is unclear. Although alignment with one parent may temporarily relieve some of the problems children experience with covert interparental conflict, it has been hypothesized that the typical harboring of anger and resentment towards the rejected parent experienced by the child when involved in a coalition with the favored parent may interfere with the development of mature social relationships (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001). The following narrative example of this situation provides a sense of the frustration children inevitably feel when placed in this type of situation: “My dad would cut down my mom for things she’d done, and I’d defend her. And my mom would cut down my dad for things he’d done, and I’d defend him, and I was in the middle, and they both thought I was against them (p.217)…”

Although the processes involved in loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation have all been linked in prior research with boundary problems (Minuchin, 1974), parental alienation and the formation of the frequently resulting parent-child coalitions is the covert process that by its very nature can be most associated with both psychological control and boundary violations. In Johnston, Walters, and Olesen’s (in
press, 2005) study of custody litigating parents, one-half of the parents in the study were found to exhibit consistent indicators of sabotaging behaviors toward their child’s relationship with his or her other parent; these sabotaging behaviors included blaming the other parent, telling negative stories about him or her, demeaning the other parent in front of the child, and becoming angry with the child if he or she expressed positive feelings toward the other parent. The authors of this study concluded from their results that parents who utilize parental alienation behaviors are also those parents who are more likely to have poor boundaries, engage in role reversal with their children, and have difficulty differentiating their feelings from the feelings of their children. These behaviors are associated with psychological control defined by Barber and Harmon (2002) as “parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children’s thoughts, feelings, and attachments to parents (p.15).” Given the greater association between psychological control and parental alienation, the present study hypothesizes that young adults’ exposure to parental alienation will lead to different types of maladjustment as opposed to the maladjustment associated with exposure to loyalty conflicts/triangulation and child involvement. While it is hypothesized that exposure to loyalty conflicts/triangulation and child involvement in parental disputes will lead to greater maladjustment in young adults in terms of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and while exposure to parental alienation will also lead to greater maladjustment in these areas, it is predicted in the present study that exposure to parental alienation will relate to young adults’ maladjustment in more specific, developmentally stage-salient ways. Several authors have suggested that parental psychological intrusion may lead to difficulty with the development of important interpersonal skills, difficulty with the formation and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships, and difficulty with individuation and emotional autonomy (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002).

The Link Between “Parental Alienation”, “Parental Alienation Syndrome”, and “Programming and Brainwashing”

The concept of “parental alienation” espoused here is akin to the controversial concept of “parental alienation syndrome” made popular by Richard Gardner, a psychodynamically oriented psychiatrist heavily involved in child custody litigation. While those who refer to portions of this phenomenon as “loyalty conflicts” have undertaken a fair amount of empirical research to support their claims (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby, &
Dornbusch, 1996; Buchanan & Waizenhofer, 2001), Gardner has never performed a scientific study in the service of providing evidence for his syndrome. All of Gardner’s published work on parental alienation syndrome is supported only by his own claims of observation (Gardner, 1987, 1989, 1995, 1998, 2002a, 2002b). Although Gardner’s work describes to some extent the observable dynamics involved in the formation of post-divorce parent-child coalitions, one cannot be certain of the degree of truth of any of Gardner’s assertions considering that he does not provide his readers with empirical evidence. Gardner’s work restricts itself to describing situations following parental divorce in which a child comes to completely reject one of his or her parents based on the fallible information provided by the denigrating parent in service of solidifying that parent’s relationship with the child. The present study hypothesizes that verbal or nonverbal expressions to the child/young adult of denigration of the opposite parent are in and of themselves damaging to the child’s long-term well-being, especially in terms of competence in interpersonal situations and in the development and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships, both of which are stage-salient issues related to young adult college student development (Amato, 1999; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000).

Gardner is not the only author to write about and describe purely observational, non-empirical evidence of parental alienating behaviors utilized by parents following contentious divorce. Using the term “programming and brainwashing” rather than “parental alienation syndrome,” Clawar and Rivlin (1991) describe the phenomena of post-divorce parental campaigns of denigration against the other parent for purposes Clawar and Rivlin suggest are related to parental feelings of bitterness, revenge, and propriety of the children. According to Clawar and Rivlin, by way of the campaign of denigration, the alienating parent participates in slowly destroying the relationship between the non-custodial parent and the child through various forms of degradation of the non-custodial parent while using threats or manipulation techniques to “program and brainwash” the child according to the alienating parent’s belief system. In order to “program,” the parent assists the child in interpreting the data he or she perceives in a certain way so as to cast the target parent in a negative light.

Clawar and Rivlin (1991) observed 700 families over a 12-year period and purport to have witnessed ten different techniques utilized by alienating parents when attempting to bring their children into alliances or coalitions with them. The ten techniques they claim to have seen
utilized include the following: refusal to talk about the target parent in an effort to deny his or her existence, direct attack on the target parent through criticism and denigration or indirect attack through denigration of the target parent’s extended family (especially of new stepparents or grandparents), career, living arrangements, activities, and associates, the use of force to cajole the child into discussing issues with the target parent that they themselves should be discussing with him or her (i.e., finances), refusal to inform the target parent of important dates involving the child like parent-teacher conferences, school plays, or graduations, exaggeration of differences between themselves and the target parent as well as the use of facial grimaces and snickers in reaction to comments about the target parent, the use of force directed at the child having to choose sides between parents, passage of moral judgment on the target parent, use of the threat of withdrawal of love from the child if the child expresses love for the target parent, telling the child that only the alienating parent loves the child while the target parent doesn’t, and rewriting reality in order to put a negative spin on the actions of the target parent. Clawar and Rivlin (1991) also include a list of the consequences these behaviors had on the children they observed; among these are anger, loss or lack of impulse control in conduct, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, clingingness and separation anxiety, development of fears and phobias, depression, suicidal ideation, sleep disorders, eating disorders, academic problems or radical improvements in academics, withdrawal from one or both parents, confusion, bed-wetting, daydreams, drug use and other self-destructive behaviors, peer group problems, obsessive-compulsive disorder, motor tension likes tics, fidgeting, restlessness, anxiety, psychosomatic disorders, damaged sexual identity, rescuer role/parentification, excessive guilt, and retreat into fantasy. Besides these, Clawar and Rivlin suggest that the child’s internal psychological and emotional organization develops and is centered around rejection of the target parent. Given that as a child develops his or her identity and self-concept through identification with both parents, the rejection of the alienated parent often becomes an internalized rejection and can lead to self-loathing and fears of rejection. A child’s reality-testing abilities also become compromised, and he or she does not have permission to trust other aspects of life (Waldron & Joanis, 1996).

Recently, Johnston, Walters, and Olesen (in press, 2005) made a unique contribution to the empirical study of parental alienation and parent-child coalitions. Findings from this study suggest that both sons and daughters are equally likely to align with one parent against the other; results of the study also suggested that older children are more likely to reject a parent than
younger children. Although in this study alienating behavior was quite common for both mothers and fathers, children tended to more strongly reject their fathers than their mothers. Also, as mentioned previously, parents engaged in the covert conflict process of parental alienation were also those who tended to have dissolution of boundaries as well as engagement in role reversal with their children (Johnston et al., in press, 2005). Alienating parents were found to more often use their child as a confidante and to have difficulty distinguishing their own feelings from their child’s feelings, behaviors that are consistent with boundary dissolution in families and parentification of the child (Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001).

Present Study

The goal of the present study is to explore the relationship between the covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation and young adults’ adjustment and navigation of stage-salient developmental tasks. Given the similarities between the long-term adjustment of children in conflicted intact families and that of children in divorced families, family structure will serve as a covariate in the present study (Amato, 1999). Taking into account the developmental psychopathology perspective, young adult college students are faced with specific developmental tasks associated with the transition into adulthood. The adjustment of young adult college students will be assessed through measures of the following stage-salient area: the ability to form satisfying and healthy intimate relationships outside of the family-of-origin.

Specifically, it is hypothesized that the covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement, and parental alienation will serve as mediators of the link between interparental conflict and young adult adjustment. McHale (1997) provided evidence suggesting that covert processes should be treated as a separate factor from interparental conflict. Several studies have found evidence that the dynamics involved in the three covert processes mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Fauber et al., 1990; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005).

The present study also hypothesizes differential relationships between young adult college student adjustment and exposure to each of the three covert processes. Specifically, it is hypothesized that exposure to parental alienation in particular will be related to young adult
difficulties with stage-salient developmental tasks. It is predicted that while exposure to any or all of the three covert processes, loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement, and parental alienation, will be associated with more maladjustment in young adults in terms of higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, exposure to parental alienation in particular will be associated with young adult difficulty in navigating specific stage-salient developmental tasks.

In line with the above predictions, it is hypothesized that young adults’ history of exposure to any or all of the three covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement, and parental alienation will be related to higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors; specifically, it is hypothesized that those with a history of exposure to any of the three processes will tend to experience higher levels of anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive behavior as well as higher levels of deviant behavior, substance abuse, and hostility. Also, as suggested above, it is hypothesized that young adults’ history of exposure to parental alienation in particular will be related to higher levels of difficulty with stage-salient developmental tasks. Specifically, it is hypothesized that young adults with a history of exposure to parental alienation will tend to experience more difficulty with interpersonal functioning in terms of the ability to form and develop satisfying and healthy intimate relationships outside of the family. Previous research suggests a link between interparental conflict, psychological control, and difficulties in these areas (Amato, 1999; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the subject pool at Miami University. Two-hundred and thirty-one participants (143 females and 88 males) were included in this study. The students participated in the study in order to earn course credit. Participants were properly informed about their role in the study, told that they will be given a set of questionnaires to complete pertaining to their experiences in their family of origin, and asked to provide consent for participation. The study methods and protocol were approved by the Departmental Review Board.
Measures

Young Adult’s Perception of the Frequency, Intensity, and Resolution of Past Interparental Conflict. The Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) was utilized to assess the independent variables of frequency, intensity, and resolution of interparental conflict (See Appendix A). The Frequency subscale is composed of 6 items and was utilized to assess the young adult’s perception of the frequency of conflict between his or her parents during his or her middle school and high school years (e.g., “They may not have thought I knew it, but my parents argued or disagreed a lot.”) The Intensity subscale is composed of 7 items and was utilized to tap the young adult’s perception of the degree of intensity of the conflict between his or her parents during his or her middle school and high school years (e.g., “My parents broke or threw things during an argument.”) The Resolution subscale is composed of 6 items and was utilized to assess the young adult’s perception of the presence or absence of resolution following parental conflict during his or her middle or high school years (e.g., “Even after my parents stopped arguing, they stayed mad at each other.”)

Participants were asked to respond to each item by indicating their response on a scantron according to the following scale: 0 = False, 1 = Sort of or Sometimes True, or 2 = True. For each of the subscales, scores for each participant were summed; higher scores are suggestive of greater exposure to frequent, intense, or poorly resolved interparental conflict.

Previous research has shown evidence of good internal consistencies and test-retest reliabilities of these scales over a period of 2 weeks (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Evidence for the validity of the scale was found in significant correlations with parental reports of child exposure to marital conflict (O’Leary Porter Scale, Porter & O’Leary, 1980) and inter-spousal aggression (Conflict Tactics Scale, Straus, 1979) and significant associations with children’s reports of their reactions to specific episodes of conflict (Grych et al., 1992). Although initially developed for use with school-age children, the measure has demonstrated good reliability and external validity when utilized with late adolescents (Bickham & Fiese, 1997). For the present study, internal consistency was found to be acceptable for all three subscales: frequency (alpha = .85), resolution (alpha = .90), and intensity (alpha = .87).

Young Adult’s Perception of Exposure to Loyalty Conflicts. The Triangulation subscale of the Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992) was
used in the present study in order to assess one of the hypothesized mediators, the participants’ past experience of being placed in the middle between conflicted parents (See Appendix A). Participants were again asked to refer to their middle and high school years when answering this questionnaire. The Triangulation subscale consists of 8 items that assessed participants’ perception of exposure to loyalty conflicts (e.g., “My mom wanted me to be on her side when she and my dad argued.”) Participants were asked to respond to each by indicating an answer on the scantron according to the following scale: 0 = False, 1 = Sort of or Sometimes True, or 2 = True. Higher scores are suggestive of greater exposure to loyalty conflicts. In the present study, internal consistency was found to be acceptable, with an alpha of .87.

Young Adult’s Perception of Frequency of Exposure to Child Involvement in Interparental Disputes. In order to compile a measure intended to assess another of the hypothesized mediators, young adult’s exposure to involvement as a child in interparental disputes, the “Caught in the Middle” measure created by Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1991) and the “Role of the Child in Disputes” Scale by Johnston, Gonzalez, and Campbell (1987) were utilized (See Appendix B). Participants were asked to refer to their middle school and high school years when answering the questions. This composite consists of 10 items, 5 describing mother and 5 describing father, each of which were scored using a Likert scale (e.g., “How often did your mother [father] ask you to carry hostile or threatening messages to your father [mother]?”) Participants were asked to respond to these 10 items by choosing one of the following: 0 = never, 1 = once in a while, 2 = fairly often, 3 = very often. All 10 items were tallied to create a composite score ranging from 0 to 30. Higher composite scores are suggestive of the young adult’s greater exposure in childhood/adolescence to the potential mediator conceptualized in the present study as child involvement.

As for the measures utilized to compile this measure, the coefficient alpha for the “Caught in the Middle” composite was .64 (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). It has been used predominantly with white, American adolescents age 10-18 years. High scores on this measure were found to be related to poor adjustment outcomes thereby providing evidence for the measure’s validity (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Interrater reliability coefficients for the “Role of the Child in Disputes” Scale (Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987) were assessed utilizing two independent raters (a clinical psychologist and a social worker) and were found to be for the first rater, r = .75 and .85 and for the second rater, r = .83
and .80. For the present study, internal consistency for this scale was found to be acceptable (alpha = .78).

Young Adult’s Perception of Exposure to Parental Alienation. The Alienating Attitude subscale of Laughrea’s (2002) Alienated Family Relationship scale for young adults was used to assess the third of the hypothesized mediators, young adults’ past exposure to parental alienation. This measure assessed each participant’s perceptions of their father’s attitude towards their mother and perceptions of their mother’s attitude towards their father during their middle and high school years (See Appendix C).

The Alienating Attitudes subscale consists of 7 items assessing father’s attitude towards mother and 7 items assessing mother’s attitude towards father. The answer for each item (e.g., “My father had a rejecting attitude toward my mother” or “My mother accused my father of all sorts of wrongdoings”) was scored via scantron based on a Likert Scale including the following choices: 0 = almost never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = oftentimes, and 3 = almost always. Items suggesting absence of conflict were reverse scored.

Participants used to assess the reliability and validity of the measure included 493 Canadian undergraduate students ranging from 17 to 22 years of age. Alpha coefficients were found to be .88 for both alienating attitude father towards mother and mother towards father. For purposes of the present study, each participant’s ratings of alienating attitude towards mother and towards father were summed to create a composite score of parental alienating attitudes; the higher the score, the higher is young adults’ perception of exposure to parental alienation during their middle and high school years. Internal consistency was found to be acceptable, yielding an alpha of .93.

Interpersonal Functioning. The Nonassertive and Self-Sacrificing subscales of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems created by Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, and Pincus (2000) were utilized to assess participants’ interpersonal functioning (See Appendix D). Both the Nonassertive subscale and the Self-Sacrificing subscale consist of 8 items each. The total score for each subscale can be used to determine the individual level of interpersonal distress for each participant in the domain specified by the subscale. The self-report items of the inventory are divided into two sections; the first section begins with “The following are things you find hard to do with other people,” while the second section begins with “The following are things that you do too much.” Examples of items from the first section include the statements “Set limits on
other people,” and “Be self-confident when I am with other people.” Examples from the second section include “I put other people’s needs before my own too much,” and “I am affected by another person’s misery too much.” Participants were asked to indicate their answers on scantrons according to a 5-point Likert scale including the following alternative choices: 0 = Not at all, 1 = A little bit, 2 = Moderately, 3 = Quite a bit, and 4 = Extremely.

According to Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, and Pincus (2000), Cronbach (1951) alpha coefficients computed for the overall standardization sample suggested that the internal consistency for the entire measure was comparable to or higher than the internal consistency found in previous studies; the reliability coefficient found for the entire Inventory of Interpersonal Problems was .96. In the aforementioned study, the internal consistency coefficients for each of the subscales were found to be .88 for the nonassertive subscale and .80 for the self-sacrificing subscale. Horowitz et al. also utilized a sub-sample of 60 individuals as the basis for test-retest reliability coefficients with the median retest interval as 7 days. The total of all scales produced a test-retest reliability coefficient of .78. For each of the subscales, test-retest reliability coefficients were found to be .77 for the nonassertive subscale and .68 for the self-sacrificing subscale. The authors commented that this stability is somewhat lower than the stability found in previous clinical samples. The authors cite their use of a community, non-clinical sample as a possible reason for the lower test-retest reliability reported. Convergent validity was demonstrated through correlations with measures of similar constructs (Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 2000). For the present study the following alphas were found for the internal consistency for each of the subscales: Nonassertive = .88 and Self-Sacrificing = .83.

Rejection Sensitivity. In order to assess the degree to which participants’ react anxiously to social rejection as well as to assess the degree to which participants’ readily perceive social rejection, the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ) by Downey and Feldman (1996) was used (Appendix E). In this scale, 12 items were listed, and participants were asked to imagine themselves in the situations described in each item (e.g., “You ask someone you don’t know well out on a date”). Participants were then asked to record on scantrons answers to the following two questions concerning the situation described in the item: participants were asked to indicate how concerned or anxious they would be regarding the person’s agreement to comply to the request according to a 6-point scale (i.e., point 1 on the scale was equivalent to the participant feeling very unconcerned; point 6 on the scale was equivalent to the participant feeling very
participants were also asked to indicate how likely they felt it would be that the person would comply with the request (i.e., point 1 on the scale was equivalent to the participant feeling that it would be very unlikely that the person would comply; point 6 on the scale was equivalent to the participant feeling that it would very likely that the person would comply with the request). Answers to the second question for each item were reverse scored followed by multiplication of the two indicated answers for each item. Finally, composite scores were derived for each participant through averaging by summing all items and dividing by the number of items in the scale. Higher composite scores are indicative of participants’ experience of higher degrees of rejection sensitivity.

Downey and Feldman’s (1996) study utilized to assess the reliability of the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire found results indicative of acceptable internal reliability as well as test-retest reliability over a period of 2-3 weeks. Internal reliability for the RSQ in this study was found to be .83; the correlation between Time 1 and Time 2 scores for test-retest reliability was also found to be .83 (Downey & Feldman, 1996). In Downey and Feldman’s study, convergent validity between the RSQ and measures of similar concepts (e.g., social anxiety, social avoidance, self-esteem, and introversion) was demonstrated as correlations between these were found to be significant. Internal reliability of the RSQ in the present study was found to be acceptable with an alpha of .92.

Internalizing Behaviors. Portions of three subscales from the Symptom Checklist-90-R (SCL-90-R) (Deragotis, 1983) were utilized in the present study to assess one of the dependent variables, participants’ self-reported experiences of current manifestations of internalizing behaviors (Appendix F). Subscales utilized included those intended to tap symptoms of anxiety (e.g., “Spells of terror and panic.”), depression (e.g., “Thoughts of ending your life.”), and obsessive-compulsiveness (e.g., “Having to check and double-check what you do.”). Participants were asked to indicate how much they were bothered by each symptom during the previous week by filling in the circle on a scantron according to the following 4-point Likert scale: 0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = pretty much, and 3 = a lot. For the present study, 9 items from the Anxiety subscale, 12 items from the Depression subscale, and 5 items from the Obsessive-Compulsive subscale were administered to participants. As none of the items utilized required reverse scoring, total scores were found by summing each of the subscales individually for each participant. Higher scores are indicative of higher levels of participants’
reported experiences of symptoms of internalizing behaviors. Reported by Derogotis (1983), internal consistency and test-retest reliability for each of the subscales was found to be, respectively, .85 and .80 for Anxiety, .90 and .82 for Depression, and .86 and .85 for Obsessive-Compulsive. A high degree of convergent validity has been found between the scales of the SCL-90-R and the scales of the MMPI (Derogatis, Rickels, & Rock, 1976). For the present study, internal consistency for all 3 subscales was found to be acceptable: Anxiety subscale (alpha = .85), Depression subscale (alpha = .89), and Obsessive-Compulsive subscale (alpha = .75).

**Externalizing Behaviors.** Three self-report questionnaires were administered to participants in the present study in order to assess the dependent variables included under the construct of externalizing behaviors. In order to assess antisocial behavior, Leve and Chamberlain’s (2004) adaptation of the Elliott Self-report of Delinquency scale was utilized (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985) (Appendix G). This scale contains a total of 46 items, one of which was reverse scored. Participants were asked to record on scantrons how many times in the previous year they had engaged in the acts described by the items by responding according to a 5-point Likert scale which included the following choices: a = 0, b = 1-2, c = 3-4, d = 5-7, and e = 8-10. Two examples from the scale include “How many times in the past year have you attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting him/her?” and “How many times in the past year have you purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to your parents or other family members?” After reverse scoring the one item, scores for each participant were summed to arrive at a composite score; higher scores are suggestive of higher levels of delinquent behavior. The Elliott Self-report of Delinquency scale has been used in numerous studies including the 2004 study by Leve and Chamberlain. Acceptable internal consistency was found for the scale by Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton (1985). In their study, Leve and Chamberlain found an alpha of .91 for the internal consistency of the scale. Internal consistency for this measure in the present study was found to be acceptable (alpha = .81).

In order to assess another aspect of externalizing behavior, a substance abuse indicator developed by Leve and Chamberlain (2004) was adapted for our purposes and administered to participants (Appendix H). This measure consists of 12 items utilized to tap the frequency with which participants used alcohol and drugs over the previous year (e.g. “How often have you used marijuana in the past year?”). Participants were asked to record the frequency of use according
to the following 5-point Likert scale: 0 = never, 1 = tried once or twice, 2 = occasionally, 3 = 1 or more times per day, and 4 = 1-6 times a day. Item scores for each participant were summed into one composite score; higher scores on this measures suggest higher frequency of abusing substances. In the study by Leve and Chamberlain (2004), interitem consistency was found to be .91. Internal consistency for this measure in the present study was found to be acceptable (alpha = .84).

The third measure used to assess externalizing behavior in the present study was the Hostility subscale of the SCL-90-R (Deragotis, 1983) (Appendix I). This measure consists of 6 items (e.g. “Temper outbursts that you could not control”), and participants were asked to rate how much they had felt bothered by each of the items in the past week according to the following 4-point Likert scale: 0 = not at all, 1 = a little, 2 = pretty much, and 3 = a lot. All 6 items on this subscale were summed in order to create a composite score for each participant; higher scores suggest higher levels of externalizing behaviors in the form of greater amounts of hostility experienced in the past week. For Deragotis’ study (1983), internal consistency and test-retest reliability were found to be .84 and .78, respectively. The study by Deragotis, Rickels, and Rock (1976) suggests that the Hostility subscale of the SCL-90 reflects a high degree of convergent validity with the comparable MMPI scale. Internal consistency for the Hostility subscale of the SCL-90-R in the present study was found to be acceptable with an alpha of .78.

Procedure

Data were collected from participants through mass testing in small groups of 5. At the beginning of each session, participants were asked to complete several measures relating to experiences with their parents and several measures relating to their present well-being. Before completing the measures, participants were asked to read through a consent form and provide their signature on the consent form indicating their willingness to participate. The measures given to the participants at this time are described above. After each participant completed all measures, he or she was debriefed concerning the full purpose of the study. This process took no longer than an estimated 90 minutes to complete.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for each of the variables utilized in the present study. As seen in this table, all internal consistencies were found to be acceptable; Cronbach’s (1951) alpha for all variables is no lower than .75. The means and standard deviations are based on the 231 participants included in the final analysis. Thirty participants were deleted from the present study due to missing variables. Although the means and standard deviations recorded in the table are based on the number of participants included in the final analyses, the alpha coefficients are based on a total of 235 participants given that 4 participants were automatically deleted by the statistical program utilized to analyze the results after the reliabilities had already been run. Although not shown on the table, skewness and kurtosis for all variables was assessed. Only 2 variables out of 15 evidenced skewness or kurtosis in the final analyses; the Caught scale was slightly skewed with a value of 2.09, and the Delinquency scale remained slightly skewed with a value of 2.47. The Delinquency scale remained kurtotic in the final analysis with a value of 9.30. Raykov and Marcoulides (2000) suggest that it is not detrimental to an analysis to have one or two variables retain skewness or kurtosis.

Displayed in Table 2 are the intercorrelations between all the variables utilized in the present study and in the final analysis. As expected and as shown in Table 2, each of the 3 subscales assessing the independent variable, interparental conflict, were highly correlated with the scales assessing the three hypothesized mediators, parental alienation, child involvement in parental disputes, and loyalty conflicts/triangulation. Displayed in Table 3 are the demographics of the sample on which the analyses were performed.

Structural Models

Data analysis in the present study was accomplished through structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum-likelihood estimation in EQS (Bentler, 2000). The first step in analyzing the data using Structural Equation Modeling involved conceptualizing the independent and dependent variables as observed variables loading on their respective latent factors. For the present study, the three subscales of the Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict scale (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992), Frequency (6 items), Resolution (6 items), and Intensity (7
items) of interparental conflict, were conceptualized as three observed variables loading onto the latent variable of exposure to interparental conflict, which was treated as the independent variable. Three latent variables were created to represent the dependent variables. Observed variables loading on Factor 2 (stage-salient tasks) include the Nonassertive (8 items) and the Self-sacrificing (8 items) subscales of the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz, Alden, Wiggins, & Pincus, 2000) as well as the total score from the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (12 items) (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Labeled externalizing behaviors, Factor 3 is composed of three observed variables, delinquency, hostility, and substance abuse, measured, respectively, by the following three scales: the Elliott Self-report of Delinquency scale (46 items) (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985), the Hostility subscale of the SCL-90 (6 items) (Deragotis, 1983), and the substance abuse measure (12 items) developed by Leve and Chamberlain (2004). The fourth factor, internalizing behaviors, is composed of three observed variables, anxiety (9 items), depression (12 items), and obsessive-compulsive behavior (5 items), all three of which are measured by subscales of the SCL-90 (Deragotis, 1983).

In evaluating each of the three structural equation models tested in the present study, the theoretical importance of the model was first considered followed by the examination of the overall fit indices as well as the microfit indices. In terms of indices, first evaluated was the inferential goodness-of-fit index, the chi-square statistic. Further evaluation consisted of the examination of 3 descriptive-fit indices; these included the normed fit index (NFI), the non-normed fit index (NNFI), and the adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI). Each model was also evaluated through consideration of alternative-fit indices; these included the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA), and the 90% confidence interval for the RMSEA (90% CI). A fourth method of evaluating each model concerned the issue of parsimony; in the present study, more concise models were considered be more desirable as opposed to more complex models.

Stringent fit criteria were utilized to evaluate the descriptive-fit indices and the alternative-fit indices. For the NFI, the NNFI, the AGFI, and the CFI, values closer to 1 indicate better fit; the present study used the generally accepted criteria that values in the mid .9s indicate a well-fitting model (Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1999). For the RMSEA, the present study used Browne and Cudeck’s (1993) criterion that a value of less than .05 indicates a well-fitting model. In terms of the criteria used for the 90% confidence interval for the RMSEA, it is
generally accepted that if the left endpoint of the confidence interval is considerably smaller than .05 and the interval is not excessively wide, the model can be considered a reasonable fit to the data (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000).

Given that Model 1 was based on the original hypothesis of the present study, the highest degree of theoretical importance was granted to this model. The initial model tested in EQS proposes that young adult’s previous exposure to interparental conflict and young adults’ present level of internalizing and externalizing behaviors is mediated by the degree of exposure to all 3 variables, loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation. As seen in Figure 1, the model also proposes that young adults’ previous exposure to interparental conflict and young adults’ present success with the navigation of stage-salient tasks is mediated by the degree of exposure to parental alienation specifically.

The chi-square associated with this mediational model was found to be $\chi^2(80, N = 231) = 299.34, p < .001$. For Model 1, the descriptive-fit and alternative-fit indices were found to be as follows: NFI = .84, NNFI = .83, AGFI = .79, CFI = .87, RMSEA = .11, and the 90% CI = .10 to .12. In the case of the first model, the fit between the data and the model failed to meet the stringent fit criteria utilized in the present study.

Model 1 does not support the hypothesis that young adults’ previous exposure to interparental conflict and young adults’ level of internalizing and externalizing behaviors are mediated by exposure to loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, or parental alienation. Model 1 also does not support the hypothesis that parental alienation specifically mediates the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to interparental conflict and young adults’ successful navigation of stage-salient tasks.

Due to the limited existing body of literature on the subject, the hypothesis that parental alienation would predict young adults’ successful navigation of stage-salient tasks was a novel and potentially risky one. However, in comparison, a body of research has been accumulating suggesting that the covert processes discussed in the present study serve as mediators between overt interparental conflict and children and adolescents’ internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991, 1996; Fauber et al., 1990; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005). Therefore, the factor of stage-salient tasks was deleted in the subsequent 2 models. The Wald index from the output of Model 1 as well as the further degree of model parsimony that could be achieved by the deletion further aided in making the decision
concerning this deletion. The Wald index from Model 1 also indicated that the fit would improve if several more paths were deleted. Therefore, the paths predicting Factor 4 (internalizing behaviors) from loyalty conflicts/triangulation and parental alienation as well as the paths predicting Factor 3 (externalizing behaviors) from child involvement in parental disputes and parental alienation were dropped, and Model 2 was tested with these paths deleted.

The chi-square associated with the mediational model for Model 2 was $\chi^2(50, N=231) = 218.25, p < .001$. For Model 2, the descriptive-fit and alternative-fit indices were found to be as follows: NFI = .87, NNFI = .86, AGFI = .81, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .12, and the 90% CI = .10 to .14. Model 2 failed to meet the stringent criteria utilized in the present study.

Model 3 involved a different conceptualization of and a different utilization of the hypothesized mediators in the model. Given that the concept of covert interparental conflict is a relatively new one in the field, different researchers have conceptualized it in various ways without reaching a consensus as to how the different phenomena associated with the concept should be labeled. Therefore, as shown by Figure 3, the hypothesis underlying Model 3 proposes that young adults’ previous exposure to interparental conflict and young adults’ level of internalizing and externalizing behaviors will be mediated by the latent construct triangulation as represented by the 3 observed variables, loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation. Creating a new latent variable within which the mediators became three observed variables also added to the parsimony of the model.

The chi-square associated with the mediational model for Model 3 was $\chi^2(50, N=231) = 194.43, p < .001$. For Model 3, the descriptive-fit and alternative-fit indices were found to be as follows: NFI = .88, NNFI = .88, AGFI = .83, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .11, and the 90% CI = .10 to .13.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship between overt interparental conflict, covert interparental conflict processes, and young adults’ overall adjustment as well as their ability to successfully navigate the stage-salient tasks of young adulthood. It was hypothesized that young adults’ exposure to overt interparental conflict during the middle and high-school years and young adults’ present overall adjustment and successful
navigation of stage-salient tasks would be differentially mediated by three covert interparental conflict processes, loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation. More specifically, it was hypothesized that the covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation and child involvement in parental disputes would mediate the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present overall adjustment in the form of levels of internalizing and externalizing problems. It was also hypothesized that the covert process of parental alienation specifically would mediate the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ successful navigation of stage-salient developmental tasks.

During the analysis phase of the present study, structural equation modeling was utilized, and three models were tested, none of which produced an optimal fit between the data and the model. As shown in Figure 1, Model 1 was representative of the original hypothesis of the present study as described above. Through the analysis of Model 1, it was found that the original hypothesis was not supported; given that the direct paths from the independent variable to the dependent variables in Model 1 were not found to be significant, the model does not suggest mediation. The covert interparental conflict processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation were not found to differentially mediate the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present levels of internalizing or externalizing behaviors nor young adults’ success with navigating stage-salient developmental tasks.

As shown in Figures 2 and 3, Models 2 and 3 are representative of alternative hypotheses for the present study. Model 2 hypothesized that the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors would be differentially mediated by the different covert processes. More specifically, it was hypothesized that the degree of young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present level of internalizing behavior would be mediated by the covert interparental conflict process of loyalty conflicts/triangulation; it was also hypothesized that the degree of young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present level of externalizing behavior would be mediated by the covert interparental conflict process of child involvement in parental disputes. The direct paths from the independent variable to the dependent variables in Model 2 were not found to be significant,
thus mediation was not representative of Model 2 either. This model also failed to meet the requirements utilized in the present study for indicating a good fit between the model and the data. In turn, the hypotheses embedded in Model 3 suggested that the three covert interparental processes serving as mediators might, in fact, be better conceptualized as three observed variables representing one latent construct. In Model 3 it was hypothesized that the latent construct of “triangulation” would mediate the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present levels of both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Although the direct paths from the independent variable to the dependent variable in Model 3 were found to be significant, Model 3 still failed to meet the stringent fit criteria of the present study; therefore, the hypotheses described above were not supported.

Conceptually, there are several speculations that can be made in attempting to discern why none of the 3 models fit well with the data as well as, more specifically, why the direct paths between the independent variable and the dependent variables in Models 1 and 2 were not significant. The present study’s sample included young adults from both intact and divorced families; data from all participants, regardless of family structure, were analyzed together in all 3 of the models. Although evidence suggests that the covert interparental conflict process of loyalty conflicts/triangulation occurs in intact families (e.g., Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004; Kerig, 1995), much of the previous research focusing on the other two covert processes, child involvement in parental disputes and parental alienation, has come from the divorce literature. It is possible that these latter two processes occur with more frequency, toxicity, and tenacity in divorced families (e.g, Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Also, it was not possible to analyze the influence of family structure (divorced vs. intact) as a covariate; therefore, the variance accounted for by family structure in the present study is not known. Although a division into groups by family structure would have been most desirable, the nature of the population from which the sample for the present study was drawn is one reason why this would have been difficult to accomplish. The population from which the sample of the present study was drawn is a rather privileged population found to have a lower than average parental divorce rate (22%) when compared to the general population in the United States. Therefore, there were unequal groups of young adults from intact and divorced families in the present sample; the number of participants coming from a divorced family was 42, whereas the
number of participants coming from an intact family was 189. It is possible that the original hypotheses of the present study would have held had the sample been divided into groups based on family structure and had the analysis only included participants from divorced families.

Evidence also suggests that the three covert interparental conflict processes may operate differently as a function of family structure (Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). While it has been found that the subjective experience of being triangulated between parents may occur in both intact and divorced families and that this experience mediates the relationship between degree of overt interparental conflict and adolescents’ internalizing and externalizing behaviors, it has been recently speculated that the experience of parental alienation in particular is likely to be more common in children and adolescents from divorced families as these children may often be placed in the position of feeling that closeness with one parent represents a betrayal to the other parent (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). As has already been stated, the present study was not able to differentially test the hypotheses while taking family structure into account, and this may be one reason for the failure of the models to meet the stringent fit criteria of the present study.

In line with the above-stated conceptual considerations, recent evidence suggests that the three covert interparental conflict processes may operate differently according to the degree of overt interparental conflict in the family (Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). The population from which the sample of the present study was drawn is a rather unrepresentative population which has experienced a lower than average degree of interparental conflict. For example, the means of the frequency, resolution, and intensity scales in the current study are lower than those reported by Grych et al. (1992). Similarly, the mean score for the measure of the covert conflict process labeled loyalty conflicts/triangulation in the present study was lower than the mean score found by Grych and colleagues (2004); (e.g. triangulation = 5.35). Therefore, whereas Grych et al. (2004) found that adolescents ages 14 to 19 were more likely to feel triangulated as the degree of interparental conflict increased, the failure of the fit between the models tested and the data may reflect the fact that the population from which the sample of the present study was drawn tends to experience lower than average degrees of overt and covert interparental conflict. In other words, it is possible that the models tested were found to be a poor fit due to a non-representative sample.
Speculations can also be made as to why the factor encompassing successful navigation of stage-salient developmental tasks was not predicted by the path from parental alienation. First much of the research focusing on covert interparental conflict processes has found evidence that the three covert processes mediate the relationship between interparental conflict and youth internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996; Fauber et al., 1990; Johnston, Walters, & Olesen, in press, 2005) as opposed to the relatively uninvestigated concept of stage-salient developmental tasks. Second, it is possible that the developmental task chosen for the present study, the ability to form satisfying intimate relationships outside of the family of origin, was less appropriate as an outcome measure to test the particular hypotheses of the present study as opposed to other tasks that are salient for young adults’ development. More specifically, perhaps the hypothesis that parental alienation would mediate the relationship between young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present successful navigation of stage-salient tasks would have been supported had another task served as this dependent variable, particularly one with a higher risk for interference due to exposure to parental alienation. For example, it has been suggested by several authors that parental psychological intrusiveness, a concept akin to parental alienation, may not only lead to difficulty with the development of important interpersonal skills and difficulty with the formation and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships, but also with difficulty achieving individuation and social, economic, and emotional autonomy (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002). Perhaps the use of the stage-salient developmental task of successful individuation and autonomy from the family of origin may have proved more effective as an outcome measure in the present study.

Although it is possible that the choice to use difficulty with the development and maintenance of healthy romantic relationships rather than difficulty individuating and gaining autonomy from one’s family of origin as the stage-salient task could be one reason that the original hypothesis did not hold, it is also possible that the present study’s stage-salient task was indeed appropriate and that the problem lies in that the measures utilized tap only one facet of this construct. The stage-salient task of the development and maintenance of healthy and successful intimate relationships is a rather large construct; in the present study, it appears that perhaps only one particular dimension underlying the ability to form intimate relationships was
measured (i.e., relational insecurity). It can be speculated that there are several other dimensions that need to be measured in order to fully tap the construct of successful navigation of this stage-salient task; perhaps there are other measures that could have been utilized to tap the construct more fully. Had this been accomplished, it is possible that the original hypothesis of Model 1 would have held.

As shown on Figures 1 and 2, although the paths still did not reach significance, the paths in Model 2 predicting differential mediation of young adults’ previous exposure to overt interparental conflict and young adults’ present levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors through the covert processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation and child involvement provided a better fit between the model and the data than the paths in Model 1. One potential conceptualization as to why these paths were more explanatory has to do with the roles played by the child under the circumstances of these two covert processes. The present study’s conceptualization of loyalty conflicts/triangulation seems to have a more agentic dimension to it as opposed to the conceptualization of child involvement in parental disputes. The items utilized to measure young adults’ previous exposure to loyalty conflicts/triangulation seem to suggest the child’s role as an active agent in parental disputes (e.g., “I felt like I had to take sides when my parents had a disagreement”) as opposed to the items utilized to measure child involvement which seem to suggest the child’s role as that of a victim (e.g., “How often did your mother use you as a bargaining token when negotiating with your father”). Previous research has found evidence suggesting that psychological control is more related to internalizing behaviors than to externalizing behaviors (Barber, 2002; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990). Given this evidence, it is understandable that the path in Model 2 predicting internalizing behaviors from child involvement was found to be more explanatory as the present study’s conceptualization of this covert process appears to be more akin to psychological control. In terms of the conceptualization of loyalty conflicts/triangulation in the present study, the finding that the path predicting externalizing behaviors from this concept also makes sense; a more agentic response from a child that involves taking sides or intervening in interparental conflict might lead to parental aggression becoming turned toward the child. Exposure of the child to marital aggression “spill over” has been found to lead to higher levels of externalizing behaviors in the child, perhaps by way of modeling (Kerig, 2001).
As stated previously, Model 3 involved an alternate conceptualization of the three covert interparental conflict processes as opposed to the original hypothesis of the present study. In Model 3, as depicted in Figure 3, all three covert processes were conceptualized and analyzed as three observed variables loading on one latent construct. Speculations can be drawn from the fact that the hypothesis of Model 3 did not improve the fit between the model and the data. That the conceptualization of the covert processes in Model 3 did not improve the model suggests that the original hypothesis which conceptualizes the three covert conflict processes as separate entities is not necessarily invalid; that the conceptualization embedded in Model 3 did not improve the fit of the data to the model suggests that the three covert interparental conflict processes could very well be separate constructs. This line of research deserves further inquiry.

A number of methodological issues may also serve to explain why none of the models were a good fit. First of all, the desired sample size ($N=350$) for the present study was not achieved. Data were collected on a total of 261 participants, 30 of which had to be deleted due to missing variables. This decreased number of participants most likely reduced the explanatory power of the models. A second potential methodological issue has to do with the quality of the data as reported by the participants. Evidence suggests that the participants found the number of questionnaires presented to them for the present study to be overwhelming and time-consuming; it is possible that some participants may not have been invested in contributing to the research process, that they may have rushed through the self-report questionnaires, or that they may have provided inaccurate answers to the questions. Approximately 8 participants were dropped from an original sample size of 269 as it was evident that these participants were answering haphazardly. A third methodological issue that must be considered has to do with the utilization of retrospective data gleaned from several of the questionnaires. Particularly problematic is the fact that the key concepts of the present study, the covert interparental conflict processes of loyalty conflicts/triangulation, child involvement in parental disputes, and parental alienation, were all measured through self-report retrospective questionnaires. Perhaps the participants included in the present study had difficulty remembering accurately how often or to what extent their parents engaged in these behaviors during their middle and high-school years as requested by the questionnaires.
Limitations of the Study

In addition to the limitations noted above such as sample size, quality of the data, and the fact that several of the key concepts in the present study were measured retrospectively, several other factors contribute to limiting the findings of the present study. First of all, the proposed covariates, age of the child at the time of parental divorce, current developmental stage, family structure (divorced vs. intact), and gender were not taken into account and were not able to be tested. Therefore, it is not known to what extent these variables affected the pattern of results.

Also limiting the study is the homogeneity of the population sampled; the sample consists of a largely European American middle class college student body. The homogeneity of the sample threatens the external validity of the study and prevents findings from being generalizable to other ethnic groups or those of a different class. Besides this threat to the external validity of the study, the internal validity of the is also threatened as the measure used for one of the key concepts, child involvement in parental disputes, was developed for the present study by combining 2 measures used in previous studies (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Johnston, Gonzalez, & Campbell, 1987); this measure, therefore, has not been validated in other studies, although it did have an acceptable internal reliability in the present study.

Directions for Future Research

The failure of all three models to meet the stringent fit criteria of the present study leads to important conceptual speculations for advancing this area of research in future studies. One possibility for improving upon the originally hypothesized model would be to exclude participants from intact families from the analysis. Previous research suggests that the three covert interparental conflict processes hypothesized as mediators in the present study occur with more frequency and tenacity in divorced families as opposed to intact families (e.g., Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Therefore, it is possible that the original hypothesis would have held had a more representative sample been available and had participants from divorced families been exclusively included in the final analysis. Another possible way in which the present study could be improved upon in future research is through the utilization of a more appropriate outcome measure. Several researchers have suggested a relationship between parental psychological intrusiveness and young adults’ difficulty in
achieving social, economic, and emotional autonomy from the family of origin (Barber & Harmon, 2002; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Stone, Buehler, & Barber, 2002). Given that the concept of parental psychological intrusiveness is a similar concept to that of parental alienation, perhaps the originally hypothesized model would have held had autonomy been alternatively utilized as the outcome measure encompassing the factor of stage-salient developmental tasks. Another possibility for improving future endeavors would be to more fully tap the construct of the designated stage-salient task utilized in the present study as it can be speculated that only one dimension of this rather large construct was measured.

An interesting question that could be pursued in future research also follows from the results of the present study. The fact that Model 3 did not improve the fit between the data and the model suggests that the research concerning covert interparental conflict processes could be furthered through a deeper inquiry into how best to conceptualize these processes, as separate constructs or as one.

Another potential conceptual change that could be made in future studies researching the relationship between overt interparental conflict, covert interparental conflict, and young adult adjustment has to do with the moderator-mediator variable distinction (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Perhaps rather than conceptualizing the three covert interparental conflict processes as mediators, it would have been more effective to conceptualize these processes as moderators of the relationship between overt interparental conflict and college student adjustment. It can be speculated that rather than accounting for the relationship between overt interparental conflict and college student adjustment, the three covert interparental conflict processes instead may be better conceptualized as changing the direction and/or strength of the aforementioned relationship.
References


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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Range, and Alphas for All Variables in SEM Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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<th>Alpha</th>
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<tr>
<td>CPIC Frequency</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>3.32</td>
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<td>.85</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPIC Resolution</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0-14</td>
<td>.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPIC Intensity</td>
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<td>CPIC Triangulation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caught Scale</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>0-30</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation Scale</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>8.42</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIP Nonassertive</td>
<td>10.64</td>
<td>6.58</td>
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<tr>
<td>IIP Self-Sacrificing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rejection Sensitivity</td>
<td>8.43</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2-12</td>
<td>.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCL-90-R Anxiety</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>4.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCL-90-R Depression</td>
<td>9.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
<td>7.52</td>
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*Note.* CPIC = Children’s Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale. IIP = Inventory of Interpersonal Problems. SCL-90-R = Symptom Checklist-90-R.
### Table 2

**Intercorrelations**

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<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>1.CPICFREQ</td>
<td>.771***</td>
<td>.805***</td>
<td>.624***</td>
<td>.464***</td>
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<td>.031</td>
<td>-.051</td>
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<td>.178**</td>
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<td>.694***</td>
<td>.509***</td>
<td>.554***</td>
<td>.047</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>.189**</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.181**</td>
<td>.010</td>
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<td>.084</td>
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<td>.480***</td>
<td>.585***</td>
<td>.095</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.191**</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.194**</td>
<td>.081</td>
<td>.164*</td>
<td>.152*</td>
<td>.154*</td>
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<td>.495***</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td>.169*</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.155*</td>
<td>.045</td>
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<td>.137*</td>
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<td>.027</td>
<td>.195**</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>.193**</td>
<td>-.027</td>
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<td>.169*</td>
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* * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
Table 3

Sample Demographics

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Figure 1. Path diagram of Model 1
Figure 2. Path Diagram of Model 2

Exposure to IP Conflict (F1)
- CPICFREQ (V1)
- CPICRES (V2)
- CPICINT (V3)

ALIENAT (V4)

CAUGHT (V5)

Overall Adjustment (Externalizing) (F3)
- DELINQUE (V10)
- HOSTIL (V11)
- SUBABUS (V12)

Overall Adjustment (Internalizing) (F4)
- SCLANX (V13)
- SCLDEP (V14)
- SCLOCD (V15)

Overall Adjustment (Externalizing)
- .80*
- .41*
- .78*

Overall Adjustment (Internalizing)
- .90*
- .90*
- .79*

E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E10, E11, E12, E13, E14, E15

Exposure to IP Conflict (F1)
- .88*
- .87*
- .87*
- .66*

Overall Adjustment (Externalizing)
- .60*
- .10

Overall Adjustment (Internalizing)
- .10
- .09
- .13

CAUGHT (V5)
- .76*

E4
Figure 3. Path diagram of Model 3

- Exposure to IP Conflict (F1)
- Triangulation (F5)
- Overall Adjustment (Externalizing) (F3)
- Overall Adjustment (Internalizing) (F4)

Variables:
- CPICFREQ (V1)
- CPICRES (V2)
- CPICINT (V3)
- ALIENAT (V4)
- CAUGHT (V5)
- CPICTRI (V6)
- DELINQUE (V10)
- HOSTIL (V11)
- SUBABUS (V12)
- SCLANX (V13)
- SCLDEP (V14)
- SCLOCD (V15)

Path Weights:
- .89*
- .87*
- .88*
- .85*
- .71*
- .66*
- .90*
- .80*
- .45*
- .31
- .77*
- .81*
- .42*
- .91*
- .80*
- .90*
- .89*
- .87*
- .85*
- .66*
- .46*
- .81*
- .42*
- .77*
- .90*
- .80*
- .89*
- .87*
- .85*
- .66*
- .46*

* indicates significance at the 0.05 level.
Appendix A

1) I never saw my parents arguing or disagreeing.
2) When my parents had an argument, they usually worked it out.
3) My parents got really mad when they argued.
4) They may not have thought I knew it, but my parents argued or disagreed a lot.
5) Even after my parents stopped arguing, they stayed mad at each other.
6) When my parents had disagreement, they discussed it quietly.
7) My parents were often mean to each other even when I was around.
8) I often saw or heard my parents arguing.
9) When my parents disagreed about something, they usually came up with a solution.
10) When my parents had an argument, they said mean things to each other.
11) My parents hardly ever argued.
12) When my parents argued, they usually made up right away.
13) When my parents had an argument, they yelled at each other.
14) My parents often nagged and complained about each other around the house.
15) My parents hardly ever yelled when they had a disagreement.
16) My parents broke or threw things during an argument.
17) After my parents stopped arguing, they were friendly towards each other.
18) My parents pushed or shoved each other during an argument.
19) My parents still acted mean after they had an argument.
20) When my parents argued, I ended up getting involved somehow.
21) I felt caught in the middle when my parents argued.
22) When my parents argued, I tried to do something to stop them.
23) I didn’t feel like I had to take sides when my parents had a disagreement.
24) My mom wanted me to be on her side when she and my dad argued.
25) I didn’t get involved when my parents argued.
26) I felt like I had to take sides when my parents had a disagreement.
27) My dad wanted me to be on his side when he and my mom argued.
Appendix B

1) How often did your mother ask you to carry hostile or threatening messages to your father?
2) How often did your mother use you as a go-between to communicate non-threatening messages to your father?
3) How often did your mother use you as a bargaining token when negotiating with your father? (i.e. allowed or withheld visitation time with father in order to achieve unrelated ends)
4) How often did your mother ask you questions about your father that you wished she wouldn’t ask?
5) How often did your mother ask you to collect evidence against or spy on your father?
6) How often did your father ask you to carry hostile or threatening messages to your mother?
7) How often did your father use you as a go-between to communicate non-threatening messages to your mother?
8) How often did your father use you as a bargaining token when negotiating with your mother? (i.e., allowed or withheld visitation time with mother in order to achieve unrelated ends)
9) How often did your father ask you questions about your mother that you wished he wouldn’t ask?
10) How often did your father ask you to collect evidence against or spy on your mother?
Appendix C

1) My mother believed that my father was good for me.
2) My mother said nasty things about my father.
3) My mother respected my father.
4) My mother brought down my father.
5) My mother had a rejecting attitude toward my father.
6) My mother accused my father of all sorts of wrongdoing.
7) My mother estimated that my father had a well-balanced mental state.
8) My father believed that my mother was good for me.
9) My father said nasty things about my mother.
10) My father respected my mother.
11) My father brought down my mother.
12) My father had a rejecting attitude toward my mother.
13) My father accused my mother of all sorts of wrongdoings.
14) My father estimated that my mother had a well-balanced mental state.
Appendix D

The following are things you find hard to do with other people:
1) Let other people know what I want.
2) Tell a person to stop bothering me.
3) Confront people with problems that come up.
4) Be assertive with another person.
5) Be another person’s boss.
6) Be aggressive toward other people when the situation calls for it.
7) Be firm when I need to be.
8) Set limits on other people.
9) Let myself feel angry at somebody I like.
10) Attend to my own welfare when somebody else is needy.
11) Be self-confident when I am with other people.

The following are things that you do too much:
12) I try to please other people too much.
13) I trust other people too much.
14) I put other people’s needs before my own too much.
15) I am overly generous to other people.
16) I m affected by another person’s misery too much.
Appendix E

1) You ask someone in class if you can borrow his/her notes.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not the person would want to lend you his/her notes?
   b) I would expect that the person would willingly give me his/her notes.
2) You ask your boyfriend/girlfriend to move in with you.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not he/she also would want to move in with you?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to move in with me.
3) You ask your parents for help in deciding what programs to apply to.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your parents would want to help you?
   b) I would expect that they would want to help me.
4) You ask someone you don’t know well out on a date.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not the person would want to go out with you?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to go out on a date with me.
5) Your boyfriend/girlfriend has plans to go out with friends tonight, but you really want to spend the evening with him/her, and you tell him/her so.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your boyfriend/girlfriend would decide to stay in?
   b) I would expect that he/she would willingly choose to stay in with me.
6) You ask your parents for extra money to cover living expenses.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your parents would help you out?
   b) I would expect that they would not mind helping me out.
7) After class, you tell your professor that you have been having some trouble with a section of the course and ask if he/she can give you some extra help.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your professor would want to help you out?
   b) I would expect that the professor would want to help me.
8) You approach a close friend to talk after doing or saying something that seriously upset him/her.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to talk with you?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to talk with me to try to work things out.
9) You ask someone in one of your classes to coffee.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not the person would want to go?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to go with me.
10) After graduation you can’t find a job and you ask your parents if you can live at home for awhile.
a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your parents would want you to come home?
b) I would expect that I would be welcome at home.

11) You ask your friend to go on vacation with you over Spring Break.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to go with you?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to go with me.

12) You call your boyfriend/girlfriend after a bitter argument and tell him/her you want to see him/her.
   a) How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your boyfriend/girlfriend would want to see you?
   b) I would expect that he/she would want to see me.
Appendix F

How much were you bothered by:
1) Nervousness or shakiness inside.
2) Trouble remembering things.
3) Worry about sloppiness or carelessness.
4) Blaming yourself for things.
5) Loss of sexual interest or pleasure.
6) Feeling lonely.
7) Feeling blue.
8) Your feelings being easily hurt.
28) Thoughts of ending your life.
29) Having to do things very slowly to be sure you are doing them right.
30) Crying easily.
31) Trembling.
32) Worrying too much about things.
33) Feeling no interest in things.
34) Having to check and double-check what you do.
35) Feeling hopeless about the future.
36) Feeling fearful.
37) Feelings of worthlessness.
38) Trouble concentrating.
39) Heart pounding or racing.
40) Feeling tense or keyed up.
41) Spells of terror or panic.
42) Feeling so restless you couldn’t sit still.
Appendix G

How many times in the past year have you:
1) Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to your parents or other family members?
2) Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to an school?
3) Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to your employer?
4) Purposely damaged or destroyed other property that did not belong to you, not counting family, school, or work property?
5) Stolen or tried to steal a motor vehicle such as a car or motorcycle?
6) Stolen or tried to steal something worth more than $50?
7) Knowingly bought, sold, or held stolen goods or tried to do any of these things?
8) Purposely set fire to a building, a car, or other property or tried to do so?
9) Carried a hidden weapon other than a plain pocket knife?
10) Stolen or tried to steal things worth $5 or less?
11) Attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting him/her?
12) Been paid for having sexual relations with someone?
13) Paid someone to have sexual relations with you?
14) Been involved in gang fights?
15) Used checks illegally or used phony money to pay for anything (INCLUDES INTENTIONAL OVERDRAFTS)
16) Sold marijuana or hashish? (“Pot,” “Grass,” “Hash”)
17) Hitchhiked where it was illegal to do so?
18) Stolen money or other things from your parents or other members of your family?
19) Stolen money, goods, or property from the place where you work?
20) Had or tried to have sexual relations with someone against their will?
21) Hit or threatened to hit a teacher, professor, or other school staff?
22) Hit or threatened to hit one of your parents?
23) Hit or threatened to hit other students?
24) Hit or threatened to hit your supervisor or other employee?
25) Hit or threatened to hit anyone else (other than teachers, students, parents, persons at work)?
26) Been loud, rowdy, or unruly in a public place-disorderly conduct?
27) Sold hard drugs such as heroin, cocaine, and LSD? (Total Frequency Of All Hard Drug Sales, Not Limited To These Three Drugs)
28) Tried to cheat someone by selling them something that was worthless or not what you said it was?
29) Taken a vehicle for a ride or drive without the owner’s permission?
30) Bought or provided liquor for a minor?
31) Used force or strong-arm methods to get money or things from other students?
32) Use force or strong-arm methods to get money or things from other people (Not including other students)
33) Avoided paying for such things as movies, bus rides, and food?
34) Been drunk in a public place?
35) Stolen or tried to steal things worth between $5 and $50?
36) Stolen or tried to steal something at school or on campus?
37) Broken or tried to break into a building or vehicle to steal something or just to look around?
38) Begged for money or things from strangers?
39) Failed to return extra change that a cashier gave you by mistake?
40) Used or tried to use credit cards without the owner’s permission?
41) Made obscene telephone calls (such as calling someone and saying dirty things)?
42) Snatched someone’s purse or wallet or picked someone’s pocket?
43) Embezzled money, [that is, used money or funds entrusted to your care for some purpose other than that intended]?
44) Used force or threat a force to rob a person, store, bank, or other business establishment?
45) Burglarized a residence, building, house, business or warehouse?
46) Of all the things you just told me about, how many of them did your parents or caretakers know about?
Appendix H

How often have you used ________ in the past year?

1) Tobacco?
2) Marijuana?
3) Alcohol?
4) Any other drugs?
5) Cocaine?
6) Crack?
7) Uppers/Speed: Crank, Crystal, Meth, MMDA, X, Ectasy, Ritalin, Dexidrine, Benzedrine
8) Psychedelics: LSD, Acid, Mushrooms, PCP, Angel Dust
9) Inhalants: Glue, Paint, Gas, Whippets, Poppers, Locker Room
10) Opiates: Heroin, Morphine, Opium, Methadon, Codeine, Percodan, Darvon
11) Downers/Tranquilizers: Quaaludes, Barbiturates, Seconal, Goof Balls, Valium
12) Over the Counter: Vivarin, Bendryl, No-Doz, Percogisic, Dramamine
Appendix I

1) Feeling critical of others.
2) Feelings easily annoyed or irritated.
3) Temper outbursts that you could not control.
4) Having urges to break or smash things.
5) Getting into frequent arguments.
6) Shouting or throwing things.