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THE INFLUENCE OF SIBLING SUPPORT ON CHILDREN'S POST-DIVORCE
ADJUSTMENT: A TURNING POINT ANALYSIS

By

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B.A., Utah State University, Logan, Utah, 2006

Thesis

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The Influence of Sibling Support on Children's Post-Divorce Adjustment: A Turning Point Analysis

Chairperson: Dr. Alan Sillars

ABSTRACT

Most previous research on children's adjustment following the divorce of their parents has focused on the consequences of parents' actions and communication choices. Relatively little is known about the impact that sibling relationships have on post-divorce adjustment. The current study was designed to explore the relationship between sibling social support (emotional, instrumental, and informational support) and adjustment. Data was collected from 34 participants using the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT). Participants identified key turning points in their adjustment process and used those points as an interview guide to talk about support from and communication with their siblings. Numerical questionnaire data was also collected at three turning points. Findings revealed 12 categories of turning points, of which "Move," "Change in family composition," "Change in contact with non-residential parent," "Intrapsychic change," and "Change in parent relationship status" were the most frequently reported. Five trajectories of adjustment were also found, namely "Steady," "Interrupted," "Stagnating," "Turbulent," and "Declining." From the interview data, examples of social support and communication topics were assessed. Social support was evident in the forms of emotional, instrumental, informational, and perceived support as were more implicit categories like "time together" and "common cause." Conversation topics included parent relationships, the effect of the divorce on other family members, making sense of the divorce, and opinions. From the support and communication data, 7 sibling types were proposed. Siblings who gave equal support to each other fell into the categories of "Separates," "Pals," "Allies," and "Opponents." Relationships where one sibling offered more support than the other were categorized as "Parent," "Protector," and "Encourager." Statistically, no relationship was found between sibling support and adjustment, although relationships between parent support and adjustment were found. Explanations and implications are proposed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Rationale and Review of Literature	1
Rationale	1
Review of Literature	5
Family system	5
Parenting after divorce	6
Conflict	7
Social support	8
Emotional support	10
Informational support	13
Instrumental support	14
Turning points	15
Chapter 2: Method	19
Participants	19
Procedure	19
Data analysis	23
Chapter 3: Results	25
Turning points	25
Adjustment trajectories	29
Support	31
Emotional support	32
Informational support	33
Instrumental support	33

Perceived support	34
Time together	35
Common cause	36
Listening	37
Redirected attention	37
Conflict	38
Differences	38
Communication	39
Sibling relationship types	45
Separates	46
Pals	47
Allies	47
Opponents	47
Parent	48
Protector	48
Encourager	49
Quantitative results	50
Chapter 4: Discussion	61
References	70
Appendix A: Family Member Information Questionnaire	76
Appendix B: Blank RIT Graph	77
Appendix C: Interview Questions	78
Appendix D: Turning Point Questionnaire	79

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Frequency distribution of turning point event types and their associated change in adjustment	27
Table 2: Measures of sibling support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period	51
Table 3: Measures of mother support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period	52
Table 4: Measures of father support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period	53
Table 5: Correlations Between Measures of Support, Conflict, and Time Spent Together for Siblings, Mothers, and Fathers	55
Table 6: Correlations of sibling, mother, and father support with adjustment at each time period	58
Table 7: Partial correlations of support and adjustment at Times 2 and 3	60

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Representative trajectories for adjustment types

30

CHAPTER 1: RATIONALE AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Rationale

Sibling relationships have been called “forgotten relationships” in the field of family communication (Hetherington, 1988; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Because parents are thought of as being primarily responsible for the management of family relationships, communication study has focused on the relationships within the family that directly involve parents: spousal and parent/child relationships (Bank & Kahn, 1975). Though forgotten, sibling relationships are common and important.

Single child families may be increasing, but children in the United States are still more likely than not to have at least one sibling. Sibling relationships are unique because they are the only relationships within the immediate family that span a lifetime. They often carry the affective intensity of peer relationships, but are non-voluntary relationships (Hetherington, Clingempeel, Anderson, Deal, Stanley-Hagan, Hollier, Lindner, MacCoby, Brown, O'Connor, Eisenberg, Rice, & Bennion., 1992). Through childhood, sibling interaction is a requisite part of home life and often siblings become close friends. Children may even spend more time with their siblings than with their parents (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Clearly, siblings have the ability to profoundly influence each other.

One period where sibling relationships may take on particular importance is during and after the divorce of the siblings' parents. Sociologists estimate that 50% of today's first marriages will end in divorce (Glick & Lin, 1986). Because of its ubiquity, divorce is now considered a “normative” stage in the family lifecycle, though it is not necessarily considered a “normal” stage (Hetherington, Law, & O'Connor, 1993). Often parents bear children before

dissolving their marriage. Therefore, when a couple breaks up, the whole family, not just the couple, is affected.

There is some debate over what happens to a parent's parenting skills following a divorce. Research shows that mothers' post-divorce parenting is very similar to their parenting prior to the divorce. However some mothers withdraw or become disabled by depression following divorce (Hetherington, et al., 1993). Under these circumstances children with a custodial mother may be left to fend for themselves. While most mothers maintain a similar level of parenting pre- and post-divorce, fathers' parenting generally changes dramatically. Some decrease or cut off contact with their children, while others develop parenting competence and skill beyond their pre-divorce ability (Hetherington, et al., 1993). The time following divorce is filled with uncertainty as former spouses adjust their parenting and learn to live life as non-married people. Children are affected by their parents' period of readjustment and look to family members to make sense of the changes around them. Conceivably, children whose parents became less available following divorce would demonstrate greater between-sibling changes as children looked for support from other sources. The sibling subsystem may be more affected in families where the parent/child relationship changes dramatically; sibling subsystems may remain more stable when the parent/child relationship has less dramatic change.

Traditionally, studies analyzing children's reactions to their parents' divorce have framed children's adjustment as a cause and effect relationship in which outcomes for children are dependant on parents' behavior. For example, in a meta-analysis of children's adjustment after divorce, Amato and Keith (1991) outlined the consequences of parental conflict on children. Long-term effects showed that children with divorced parents were more likely to obtain a lower level of education, earn less, become dependent on welfare, have a child out of wedlock, get

divorced themselves, and become single-parents. Short term consequences were equally dire. Compared to children whose parents stayed married, children with divorced parents scored lower on indicators of academic achievement, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations (Amato, 2001). All of these negative outcomes have been attributed to the breakup of the marital relationship and the conflict surrounding that process. When parents have high conflict with each other or speak negatively about the other parent, children are impacted socially and emotionally (Amato & Keith, 1991).

While the negative effects of divorce on children are undeniable, it is important to consider that children are not just passive recipients of their parents' behavior. Stafford and Bayer (1993) pointed out that children with divorced parents have lower self-esteem. They noted, however, that the divorce is not necessarily the cause of low self-esteem. Children who are more difficult to parent, like those with low-self esteem, may put significant strain on the marital relationship to lead to its eventual dissolution. Because all members of a family have the capacity to influence the others, cause and effect relationships are insufficient for explaining outcomes on individuals (S. Minuchin, 1974; Beavers & Hampson, 1993).

Many divorcing parents clearly recognize their children's capacity to give comfort and support. This is evidenced in the way that some parents disclose information to their children about the divorce or their former spouse (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007). Adults may be prompted to disclose to their children when they feel a lack of control over the divorce situation. If adults who have much more access to information about the causes and processes of the changing family turn to their children for support, how much more might children in the family turn to each other? In other traumatic family situations like the accident or illness of a

family member, siblings often form closer and more supportive relationships than before the stressful event (Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994).

Surprisingly, the ways in which sibling relationships are affected by divorce have been only marginally studied. The evidence that does exist is contradictory. While some evidence shows that siblings pull together during times of family trauma, other research shows that siblings demonstrate greater conflict in the time following divorce (Dunn, et al., 1994). It is likely that support and conflict are not mutually exclusive. The purpose of this study is to develop a more complete understanding of what happens to sibling relationships during divorce. While there may be trait and situational factors that strongly impact children's adjustment to their parents' divorce, much of their adjustment is facilitated or hindered by communication within the family (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007).

Sibling relationships are complex and dynamic. When describing post-divorce sibling relationships, it is important to look at the development of the relationship over time. Relationships are unlikely to be constantly conflicted or constantly supportive. Thus, a turning-point analysis is an appropriate tool for building our understanding of sibling phenomena. Turning-point analyses are used to track changes in relationships during a specified time sequence (Fitzgerald & Surra, 1981). Participants retrospectively identify significant events, or turning points, in the development of their relationships. This method brings forward both participants' perceptions of important events as well as the trajectories of certain variables across the relationship span. In this paper, a framework for understanding sibling relationships post-divorce will be presented, as well as factors that might influence such relationships. A proposed method of study will then be discussed.

Review of Literature

Family System

The family unit has frequently been conceptualized as a system. A system can be compared to a living organism with interrelated parts, boundaries, and feedback mechanisms that keep the system in balance. When looking at families as systems, interrelatedness is a key concept. Family members are constantly influencing and influenced by other family members (S. Minuchin, 1974; Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; P. Minuchin, 1988). Within the larger family system there are three subsystems: the spousal relationship, the parent/child relationship, and the sibling relationship. Besides the ways in which members of the dyad influence each other, these dyads can work together to impact the greater family unit. During a divorce, the family as a whole changes dramatically, but each subsystem should be considered as well. Most obviously, the nature of the spousal relationship changes, which also spills into the parent/child relationship. The spousal relationship is transformed from a marriage relationship to one of co-parents but not spouses. This time of redefining roles can be a period of intense uncertainty and is often characterized by a high degree of conflict (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, & Christopher, 1999).

The reorganization of the family can also change the dynamics of the parent/child relationship. As mentioned earlier, mothers typically demonstrate similar parenting ability before and after divorce (Hetherington, et al., 1993). However, the parent/child relationship is still likely to change as mothers adapt to life as a single parent. They may begin working more than before or may reconfigure their social network. This may decrease their availability to their children. Fathers, on the other hand, show vastly different parenting behavior than before the divorce. Some disengage from their children's lives while others develop parenting

competencies previously unseen (Hetherington, et al., 1993). In either case, the parent/child relationship will undergo significant change.

The ways in which sibling relationships change in the time surrounding divorce has only been marginally studied. They are affected by the spousal relationship though in less apparent ways. One possible change is an increase in conflict. When the spousal relationship breaks up and parents live in separate residences, children may feel the need to compete for parental attention, a resource that has become scarcer than before (Hetherington, et al., 1992). Sibling relationships may also model the communication demonstrated in the spousal relationship. When parents are able to model productive and supportive communication in their own relationships, sibling relationships may be characterized by similar behaviors. When parents are hostile toward each other, as divorcing couples often are, siblings may perpetuate the hostility within their own relationship (Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994).

Sibling relationships may also be impacted by changes in the parent/child subsystem. Often times sibling relations are soured by perceived preferential treatment from parents toward one child, even in intact families. Differential treatment toward children has been linked to rivalry, aggression, and avoidance between siblings (Hetherington, 1988). In extreme cases, a parent may stop parenting completely and a sibling may be forced to fill a parenting role (Goetting, 1986). This shift would certainly change the dynamic of the sibling relationship.

Parenting after Divorce

While it is important to look at children as agents, not mere recipients of their parents' behavior, parental behavior can still influence sibling interaction in important ways. The process of divorce is emotionally distressing for everyone involved. Children may become more difficult to manage as they show their resentment through aggressiveness, noncompliance, and

withdrawal (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1995). Many established household routines break down when one spouse leaves. The custodial parent becomes responsible for household tasks that were previously shared by two adults. Many, especially mothers, are forced to work more outside the home as their available income drops dramatically (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1995).

Besides being physically away from home more often, many parents have diminished emotional reserves to offer their children. Children are not the only ones trying to make sense of their new living situation. Parents feel the strain of readjusting to their new roles while dealing with decreased self-esteem and increased self-criticism (Hetherington, et al., 1993). Many also complain of loneliness (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1995). Stressors on divorcing parents may not stop at an emotional level. Divorcing parents have been shown to have weakened immune systems, making them more susceptible to illness and chronic health conditions (Kitson & Holmes, 1992).

All of these factors combine to create an environment where parents may be less available to their children. Trying to juggle their changing responsibilities, increased workload, and physical and emotional strain can leave parents drained and distant. Under these strained circumstances, sibling relationships are likely to change in important ways. Some relationships may show more rivalry as they compete for their parents' scarce resources. Others may turn to their siblings for caretaking and emotional support. When a parent has been uninvolved with the family before the dissolution of the marriage, sibling relationships may remain unaffected by the change in legal status. However, I propose that the amount of change in the sibling relationship will be related to the change in the physical and emotional availability of the custodial parent.

Conflict

Conflict between siblings is likely to increase following parental divorce (Hetherington, et al., 1993). There are many factors that can contribute to this phenomenon. One source of conflict can be linked to the general home atmosphere. When parents are depressed, fighting, or stressed, a negative home climate can be created and children have been shown to act out more during these periods. Both poor marital quality and maternal depression were correlated with increased conflict and decreased prosocial behavior in children (Vandell & Bailey, 1992). As discussed above, depression and stress are common for divorcing parents. In addition, conflict between spouses generally increases in the post-divorce period as well. While many believe that a divorce will relieve them of their conflicted relationship, research shows that in the time immediately following the divorce, conflict actually increases as parents try to work out the arrangements of their new lives (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Children are likely to witness some degree of negative behavior in their parent and many behave negatively as well.

Another source of conflict may come from competing for scarce resources. Sibling rivalry in intact families is generally attributed to the competition that comes from sharing parental attention and affection (Bank & Kahn, 1975). Rivalry is likely to be higher when one sibling perceives that a parent is treating another preferentially (Hetherington, 1988). In the time following divorce, parental time, money, and affection may become even scarcer. If children perceive decreased access to resources and believe that a sibling is receiving more, conflict may increase.

Social Support

The possible changes in sibling relationships are not all negative, however. Besides an increase in conflict in the time surrounding divorce, siblings may also show increased social support. Social support is the fulfilling of an individual's needs by members of the individual's

social network. Garner and Cutrona (2004) define social support as “verbal communication or behavior that is responsive to another’s needs and serves the functions of comfort, encouragement, reassurance of caring, and/or the promotion of effective problem solving through information or tangible assistance” (p. 495). In line with this definition, Goldsmith (2004) categorized social support into three primary groups: emotional, informational, and tangible support. Emotional support includes expressions of caring, concern, and empathy, and reassurance of worth. Informational support is comprised of the provision of new information, advice, and alternative ways of looking at things. Tangible support is the offering of goods and services. Two additional categories that have sometimes been used as subgroups of social support are appraisal support and esteem support (Goldsmith, 2004). Appraisal support is sometimes grouped with informational support as it is the process of offering a new perspective on a problem. Esteem support includes giving reassurances of worth and has therefore been thought of by some as part of emotional support.

Many emotional and psychological benefits have been linked to social support. Social support has been shown to have a buffering effect against the negative impacts of stress as well as an overall positive influence regardless of stress levels (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). This buffering effect may moderate the negative effects of divorce depending on characteristics of the support receiver, provider, and the message itself (Goldsmith, 2004). Children with supportive siblings are less likely to be depressed, have higher self-esteem, and show less delinquency (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004). Interestingly, these positive effects can come from the mere perception of available support. Whether or not resources are utilized, people feel comforted by the idea that support is available if needed (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002).

However, social support is primarily communicative. In order for a recipient to perceive support, some form of support was likely communicated in the past. Because communication is so central in the process of giving and receiving social support, this study will measure enacted support rather than perceived support between siblings. Enacted support is made up of the things that people say and do for each other and is measured from the perspective of the receiver of the support (Goldsmith, 2004). Studying social support from the perspective of the provider is insufficient because of certain limitations. The most significant is that provider and receiver evaluate the supportive event differently. Good intentions by the sender are not always interpreted as helpful by the receiver. Messages designed to provide support can actually exacerbate the stress of the receiver if the receiver interprets the act as insincere, obligatory, or controlling (Goldsmith, 2004). Additionally, messages not specifically sent with the intention of support can be helpful to the receiver. After all, “social support can be, and often is, found in the mundane, flexible, and largely nonmemorable conversations about problems that make up daily life” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 119). In order to construct sensitizing concepts for studying enacted support, the main categories of emotional, informational, and instrumental support will be reviewed and applied to the context of post-divorce sibling relationships.

Emotional support. Bank and Kahn (1982) have proposed that after going through their parents’ divorce, children may perceive their relationships with adults to be unreliable, unstable, and painful. Because of this distrust, siblings may be more apt to turn to each other for emotional support in the time following divorce. When multiple family members experience the same stressor, the roles of support provider and receiver become blurred. In this case family members engage in mutual coping (Goldsmith, 2004).

This process of mutual support can be witnessed during other times of family trauma.

Dunn, et al. (1994) found that sibling relationships were relatively stable through the lifespan. Children who had close relationships between the ages of three and ten maintained close relationships over time, whereas children who had conflicted relationships early on stayed conflicted. Only in the case of a traumatic family event did relationship patterns change. Dunn, et al. (1994) found when children went through a major life event, such as an accident, illness, maternal illness, or problems with children at school, siblings became closer and more supportive. The only exception to this finding was in the case of children whose parents were separated. When parental separation was the major life change, sibling relationships demonstrated greater conflict.

However, some still contend that siblings form tight bonds when put into adverse circumstances. Noller and Fitzpatrick (1993) suggest that working through a divorce together strengthens the sibling bond because it is the only relationship that is stable throughout the process. In several studies adolescents reported working through this period of change with the help of a sibling, especially during times where the parent was unavailable or uninvolved (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Most articles about post-divorce sibling relationships, and Hetherington, et al. (1992) specifically, describe sibling relationships as either supportive or conflictive. Further, they claim that rivalry, disengagement, and hostility are more likely to surface between siblings following divorce than are supportive behaviors. However, it may be that conflict and support can occur simultaneously. Children may be able to act as a buffer for their siblings while still working through their own emotions.

The benefits of supportive sibling relationships are significant. Jenkins (1992) found that children in disharmonious homes who had a close relationship with at least one sibling fared better than children who did not feel close to at least one sibling. Those who had a supportive

relationship with a sibling demonstrated behavior similar to children in harmonious homes. Children in disharmonious homes who did not have a supportive sibling relationship showed much higher symptomatic behavior (Jenkins, 1992). The same study found, however, that children in disharmonious homes were much less likely to have a supportive relationship with a sibling. Although close sibling relationships offer clear benefits, developing these relationships may not be easy for children. Jenkins (1992) pointed out that children may struggle to have positive interactions because of the negative conflict they have seen modeled in their parents' relationship. Gardner and Cutrona (2004) also point out that rivalry is likely to increase following divorce, which can interfere with children's willingness to provide social support to their siblings.

Bryant (1992) explored the differences between parental support and sibling support. The author discovered that children were more likely to confide in a sibling than a parent if the parent had reacted negatively to a past disclosure. When comparing the effectiveness of support given by a sibling to the support given by a parent, sibling support was found lacking. Parents were able to provide a variety of responses to children's concerns including explanations and coping strategies. Siblings were simply unable to provide the depth or complexity of support that comes from parents (Bryant, 1992). However, positive sibling support was better than no support. Children who had a supportive relationship with a sibling demonstrated more pro-social behaviors than children who had no support from a family member (Bryant, 1992).

In a study comparing comforting strategies between children and adolescent peers, Clark, MacGeorge, and Robinson (2008) found that companionship was the most preferred comforting strategy when compared to minimization, optimism, sympathy, accounts, and advice. This finding differs from the preferred comforting strategy of adults. Whereas adults valued support

that comes from someone “being there,” children felt that a friend wanting to do something with them was the most helpful form of emotional support.

Informational support. Although children evaluate companionship most positively, many comforting strategies provide informational support. These strategies are also beneficial to children and adolescents (Clark, et al., 2008). In general, comforting messages are gauged most effective when they are person-centered and delivered with high levels of nonverbal immediacy (Jones & Wirtz, 2006). Person-centeredness can be thought of as sensitivity to the situation, the relationship, and the person’s needs. Person-centered messages are more accepting and help the person understand and work through their emotions (Burluson & MacGeorge, 2002). In Clark, et al.’s (2008) study, sympathy and advice were measured by participants to be the most person-centered of the informational messages. In this study, the sympathy construct included a narrative of a time the support provider had been in a similar situation and related how they felt during that time. In the advice situation, children received suggestions about how to improve the situation. Advice has generally been evaluated negatively by adults, but the authors noted that children and adolescents may believe that situations can be worked out, yet lack the tools to do it (Clark, et al., 2008). The construct of optimism was an attempt to positively reframe the situation and was evaluated moderately well. Minimization and accounts were viewed least favorably. Minimization included down-playing the importance of the situation and accounts were messages which diverted the blame away from the distressed person. It appears that children prefer a person-centered approach that gives them tools to handle a situation over messages that try to minimize or remove the problem.

Some of these comforting messages might be applied in the context of divorce. Often, children form coalitions within the family to increase their power against parents. They filter the

information that parents receive in defense of each other and can warn siblings about parent moods and negative situations (Bank & Kahn, 1975; Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Siblings can also help each other negotiate difficult communication situations with parents (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). Ostensibly this happens through informational channels like sympathetic narratives and advice.

Instrumental support. In some circumstances, children will provide more than emotional or informational support to one another. Support can become tangible in the form of money lending, labor, and material assistance (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). In a study by Ikkink, Tilburg, and Knipscheer (1999) looking at instrumental support given by adult children to their parents, instrumental support was operationalized as help with daily chores including cleaning and meal preparation, transportation, small repairs, and help filling in forms. For adolescents and children, instrumental support might still include help with chores and transportation. However, they are likely to include other age appropriate tasks like help with homework.

An extreme form of instrumental support is caretaking. When parents are less available, one of the children, generally an older sibling, may begin physically taking care of other family members. This is more likely to occur when parents are uncommitted to parenthood, or if parents are incapacitated by illness, disability, absence, or death. Children as caretakers occur frequently in single-parent or low-income families, families where both parents work outside the home, families with many children, or in families that include a handicapped member (Goetting, 1986). Siblings usually have a fairly equal power balance in their relationship, but when an adult does not provide for the children's needs, a sibling may fill the role of adult (Gardner & Cutrona, 2004).

While emotional support is likely to result in a closer relationship between siblings, caretaking does not necessarily have the same positive impact on sibling relationships. This is probably related to the toll that caretaking can take on a child. Children who fill in for parents learn responsibility and relieve parents' stress, but the child acting as caretaker has an increased level of stress and pressure. Many feel like they have to grow up faster than children in intact families (Weiss, 1979). They may also feel that their freedom is limited because they feel obligated to be available whenever a parent needs them (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993).

When children are forced to raise each other, family dynamics change. Siblings act differently when they are alone than they do in the presence of parents. When alone, siblings are more spontaneous and direct in their communication. A positive outcome of this honesty is that children tend to be more empathetic when they are not in the presence of parents (Bank & Kahn, 1975). However, there can be negative outcomes as well. Sibling abuse happens and is more common when children are not monitored (Bryant, 1992).

Turning Points

Each of the factors presented here is likely to influence sibling relationships in divorced families. The ways in which these factors work together to affect relationships have not been fully explored. Sibling relationships are complex and changing. Because the processes of change in relationships supply useful information about relationships, a turning point analysis will be used for the present study using the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT).

The RIT was developed to compensate for some of the shortcomings of other common methods used to track evolving relationships. Fitzgerald and Surra (1981) demonstrated how the RIT was a more complete measure of relationship development than commonly used cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. In cross-sectional designs, the researcher recruits participants

at different stages in the relationship being measured. However, Fitzgerald and Surra (1981) point out that by combining each participant's experience into one trajectory, the researcher assumes that everyone's relationship develops in the same way. Longitudinal designs seek to map change by having participants report at two different points in time. This method gives some information about the development of individual relationships; however, one shortcoming of the method is that the times for reporting are standardized across participants. The RIT gives participants the opportunity to identify the salient events in their experiences rather than having time periods assigned to them by the researcher (Fitzgerald & Surra, 1981). The events can then be used as a basis for tracking relationship development over time. There are drawbacks to the RIT as well, specifically the lack of objectivity that comes with self-report and participants' limited capacity for retrospective recall. Although it is true that memory fades over time, Bahrick, Bahrick, and Wittlinger (1975) found that recall was accurate for up to 15 years and that time period extended if the memory was significant or situated in social context. The RIT is designed to give participants an opportunity to center their story around significant events situated in context.

To date, the RIT has been used for a variety of purposes. Its original function was to map the development of romantic relationships from the first meeting to marriage; however, researchers have applied it in other contexts. The RIT has been used to measure organizational identification (Bullis & Bach, 1989), small group functioning (Erbert, Mearns, & Dena, 2005), and the cohesion of blended families (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), besides its still frequent use for romantic relationships (Fitzgerald & Surra, 1981; Surra, 1987; Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Baxter & Erbert, 1999). The RIT is no longer confined to dyadic relationships and has used other starting points than a couple or group's first meeting.

This study will use the RIT to primarily look at the dyadic relationship between siblings in a family. However, because this study assumes that dyadic relationships within families are subsystems that are tied to the larger system, the influence of outside family members on the dyadic sibling relationship will be taken into account. The most obvious influence that comes from outside the dyad is the divorce itself, or the dissolving of the spousal subsystem. Because of the adjustment period required for the adults in the family, the parent/child subsystem changes as well. Both of these shifts are likely to alter the sibling subsystem. Family members experience high stress and parents may be less physically or emotionally available. To see how outside influences impact sibling relationships, parental availability will be measured in this study.

Because each family evolves differently and each child experiences stressors differently, there are likely to be a variety of turning points that arise from participant narratives. Baxter, et al. (1999) identified the main turning points as stepfamilies went through the process of blending. Many of the points they identified may be relevant to the participants in the current study as well. These points include physical changes like changes of residence, changes in the family composition, and positive or negative intrapsychic change. Because this study will look at families as they reform, another predictable turning point is the entry of one of the parents into new romantic relationships. All of these events are likely to influence participants' adjustment as they work to come to terms with their parents' divorce.

In order to probe the turning points and trajectories of adjustment patterns of children in post-divorce sibling relationships, the following research questions are offered:

RQ1: What events are identified as turning points by children in their adjustment to their parents' divorce?

RQ2: What are the primary trajectories of adjustment for children of divorced parents?

RQ3: To what extent does parental availability correlate with sibling conflict, emotional support, informational support and instrumental support?

RQ4: Are sibling conflict, emotional support, informational support and instrumental support associated with positive and negative turns in children's adjustment to their parents' divorce?

CHAPTER 2: METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through a combination of network sampling and announcements to communication classes. Those who volunteered from communication classes received extra credit for their involvement or for finding another qualified participant. Thirty-four people participated who met all of the study criteria. All participants were children of divorced parents who were at least 10 years old at the time of the divorce but still living at home. They also had at least one sibling who was also living at home at the time of the divorce. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 53 ($M=25$). Of the total 34 participants, 24 were female (71%) and 10 were male (29%). The distribution of siblings for the sample included 19 females and 15 males. Twenty-three (67%) participants reported on a same-sex sibling while 11 (33%) talked about an opposite-sex sibling. In 14 cases the sibling was older than the participant, in 19 cases the sibling was younger than the participant, and one participant was a twin.

Procedure

After reading about the purpose of the study and giving their informed consent, participants completed a questionnaire asking for demographic information. They listed the first names, genders, and current ages of the members of their family (Appendix A). This information was helpful for analyzing the gender and age distribution of the siblings discussed during data collection. Participants also reported on the type of custody arrangement that they were a part of after their parents' divorce was finalized. Determining custody arrangements offered a sense of the about the amount of physical time that participants likely spent with each parent. For the 34 participants, the custody arrangements were as follows: 4 father full custody,

17 mother full custody, 6 joint custody, 2 kids split between the parents, 5 other (participants who moved out on their own or went to live with extended family.)

After gaining demographic information about each participant's family, he/she was asked to select one sibling to report on. In 14 instances a participant only had one sibling. Where participants had more than one sibling, they were asked to choose the sibling that they felt closest to or felt like they were the most supported by. This created an opportunity to look at the maximum level of support available within the sibling network. Twenty participants had more than one sibling. Step-siblings or half-siblings were allowed as long as a divorce occurred between the participant's parent and step-parent, thereby making the divorce a shared experience for the siblings. While several participants shared their experience of a parent/step-parent divorce, all participants chose a biological sibling as the person they worked through the experience with.

After determining which relationship to discuss, participants were interviewed using the Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT). Interviews lasted between 20 and 80 minutes. In the RIT, respondents track their experience using a basic two-dimensional graph (Appendix B). The horizontal axis is used to chart time and the vertical axis is used to chart some variable, in this case, personal adjustment to divorce. The time range for reporting on the horizontal axis began at the time participants learned of their parents' intention to divorce and ended when they either felt a satisfactory level of adjustment or moved out of the house. The time leading up to the divorce was included because divorce is often a process rather than a single event. Participants' experiences ranged from 6 to 168 months ($M=56$, $SD=48.34$).

After determining a beginning and end point, participants were asked to identify turning points in their adjustment. They marked these turning points along the horizontal axis in

sequence. Respondents were encouraged to include both positive and negative turning points. Turning points were elicited using the following prompt (adapted from Baxter, et al., 1999):

The purpose of this study is to track your experience of adjusting to your parents' divorce. Please take a moment to think back on your growing up experience, particularly the time surrounding your parents' divorce. Beginning with the time you found out about your parents' intention to divorce, I want you to try to think of the important turning points that affected your adjustment to the divorce. By "turning points," I mean all of the important, pivotal events that were significant in your adjustment process. Most people experience both positive and negative turning points, so I am interested not only in those events that helped you feel better about the event, but the times that you felt less satisfied with your family's state. Adjustment could be your coming to terms with the event, feeling emotionally adapted, feeling good about how your family was functioning in its new state, or feeling a new sense of normalcy. Everyone is different, so there are no right or wrong answers. What I am interested in are the turning points in *your* adjustment process.

Once participants identified as many turning points as they deemed significant, they charted their adjustment level at each point on the vertical axis. The vertical axis included numbers ranging from zero to one-hundred marked in increments of ten. The zero level at the horizontal axis represented extreme distress while the one-hundred level depicted complete adjustment to the divorce. After marking their level of adjustment at each turning point, the participants were asked to connect the points in a manner that indicated through the slope of the line whether the time between turning points was a time of slow or abrupt change. After the

graph was completed, participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the completed graph and make any additional corrections.

Using the graph as a guide, the participants gave information about their experience both by verbally answering interview questions and by filling out a written questionnaire. Three questions were asked by the researcher at each turning point that were designed to find out what was happening at each turning point and what the communication and support between siblings was like at each point. (Appendix C). Interviews were a good tool for gaining insight into post-divorce sibling relationships because relatively little was known about the topic (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

At different stages in the interview, participants paused to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of scale questions designed to measure social support and conflict in the sibling and parent/child relationships (Appendix D). The questionnaire included questions about emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, conflict, and availability. The same set of questions was used to assess respondents' relationships with their sibling, mother and father. The questionnaire was used at three key points in time: the starting point, the middle turning point, and the final turning point. Participants completed the questionnaire immediately after answering the interview questions for each point and were asked to answer keeping in mind only that specific point in time. This was designed to increase their recall of the event and evaluate their family relationships at specific points rather than reporting on the duration of the relationship. Three points were used in order to assess change over time. Because participants were able to include as many turning points as they wished, limited use of the written questionnaire prevented participant fatigue. All participants identified between 3 and 11 turning points.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on the graphs, questionnaire data, and 113 single-spaced pages of interview transcriptions. Participants identified a total of 182 turning points subsequent to when they initially found out about the divorce. Twelve categories were created to describe these turning points using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each turning point was also analyzed for the amount of positive or negative change in adjustment. This change was calculated by subtracting the adjustment percentage at the prior turning point from the adjustment percentage at the given turning point. Besides looking at the change in each individual turning point, each graph was analyzed as a whole. Using the trajectories reported by Baxter, et al. (1999) as a guide, the graphs in the current study were compared against those authors' findings as well as each other to determine trajectories in post-divorce adjustment. Five general patterns were found, three of which matched the categories found by Baxter, et al. (1999), and two of which were unique to this study.

In addition to the data specific to turning points, participants provided other qualitative information about their post-divorce experience. This information was also coded for themes using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From this method several sibling support types and communication topics were uncovered. Axial coding (Spradley, 1979) was then used to produce seven sibling relationship types.

From the data collected from the written questionnaire, several statistical analyses were used in conjunction with the qualitative data. Composite variables of emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, conflict, time and adjustment were created from the questionnaire questions. Most of the composite variables had good to excellent reliability ($\alpha \geq .77$). Because the sample size was small, there was limited power to detect statistical

associations and the numeric data found cannot be generalized to the general population.

Nonetheless, descriptive statistics and correlations point to notable trends within the sample.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Turning Points

Table 1 reports the events that relate to the first research question, “What events are identified as turning points by children in their adjustment to their parents’ divorce?” The frequencies of each turning point as well as information about positive, negative, and neutral change associated with each point is also reported. The most common turning point in post-divorce adjustment was “Move.” This category included both instances of participants moving with their families as well as instances of participants moving out on their own. Moves involved either a move to a new house within the same geographic area or complete relocation. The second most common event was “Change in family composition.” These changes were marked by a family member moving in or out or a change in custody. Most often this event came about as one parent moved out during the period of divorce. “Change in contact with non-residential parent” was the third most commonly identified turning point. In these instances, the non-residential parent typically moved closer to or farther away from the rest of the family after his/her initial move out of the residence. This category also included changes in visitation. The fourth most common category, “Intrapsychic change” involved an internal reframing of the situation. There was a lot of variation within this category and the intrapsychic change was primarily positive. Examples of positive intrapsychic change included wanting a better life, choosing to stop caring about the divorce, realizing the divorce was real, and deciding the change was a good thing. Negative intrapsychic came as a result of receiving negative information about a parent. “Change in parent relationship status” was the fifth most common turning point. This category included a parent dating a boyfriend/girlfriend, remarrying, or re-divorcing after the initial divorce.

The rest of the turning points were reported less frequently ($n \geq 15$) and fell into six additional categories. “Special occasions” were holidays like Christmas and birthdays, and events like graduation and musical performances. These events were significant to participants for multiple reasons. For some, the occasion brought family members back together after the divorce; for others, the occasion was a letdown because a family member that they were hoping would attend did not. The next category, “Personal distractions” was comprised of non-divorce related events that took participants’ minds off of the changes in their family. Such distractions included vacation or study abroad, work, school, or progression of the participant’s own relationship. “Personal or family crisis” stood out as a turning point for many participants and included personal or family member illness, pregnancy, or substance abuse. The next two categories, “Conflict between family members” and “Divorce finalized” are self-explanatory and were significant to only a few participants. The actual finalizing of the divorce was generally not as salient to participants as was one parent moving out of the home. “Relationship maintenance with parent” was a less-frequent but important category. Participants in this category either tried to reestablish a relationship with an estranged parent or set boundaries on the communication from their parent. In the latter example, participants became tired of listening to their parents complain about the other parent and told their parents they would not listen to it anymore. The last category, “Outside resources” came when participants turned to sources of support outside the family network, such as friends or counseling. Table 1 reports the frequency of each turning point event type. The number of points which are associated with positive, negative, or neutral changes in adjustment are also listed.

Table 1

Frequency distribution of turning point event types and their associated change in adjustment

Event Type	Frequency (N=182)	Positive Change	Negative Change	Neutral Change	Number of Participants Reporting at Least One Instance
Move	29 (15.9%)	14 (48.3%)	9 (31.0%)	6 (20.7%)	19
Change in Family Composition	27 (14.8%)	17 (63.0%)	4 (14.8%)	6 (22.2%)	16
Change in Contact with Non-residential Parent	20 (11.0%)	15 (75.0%)	3 (15.0%)	2 (10.0%)	13
Intrapsychic Change	19 (10.4%)	15 (78.9%)	1 (5.3%)	3 (15.8%)	14
Change in Parent Relationship Status	18 (9.9%)	9 (50.0%)	6 (33.3%)	3 (16.7%)	12
Special Occasions	15 (8.2%)	8 (53.3%)	4 (26.7%)	3 (20.0%)	10
Personal Distractions	13 (7.1%)	9 (69.2%)	2 (15.4%)	2 (15.4%)	10
Personal or Family Crisis	11 (6.0%)	4 (36.4%)	5 (45.5%)	2 (18.2%)	9
Conflict Between Family Members	10 (5.5%)	4 (40.0%)	3 (30.0%)	3 (30.0%)	8
Divorce Finalized	9 (4.9%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	8
Relationship Maintenance with Parent	6 (3.3%)	5 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (16.7%)	5
Outside Resources	5 (2.7%)	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5

Note. Percentages in change categories are calculated from the frequency total of each type.

As will be discussed in reference to the second research question which explored adjustment trajectories, most participants showed a relatively constant progression from low adjustment to high adjustment. That being the case, the majority of turning points were associated with positive turns in adjustment. Some categories, however, were associated with noticeably more positive than negative or neutral change. Categories of strong positive change included “change in contact with residential parent,” “intrapsychic change,” “personal distractions,” “relationship maintenance with parent,” and “outside resources.” Two of these categories deal with changes in the parent/child relationship: “change in contact with residential parent” and “relationship maintenance with parent.” In the case of relationship maintenance, children controlled the amount and type of contact that they had with their parents. A gained sense of control may explain the positive change. Harder to explain, though, is the category pertaining to change in contact with the non-residential parent. In some cases, the non-residential parent moved closer to the child; however in other cases the parent moved away or discontinued visitation over time. These changes seem like they might lead to negative turns in adjustment. The fact that these changes were still predominantly positive may be attributed to participants gaining relief from a split family or from the tension of negotiating relationships with both parents. Two other categories, “personal distractions” and “outside resources,” were both comprised of events that removed or distracted participants from their family situation. This opportunity to “get away” most commonly led to positive change. The final category that showed strong positive change, “intrapsychic change,” involved a reframing of the situation. Participants generally viewed the situation more positively as time went on.

Two categories showed balanced numbers of positive, negative, and neutral change instances: “conflict between family members,” and “divorce finalized.” In the conflict category,

some conflict instances involved the participant and another family member, while other conflicts did not involve the participant. Conflicts not involving the participant were still distressing to some participants, but others felt relatively unaffected. For a few participants, conflict arose as they adjusted to their parents' divorce and their siblings did not. This process could be related to positive changes. The other evenly-divided category, "divorce finalized," was traumatic for some and expected for others. The reactions were evenly balanced. Only one category had more instances of negative change than positive change: "personal or family crisis." What is surprising in this category is not that it was associated with negative change, but rather that this negative effect was not stronger. The most obvious explanation for the relatively balanced number of positive change instances is that participants were charting their adjustment to the divorce specifically. Because personal and family crises dealt with health problems and substance abuse, they may be hard times for the participants while still distracting them from the divorce itself.

Adjustment Trajectories

The second research question asked, "What are the primary trajectories of adjustment for children of divorced parents?" Five principal trajectories were found. A representative line for each trajectory is shown in Figure 1. The first trajectory, "Steady" was the most frequent pattern of adjustment for participants (n=13, 38.2%). This pattern was characterized by a gradual but consistent climb from low to high adjustment over the full adjustment period. Baxter, et al. (1999) identified a similar category called "Accelerated" in their study of blended families. In their study the category reflected a rapid increase toward 100 percent of the x-value and remained high throughout the rest of the time period. In this study, an abrupt increase was not found. Rather, a slow, gradual, unbroken climb to high adjustment was more characteristic. The

next most frequent category was called “Interrupted” (n=8, 23.5%). This trajectory was defined by an early progression toward high adjustment, which was then broken by an event that caused a drop in adjustment near the middle of the participants’ timelines. After the distressing event, these participants resumed their progression to full adjustment. No similar category was identified by Baxter, et al. (1999).

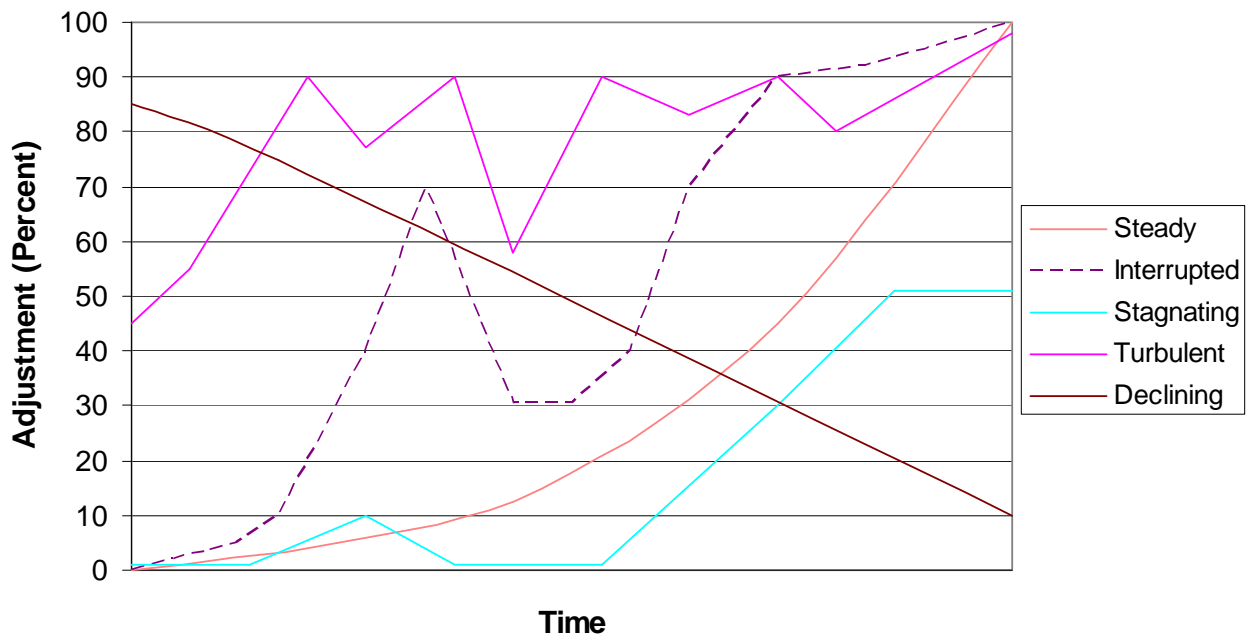


Figure 1. Representative trajectories for adjustment types

The final 3 categories follow Baxter, et al.’s (1999) findings. “Stagnating” (n=5), and “Turbulent” (n=5) trajectories each represented 14.7 percent of total participants. In cases of “stagnating” adjustment, participants started out at low adjustment and remained relatively low throughout the timeline. All participants in this category began at 5 percent adjustment or below and finished at 50 percent or below. The “turbulent” trajectory was marked by frequent ups and downs in adjustment. Nearly every turning point alternated adjustment direction from the previous point. However, despite the frequent swings in adjustment, all “turbulent” participants finished at higher adjustment levels than they began. A low percentage of participants fell into

the last category, labeled “Declining” (n=3, 8.8%). In these few cases, adjustment did not necessarily follow a constant decline, but rather the final state of adjustment was considerably lower than the beginning state.

In addition to the data which answered the first two research questions, other findings emerged from the interview data. First were the types and forms of support between siblings in divorced families. Not all siblings felt supported, but most believed that they received some form of support from their sibling. Support was remarkably diverse within the narratives. Participants experienced support from their siblings in different forms, on different levels, and at different stages of their adjustment process. Another finding in the interview data was the communication between siblings about the divorce and their parents’ relationship. Some participants talked regularly with their siblings about the divorce, some talked about it at some points but not others, and some participants never addressed the issue with their sibling. These additional findings will each be discussed.

Support

Narratives about support came in response to the third open-ended research question, “Did you feel supported by your sibling at this point in time?” If participants responded that they did feel supported, a follow-up question prodded them to describe what communicated support to them. Similarly, if respondents said they did not feel supported, a follow-up question was used to delve into what communicated lack of support. Several of the support categories that emerged followed existing research on social support. Emotional support, informational support, instrumental support, and perceived support were common themes. However there were other behaviors that siblings interpreted as support that fell outside of the commonly established categories of social support. The most common forms included time together, working toward a

common cause, listening, and redirected attention. When asked what communicated lack of support, participants revealed that conflict was divisive in their relationships, but more frequently participants felt distanced from their sibling because of differences in age or life stage.

Though characteristics of support were similar within support types, certain types did not consistently appear with other types of support. For some, both emotional support and time together were part of their sibling relationship. For others, however, time together seemed to take the place of overt emotional support. The time span of participants' experiences also added a dimension of diversity to the support types. Because of changes over time, indicators of both support and lack of support could occur within the same relationship. Some participants did not feel close to their sibling initially but developed a supportive relationship over time. Other participants who started out in a supportive sibling relationship experienced a break in support or saw a general decline as time passed. Support within sibling relationships was varied and unpredictable.

Emotional support. Fifteen participants (44.1%) related experiences that seemed to fall into Goldsmith's (2004) definition of emotional support. Three participants' statements encapsulate this dimension. In some cases, the child was responding to the sibling's emotional reaction as was the case with Participant 11. She said,

She started to cry and I just hugged her and told her that everything was going to be okay and she in turn hugged me and told me that she realized everything was going to be okay and that we would always have each other.

In other cases, comforting came as continuing reassurance, not necessarily a response to an overt emotional reaction. Participant 4 said of her brother, "he continued to tell me what's going to go on and that everything's going to be okay . . . it was hard at the same time. He was always there

reassuring me that we were going to be okay as a family.” Participant 12 gave similar support to his brother. He recalled, “I used to always reassure my brother that everything was going to be okay and that we would be fine, so just more comforting I guess.” Sometimes siblings mutually comforted each other, but more often, one sibling consistently reassured the other.

Informational support. Informational support can be thought of as the giving of new information or perspective to another. In past research on informational support, perspective and advice related closely to emotional support. Effective informational support was highly person-centered and optimistic (Clark, et al., 2008). In this study, however, informational support seemed very different than emotional support. In fact, emotional support was notably separate from informational messages as was illustrated by Participant 16. He said, “anytime we wanted to talk about it, we talked about it. It was quick and simple, never emotionally. It was always just like, alright, well this is what’s happening.” Participant 2 also remembered sharing information with his sister and with no effort between them to comfort each other. He described their exchanges in the following way: “Just, ‘This is happening,’ and that was the extent of it as opposed to, ‘This is happening, how are you doing? Are you okay? What are you thinking about? How do you feel?’ That wasn’t part of the conversation.” Eleven participants (32.4%) provided or received informational support.

Instrumental support. Instrumental support has been defined as the providing of goods and services and can include money lending or labor (Goldsmith, 2004; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). In this study, only one example of financial assistance surfaced. Participant 14 said, He wasn’t paying child support, so actually my freshman year, went to work babysitting and my money that I saved would actually go to pay for the low

income food lunch program for my brothers and sisters and I ate an apple and a piece of cheese every day.

This participant's experience was rare for this sample, however. For most, instrumental support was illustrated in the form of help with meal preparation, homework, and transportation.

Participant 25 told of how an exchange of instrumental support strengthened his bond with his sister who was 6 years younger. He stated, "she always liked doing cleaning and stuff so she'd always come and clean my room . . . I'd help her with her homework." Thirteen participants (38.2%) reported instrumental support as part of their relationships. While some forms of instrumental support came about because the children spent more time alone following the divorce, most examples did not seem to stem directly from the divorce. For example, a few participants reported receiving rides from their sibling after the sibling received a driver's license. It is plausible this would have occurred even if the parents stayed together. In other situations instrumental support was given in response to a change in the health of the sibling. Participant 33 felt very supported by her brother when she became pregnant in high school. She said, "he was very helpful, I mean, he was tying my shoes for me and carrying my backpack to school and things like that." Though these favors clearly communicated support to her, they were not in direct response to the divorce.

Perceived support. While the purpose of this study was to find instances of enacted support, perceived support was a theme that could not be ignored. Eight participants (23.5%) perceived that support was available from their siblings whether or not they took advantage of it. Almost every example that was coded as perceived support included the phrase, "if I needed to talk to her/him, I could." These examples generally surfaced at turning points where participants could not remember specific support actions from their siblings but felt siblings would have

helped if needed. These feelings may be a continuation of earlier support. Participant 19 even described perceived support in the present tense. She said,

I always know that she will be there if I need to talk to her or if I need her support in any way. She doesn't really need to do or say anything that makes that more clear to me than it already is.

Time together. The most common source of support which fell outside the previously mentioned categories was time together. A majority of participants (n=26, 76.5%) appreciated having their sibling with them to work through their family's reformation. Participants described this type of support as "hanging out" or just "having someone there." Participant 31 described this phenomenon in the following way: "I always spent a lot of time with him so I guess just spending time with him was probably support." Participant 35 echoed this idea, "We were just close and our day-to-day lives, we were constantly together besides the hours that we were in school, so we felt supported by each other I think." Time together was different than instrumental, emotional, and perceived support because there was no mention of comfort, direct help, or the feeling that help was available. Rather, participants valued having someone with them who could relate to their circumstances. This idea of commonality was demonstrated by Participant 13 when he said,

I mean, definitely having someone that can relate, someone that's so close in age, knows exactly what you're going through . . . now being able to have someone that can relate directly to you that you have that comfort that is your blood, you've grown up, you couldn't ask for a better support system than that.

Several participants also mentioned that they would purposely go with their sibling to visit the non-custodial parent so that the sibling would not have to go alone.

Common cause. Goldsmith (2004) points out that it is difficult to separate support from basic problem solving. A working-together process was witnessed in 18 participants' accounts (52.9%). For the purposes of this study, working toward a common cause is interpreted as support because it brought siblings together and opened channels of communication between them. Siblings usually worked together toward a common goal or fought against a common enemy. Both situations drew siblings closer to each other. For several participants, a common goal involved caring for or coping with the behavior of a distressed parent. Participant 16 and his brother worked together to care for their father who was in ill health and struggling to deal with the divorce. He illustrated their coordinating efforts by reenacting a conversation between him and his brother: "Hey, did you talk to dad today?" "Yeah, he's doing alright." "Well cool, I'll give him a call tomorrow, give you an update on him," or something like that." Participant 12 and her brother also had a distressed father. She described their mutual coping when she said, "when we see him we get sad or depressed or we feel bad for him and then we talk to each other about it and what we can do to help him or how not to feel sorry for him." In these examples children were trying to both help their family member and help each other work through trying circumstances. The other frequent example of a common cause was a common enemy. Enemies included parents, step-family members, or those outside the family who wanted to meddle in family business. Participant 33 told of how she and her brother drew closer because of perceived inequalities in treatment in the family. She said, "we were full-blooded siblings in a house with a half-brother that was treated by far better than we were, and so we supported each other that way too, you know, that was really hard to deal with." Similarly, Participant 35 was unhappy with her mother's decision to move their family in with step-family members that only their mother had met. She recalled, "I remember that being really hard, and I think my sister and I

were probably pretty close at that point because we were just rebelling against the whole change.” During times of stress and change siblings frequently pulled together in mutually supportive ways.

Listening. Listening was perceived as a form of support that seemed similar to perceived support, yet it was enacted. Six participants (17.6%) reported that listening was a form of support in their relationships with their siblings. Although no response from the sibling was mentioned, participants appreciated the opportunity to talk through their experience to a willing listener. For example, when asked what communicated support to her, Participant 15 responded, “Oh just talking about it, she’d listen and I’d talk to her. And then I’d do the same for her.” This reciprocal process of sharing and listening was perceived as support. Participant 23 said of her brother who was much younger, “he’s a good little listener, he wouldn’t know what I was talking about, but it helps when you have someone you can just [talk] to you and they’re not going to say anything about it.” Although she did not feel like her brother understood what she was telling him, this participant liked having someone that she could share things with in confidence.

Redirected attention. A less prominent yet relevant source of support came in the form of redirected attention. In these cases, a child purposely tried to divert a sibling’s attention away from the stressful family situation at hand. This theme emerged in the narratives of 4 participants (11.7%). Participant 8’s brother took him to the arcade the day that their parents went to court to finalize the divorce. Participant 1’s brother redirected her attention away from her parents’ fighting in a way that she did not recognize until later. She recalled that her brother would have me and my little sister go down into his room and he would show us pictures that he had drawn for art class or he would show us, um, talk to us about a TV show or something. And I think he was just trying to pull us away from

what was going on upstairs. And I don't think I realized it then, but then later on realized that's probably what he was doing is just trying to take us away from that. Um, so looking back now, that was a way of support.

Conflict. Two key occurrences communicated lack of support to participants from their siblings. The first was conflict. Conflict was seen in the experiences of 9 participants (26.5%). One particularly intense instance of conflict happened when Participant 13 moved out with his father while his brother, whom he had been close to, decided to remain with his mother. Of this time period, Participant 13 said,

There started to become a separation and I kind of felt a little bit of vengeance towards him because he was supporting my mom and I was upset with my mom and I couldn't see how he could do that, so there was going to be, that's where kind of a lack of support, I felt we started to hit a dead end.

In their ongoing conflict about their parents' choices, Participant 13's once close relationship with his brother turned to a non-supportive relationship filled with tension. Some conflicts were based on differences of opinion on parents' behavior, but others stemmed from jealousy over unequal opportunities or parental attention.

Differences. The most dominant theme that came in response to the question of what communicated lack of support was the idea that siblings were on different social or developmental levels. Differences occurred in the case of 19 participants (55.9%). Participant 17 said of her sister, "she was a lot younger so she just [was in] a different period of our life." Although there was only a 3 year age difference between the two sisters, Participant 17 felt like they could not relate to each other because of their ages. For many others, siblings had separate interests or were just uninvolved in each other's lives. Participant 22 described the differences

between her and her brother when she said, “he and I were so opposite, he was really cool and I was a big nerd. I was this horse nerd that wore big buckles and he was a jock . . . we were just on 2 different planes.” Throughout Participant 22’s account, she and her brother lived separate lives and did not make an effort to support each other. Participant 27 told of the different ways that she and her twin sister coped with the divorce: “she actually got progressively more shy and introverted and started doing a lot of watching TV and reading books where I was out of the house a lot.” Because of their differences in adjustment, Participant 27 felt a lack of support from her sister who had a harder time coping with the divorce. As time passed, their different interests pulled them farther apart.

Communication

The second open-ended interview question, “Did you communicate to your sibling about the divorce or your parents’ relationship?” prompted a variety of responses. Most began with a “yes” or “no” and then went on to either describe the conversation topics that were addressed or give reasons that they did not talk to their sibling at that point in time. Of the total 34 participants, 8 never talked about the divorce (23.5%), 18 talked about it at some points in time but not others (52.9%), and 8 talked about the divorce consistently throughout their adjustment process (23.5%).

Although nearly a quarter of participants never talked about the divorce with their sibling, only three participants from this group never felt supported by their sibling. Most who avoided the topic felt that they received support even while avoiding the topic of divorce itself. This phenomenon parallels some of the forms of implicit support discussed above. Participants did not always need enacted forms of support in order to perceive support; likewise, participants did not need to overtly discuss the divorce in order to feel supported in their adjustment to the

divorce. While this was the case for several participants, more commonly, times that participants felt close to their siblings were times that they reported being able to talk about the divorce.

Open channels of communication seemed to promote closeness.

Those participants who indicated communicating with their sibling did not always describe direct conversation about the divorce. Many reported either talking to a friend about the divorce or to their sibling about topics outside of their parents' relationship. Common non-divorce topics dealt with school, siblings' outside relationships (boyfriends/girlfriends, kids), and future plans. Of the responses that did relate to the divorce, the topics fell into 4 categories: parent relationships, the effect of the divorce on other family members, making sense of the divorce, and opinions.

Fourteen participants (41.2%) discussed a parent's relationship at some point in time. Relationship talk included discussion of the parents' relationship with each other, a parent's new relationship, or a parent's relationship with another family member. Some discussion of the parents' relationship with each other centered around events leading up to the divorce. This is illustrated by Participant 19 when she said,

I think that we both just kind of realized that at first they were trying to work on it but then realized that it wasn't really just going to work out, so I feel like we probably talked about it a lot.

For others, the conversation focused on their parents' post-divorce relationship. Participant 11 described the complexity of her parents' post divorce relationship because of her stepparents. She related, "we talked about how my parents got along, my parents still got along, they were still friends, still are friends, but you know sometimes their relationship was hard because of the stepparent factor." Like Participant 11, several participants talked with their siblings about their

parents' new relationships. As might be expected, children usually had strong opinions about their parents' new significant others and whether they were a good or bad addition to the family. A final topic within this category was the relationship between a parent and another family member. As the family reorganized and members coped with the divorce, other family relationships became salient. Participant 17 tried to help her sister who lived with her mom following the divorce. She said, "my mom didn't deal with it well at all, [my sister] was still living at home, it was really hard for her cause my mom wasn't very kind to her so we talked about what she was going to do." Participant 30 told about the time before her father discontinued contact with the children. At this point she felt that her parents' relationship was less relevant. She recalled,

At that point we were all just kind of still enjoying the fact that he was still a part of our lives. So I mean, I guess we would talk more about his relationship with us rather than my parents' relationship with each other.

Aside from a parent's relationship with another family member, siblings talked with each other about the impact the divorce was having on family members outside of the sibling dyad (n=8, 23.5%). In some cases, siblings wondered about how a parent was coping, especially if the parent did not choose the divorce. For others, the conversation centered around the impact of the divorce on other siblings. Participant 13 and his brother talked about "how it was carrying over to our little brothers and sisters and how we needed to play more of a role more of a mother and father to take some of the burden off of those guys and their concern."

In 14 sibling dyads (41.2%), the children tried to help each other make sense of the divorce and the changes in their family. Some felt that their parents did not give them sufficient information to help them understand what was going on. This is exemplified by Participant 9

who said, “we’d always talk about it then and they never really told us why they got the divorce. So we always tried to figure it out.” Participant 7 related her experience of trying to help her sister but feeling that she too had insufficient information. She stated, “I just remember she had trouble going to sleep and so she would ask about them getting divorced and didn’t understand what it meant but I didn’t really either.” Besides trying to understand why the divorce happened and what the implications were going to be, siblings also helped each other cope and reframe the situation. Participant 11 recalled how she and her sister came to terms with the divorce when she said,

She was wondering why my mom was so happy that it was all over and you know she kind of realized, oh wait, it is all over but I still have both of my parents so it’s not such a huge tragedy. So we talked about, you know, we still have our parents but now they’re just separate people.

Children helped each other as they tried to make sense of their experience.

The final prominent theme that emerged from the second interview question was sharing of opinions (n=11, 32.4%). Most opinions dealt with parents’ decisions. Some sibling dyads agreed that their parents were making mistakes; others agreed that their parents were making the right decision. The latter is illustrated by Participant 15 in her description of her parents’ division of assets. She said, “we just discussed again what was divided up and how it seemed pretty fair to us and to everybody. So it worked out pretty well.” At other times, however, siblings were not in agreement. This is evident in Participant 5’s ongoing argument with her sister. She described one of their exchanges:

She was just like, they got lazy, like what do they think they’re doing, they could have worked this out, and I was like, no they couldn’t have. They grew apart.

And she's like, oh, they shouldn't have let that happen, you know, and I was like, well they went to therapy.

Some of the opinions between siblings were in harmony while others created significant rifts in the siblings' relationship.

Several participants acted as mediators of communication between parents and siblings. Sometimes the communication was designed to direct the communication between the sibling and the parents; other times participants filtered the information they received from their parents in order to protect their sibling. Participant 4 described how she and her brother both encouraged each other to be honest with their father about their family situation. At one point, during counseling, it was her turn to direct her brother. She recalled, "at that point I was trying to tell [my brother] what he was trying to tell me to tell my dad." Participant 27 would relay messages from her sister to her parents. She said, "a lot of times . . . she'd talk to me first and then I would talk to our parents. Because I could handle our parents better than she could." In a more extreme version of mediated communication, Participant 14 was responsible for arranging visitation between her siblings and her father. In her own words,

I was always the liaison trying to get, when my dad said he'd come get the kids I was the one that set it up and would do all the talking . . . cause she would wonder, 'well why didn't daddy come and pick me up' and I'd say, 'well he got busy' and I'd have to play the adult and say you know, 'I'm sure he loves you' and stuff.

A majority of participants also claimed that they did not communicate with their sibling about the divorce at one or more turning point (n=26, 76.5%). However, only 8 (23.5%) participants never discussed the divorce with their sibling. Some gave only minimal information

about their lack of communication as is reflected in the following statements. Participant 2 said simply, “relative to the divorce, I don’t think that that was ever really a part of our discussion or conversation.” Similarly, Participant 31 said, “I don’t think I really did talk to my siblings about that I can remember.” Participant 5 seemed somewhat surprised by the lack of talk as she looked back on the divorce. She recalled, “It was just really weird, like it happened and no one ever talked about it.”

Most participants gave some explanation for their lack of communication about the divorce and these explanations fell into three main categories. Some consciously avoided the topic, others attributed the lack of talk to the nature of the relationship with their sibling, and others felt that the breakup of their parents’ relationship did not pertain to them or became irrelevant over time. For participant 1, the topic never came up between her family members. She believed that her parents did not know how to talk about the divorce and it was strategically avoided between other family members as well. She recalled, “I probably did talk to [my brother] but I didn’t, we didn’t ever talk about that. I think the biggest key was just avoiding the whole situation and talking about things that made us happy.” Participant 16, on the other hand, talked continuously to his parents about the divorce but preferred to avoid the topic with his sibling. He stated,

We felt better not to discuss it. We were . . . constantly discussing it mother, father, mother-son, mother-son and father-son kind of thing and we never, never really discussed it between the two of us. . . I don’t know if we felt uncomfortable, but it was easier for us to kind of just go through school, go through golf, go on our trips and we didn’t really discuss it.

Other participants did not state conscious avoidance of the divorce but rather attributed their lack of communication to the nature of their relationship with their sibling or the sibling's life stage. Several participants did not have good relationships with their sibling. Participant 22 described her relationship with her brother as “stressed,” and Participant 2 said, “there wasn't much communication to begin with and that didn't change as a result of being told they were divorced.” Some felt that their siblings became unavailable as they went to college or gave priority to relationships outside the family. Others did not talk to their siblings because they felt that the sibling was too young to understand. Interestingly, the categorization of “too young” was not related to a specific age or age difference. Participants with siblings as little as 2 years younger still reported that their sibling was too young to understand; therefore, communication about the divorce was not a part of their relationship.

A final reason for not conversing about the divorce was a sense the topic was irrelevant. A few participants did not feel a need to discuss it because they did not need help coping at the time. Participant 18 said, “In my eyes I was having the time of my life. I wasn't unhappy . . . I wasn't worried enough to talk about it to her.” Some reported that the divorce was not a surprise, therefore discussion was not needed to make sense of the situation. Participant 34 summed this up when he said, “that was like so secondary to us at that point and them getting divorced, it's like you know, who cares? . . . It was sort of anticlimactic by that point to have this divorce.” Many participants talked about the divorce during transitional periods but stopped discussing it when the new family situation normalized. This is reflected in Participant 8's statement, “[we'd] kind of gotten past at that point in time . . . it's just we know that it happened.” The theme was echoed by Participant 26, “she and I pretty much just got it I guess. We [were] used to it at that point.”

Sibling Relationship Types

Using axial coding (Spradley, 1979), the support and communication narratives were analyzed to create sibling relationship types. Seven types were found which fell into two primary categories: equal support and directional support. The equal support condition was seen in cases where siblings reciprocated each other's actions. Either both showed similar levels of support to each other or both were equally conflicted or distant. Subtypes within the equal support groups included "separates," "pals," "allies," and "opponents." In directional support relationships, one sibling provided more support than the other. Sometimes this inequality was based on age difference, other times it was based on unequal adjustment. When one sibling adjusted quickly, he/she generally stopped receiving support and often offered it to the more distressed sibling. Directional support categories included "parent," "protector," and "encourager." Because of the time dimension of this study, relationships were not always stable throughout the adjustment process. Each transcript was coded for sibling type at the three points in time where participants completed questionnaires.

Separates. The "separates" sibling type occurred during at least one point in time in the case of 14 participants (41.2%). This category of equal support was characterized by a mutual lack of support. Participants did not talk with their sibling about the divorce and were emotionally distanced from their sibling. For some there was a physical distance in the relationship as well. Even when siblings were close in proximity, though, they felt unconnected or on a separate developmental or social level than their sibling. As a whole, participants within this category displayed low levels of support, especially at Time 3. However, for individual participants, a single measure of support, like time together or informational support could be moderate to high.

Pals. “Pals” was the other prevalent type of equal support and was found in the case of 14 participants (41.2%). In these relationships siblings were close to each other, however this closeness seemed like it did not come about as a result of the divorce. Siblings were close before the divorce and continued to be supportive friends. The divorce was talked about in these relationships, but it seemed to be nested within a variety of other ongoing conversation topics and was not the key focus of the relationship. Participants felt high levels of emotional support from their sibling and most felt low levels of instrumental support. Conflict was either high or low; this may be reflective of a typical balanced sibling relationship whether in a divorced or non-divorced family.

Allies. The “allies” type was a second example of siblings who were close; however in this case, the mutual support given was directly related to coping with the divorce and other family stressors. Siblings within this category provided emotional support to each other and in their narratives expressed appreciation for having someone there who could relate to what they were going through. These sibling types often coped with other family stressors, which ranged from serious parental illness to dealing with tension at family get-togethers. Ongoing talk about the divorce was present and siblings maintained open lines of communication even when they were not geographically close. Participants in this type reported extremely high levels of time together, especially in the initial stages. This relationship type was manifest at least once in the experience of 11 participants (32.4%).

Opponents. A final and less common category of equal support was “opponents” (n=2, 5.9%). In these conflicted relationships, a mutual lack of support was shown although there was consistent communication. In both instances of this relationship, there was intense conflict over

parental decisions during and following the divorce. Participants were unable to understand the perspective of their sibling.

Parent. Within the directional support types category, the most intense form of directional support was “parent.” In 8 cases the participant or their sibling acted as a parent to the other (23.5%). The themes in the sibling-as-parent condition were different than the participant-as-parent condition for obvious reasons. When the sibling acted as a parent, participants expressed appreciation that the sibling was willing to make himself/herself available when the participant needed help. Significant instrumental support was provided by the parentified sibling, most commonly in the forms of meal preparation and transportation. When participants acted as parents, they reported providing instrumental support to their sibling and frequently said that they had to care for their sibling because the sibling was young. They also reported low levels of received support. In only the support provider narratives, themes of information management emerged. Because the sibling was younger, participants reported filtering information, trying to help the sibling make sense of the changes through age-appropriate disclosure, and putting on a strong front. Often parentified participants felt satisfaction when their sibling demonstrated good behavior or seemed well-adjusted.

Protector. The next category of directional support, “protector” was a role that was only reported from the perspective of the participant. Six participants (17.6%) fulfilled this role for their sibling. Within this type, the participant had more information about the divorce than his/her sibling. As a result, participants often withheld information that they believed would cause their sibling distress. In trying to help their sibling come to terms with the divorce, participants often gave minimal information as well as limited emotional support. Participants in this category reported low received support and very high levels of conflict. These siblings did

not show the instrumental support that parentified siblings did nor did they voice feelings of responsibility for their siblings' adjustment. These sibling relationships showed a more equal balance of power; however, one sibling had access to potentially stressful information that he/she chose to withhold from the other.

Encourager. A final category of directional support, "encourager" was the least extreme form of role inequality and was found in the case of 9 participants or their siblings (26.5%). Within this type, siblings seemed to have relatively equal access to information about the divorce, but one sibling had a harder time adjusting to the change than the other. Generally there was little age difference in these relationships. Siblings felt supported by each other, but one provided more support than the other based on the emotional needs of the other. Numerically, participants reported receiving quite a bit of support but in the interview data they reported giving more than receiving. As a result, these relationships appear much more balanced than the other directional support categories.

After the seven sibling relationship type categories were created, each participant was assigned a type for the beginning, midpoint, and endpoint of their experience. Ten participants' (29.4%) relationships with their siblings stayed stable throughout the adjustment process. A majority, however, displayed changes in their relationships. Six participants (17.6%) had a different relationship type at all three points in time. The rest had one relationship type at two points and a different type at the other. Of the 18 participants (52.9%) who displayed the same relationship type at two points, three (8.8%) had the same relationship type at the beginning and midpoint but not the endpoint, and two (5.9%) had the same relationship at the beginning and endpoint but not the midpoint. The rest (n=13, 38.2%) had the same relationship at the midpoint and endpoint which was different from the relationship type at the beginning. It appears that

most participants either retained the same type of relationship they had with their siblings or developed a new type along their adjustment process which stabilized as time went on. Using these sibling types as independent variables, several exploratory statistical analyses were done to see if there was a link between sibling types and adjustment. No trends were found. Siblings seemed to have an equal chance of adjusting to their parents' divorce regardless of the type of relationship they had with their sibling.

Quantitative results

Like the interview data, the quantitative data gathered through questionnaires was analyzed for both important patterns and the answers to research questions. In order to manage the data, composite variables were created to assess emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, conflict, time together, and participant adjustment at the three time periods where participants completed questionnaires. Items included in the adjustment index were first converted to z-scores, since the 0-100 percent rating of adjustment as reported on the RIT graph was combined with 2 ratings of adjustment on 5-point scales. Reliabilities for adjustment scores at each time were adequate (adjustment 1, $\alpha = .770$; adjustment 2, $\alpha = .778$; adjustment 3, $\alpha = .807$). Other composite variables were calculated by averaging responses on 1-5 scales. Descriptive statistics for the composite scores for siblings, mothers, and fathers are reported in Tables 2-4.

Of note in these tables are the relatively high levels of emotional support and time spent with siblings. The time spent with siblings rating parallels the interview data as participants described it as the most common source of support they felt from their sibling. However, emotional support did not seem to be as obvious in participant narratives. It appears that they

Table 2

Measures of sibling support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	Number of Items
Emotional Support				
Time 1	3.15	1.12	.81	2
Time 2	3.41	1.08	.78	2
Time 3	3.46	1.08	.84	2
Instrumental Support				
Time 1	2.53	1.33	.89	2
Time 2	2.50	1.26	.95	2
Time 3	2.31	1.45	.96	2
Informational Support				
Time 1	2.34	1.14	.92	3
Time 2	2.72	0.94	.85	3
Time 3	2.57	1.12	.92	3
Conflict				
Time 1	2.63	1.12	.92	2
Time 2	2.50	1.02	.85	2
Time 3	2.22	1.11	.93	2
Time Together				
Time 1	3.65	1.24	.90	3
Time 2	3.70	1.02	.85	3
Time 3	3.49	1.16	.86	3

Table 3

Measures of mother support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	Number of Items
Emotional Support				
Time 1	3.09	1.16	.82	2
Time 2	3.38	1.23	.91	2
Time 3	3.21	1.52	.94	2
Instrumental Support				
Time 1	2.93	1.25	.89	2
Time 2	2.91	1.43	.91	2
Time 3	2.40	1.42	.88	2
Informational Support				
Time 1	3.14	1.22	.92	3
Time 2	2.93	1.22	.93	3
Time 3	2.64	1.42	.95	3
Conflict				
Time 1	2.41	1.18	.90	2
Time 2	2.51	1.25	.96	2
Time 3	2.25	1.17	.82	2
Time Together				
Time 1	3.19	1.07	.85	3
Time 2	3.11	1.04	.86	3
Time 3	3.04	1.29	.88	3

Table 4

Measures of father support, conflict, and time spent together at each time period

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	Number of Items
Emotional Support				
Time 1	2.43	1.29	.91	2
Time 2	2.32	1.15	.84	2
Time 3	2.46	1.25	.86	2
Instrumental Support				
Time 1	1.85	1.12	.90	2
Time 2	1.81	1.24	.98	2
Time 3	1.65	1.06	.90	2
Informational Support				
Time 1	2.11	1.04	.82	3
Time 2	2.10	1.03	.95	3
Time 3	2.04	1.08	.90	3
Conflict				
Time 1	2.13	1.13	.84	2
Time 2	2.01	1.11	.91	2
Time 3	1.93	1.01	.83	2
Time Together				
Time 1	2.47	1.10	.84	3
Time 2	2.56	1.22	.91	3
Time 3	2.61	1.23	.84	3

perceived receiving emotional support yet could not articulate specific examples. Emotional support from siblings had a higher mean than emotional support from both mothers and fathers although sibling emotional support did not statistically predict final adjustment.

Correlations among forms of support, conflict, and time spent together, summed across the three time periods, are reported in Table 5. As can be seen from this table, different forms of social support were positively associated with one another and with time spent together. There is one interesting contrast between mothers and fathers reflected in Table 5. As might be expected, emotional support from the mother correlated negatively with mother-child conflict. In contrast, instrumental and informational support from the father correlated positively with father-child conflict. No relationship was found between support and conflict in sibling relationships.

After looking at the relationship between sources of support for each family member, the third research question, “To what extent does parental availability correlate with sibling conflict, emotional support, informational support and instrumental support?” was assessed. Correlations between family member variables were used to explore this relationship and were calculated using support variables that were summed across the three time periods. Time spent together was the specific variable used to assess availability. Only one significant correlation between parental availability and sibling support was found, and that was the relationship between time spent with mothers and time spent with siblings ($r = .37, p < .05$, two-tailed). There were also weak positive associations between time spent with fathers and emotional and informational support from siblings (both $r = .28, ns$). All other correlations were close to zero. The lack of a negative association between sibling support and parental availability demonstrates that sibling support does not serve a compensatory function when parents are unavailable. Rather, those who felt supported by their mothers were more likely to also feel supported by their siblings. There

Table 5

Correlations Between Measures of Support, Conflict, and Time Spent Together for Siblings, Mothers, and Fathers

	Emotional Support	Instrumental Support	Informational Support	Conflict	Time
Siblings					
Emotional Support	—	.45**	.69**	-0.09	.58**
Instrumental Support		—	.37*	0.12	.66**
Informational Support			—	-0.19	0.28
Conflict				—	0.22
Time					—
Mothers					
Emotional Support	—	.63**	.84**	-.40*	.84**
Instrumental Support		—	.52**	-0.03	.66**
Informational Support			—	-0.23	.63**
Conflict				—	-0.20
Time					—
Fathers					
Emotional Support	—	.58**	.67**	0.06	.89**
Instrumental Support		—	.49**	.42*	.72**
Informational Support			—	.34*	.67**
Conflict				—	0.19
Time					—

* $p < 0.05$, two-tailed. ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

was also a moderate negative association between time spent with fathers and instrumental support from mothers ($r = -.34, p < .05$, two-tailed). This implies that children who were cared for by their mothers generally spent less time with fathers.

Although parental availability had little impact on the other variables, other significant correlations emerged between family members. One key finding was the tendency for conflict to be associated across family relationships. There were moderate correlations between the degree of conflict with mothers and siblings ($r = .45, p < .01$, two-tailed), mothers and fathers ($r = .42, p < .05$, two-tailed), and fathers and siblings ($r = .49, p < .01$, two-tailed). It appears that in families where conflict is present, it is present throughout the system and is not necessarily confined to a certain subsystem.

Another noticeable pattern was the mirroring of sibling support to forms of parental support. Along with the correlations of conflict and time between mothers and siblings mentioned above, other support types between mothers and siblings were also related. Specifically, mother instrumental support and sibling instrumental support showed a moderate positive correlation ($r = .40, p < .05$, two-tailed), as did mother informational support and sibling informational support ($r = .37, p < .05$, two-tailed). Mother and sibling emotional support were not correlated, but father and sibling emotional support were. A moderate correlation was found between father emotional support and sibling emotional support ($r = .38, p < .05$, two-tailed).

A cluster of variables was associated with father informational support. Sibling emotional support was moderately correlated with father informational support ($r = .50, p < .01$, two-tailed), as was sibling informational support ($r = .60, p < .01$, two-tailed). Time spent with siblings also showed a low positive correlation with father informational support ($r = .34, p < .05$, two-tailed). Sibling support tended to be associated with both mother and father support.

The fourth research question asked, "Are sibling conflict, emotional support, informational support and instrumental support associated with positive and negative turns in children's adjustment to their parents' divorce?" This question was analyzed by looking at the relationships between adjustment at each turning point and the support variables from each family member. Though the questionnaires were only administered at three points in time, all the turning points showed a vast range in participants' reported levels of adjustment. The three turning points used to administer the questionnaire give a representative view of the variety recorded in the graphs. On a 0-100 scale, the range of adjustment scores at the three turning points was 85, 87, and 95 respectively. Adjustment, as measured by the turning point graphs, steadily increased over time for most participants and this can be seen in the average scores at the first point ($M = 24.18, SD = 25.96$), midpoint ($M = 48.74, SD = 30.04$), and ending point ($M = 78.88, SD = 29.35$). As can be seen from the standard deviations however, there was tremendous variation in adjustment scores at each turning point.

To calculate the influence of support on adjustment, adjustment levels at the first, middle, and last turning point were correlated with measures of support at the corresponding point in time. Table 6 reports these correlations. The only significant links between support and adjustment were determined by the actions of mothers. Participants who received emotional support and instrumental support from their mothers and had mothers who were available were better adjusted at Time 3. Participants who had conflict with their mothers showed worse adjustment at Time 2, although surprisingly this effect did not carry over to Time 3.

Table 6

Correlations of sibling, mother, and father support with adjustment at each time period

	Adjustment Time 1	Adjustment Time 2	Adjustment Time 3
Siblings			
Emotional Support	0.12	-0.20	-0.23
Instrumental Support	0.07	0.10	0.25
Informational Support	0.05	0.04	-0.08
Conflict	-0.09	-0.25	-0.18
Time Together	-0.06	-0.10	0.29
Mothers			
Emotional Support	0.03	0.19	0.36*
Instrumental Support	-0.16	0.14	0.41*
Informational Support	0.04	0.12	0.29
Conflict	-0.16	-0.47**	-0.20
Time Together	0.10	0.15	0.36*
Fathers			
Emotional Support	0.01	-0.12	-0.30
Instrumental Support	-0.21	-0.26	-0.25
Informational Support	0.05	-0.08	-0.25
Conflict	0.11	-0.20	0.01
Time Together	0.00	-0.11	-0.25

* $p < 0.05$, two-tailed. ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

A final test assessed associations between support and change in adjustment from initial to later time periods through the use of partial correlations. Partial correlations were used to test relationships between forms of support and adjustment at Time 2 and Time 3, controlling for initial adjustment. These partial correlations are shown in Table 7. The partial correlations validated to some extent the relationship between mother support and adjustment.

Sibling support (emotional, instrumental, and informational) had little to no impact on children's adjustment to their parents' divorce although in the qualitative data examples of each type of support were evident. The one factor that did influence final adjustment was time spent together although the partial correlation of .33 only approached statistical significance ($p < .10$). This non-specific form of support was the most frequent form of support reported by participants in their narratives. Just knowing that they had an associate who could relate to their situation seemed to help children adapt to the consequences of their parents' divorce. The most beneficial forms of support as reported by participants, however, came from mothers. Emotional, informational, and instrumental support from mothers as well as time spent together, were all positively related to final adjustment. Conflict with mothers was negatively related to adjustment. It seems as though participants had a harder time dealing with conflict with their mothers than with other family members. Surprisingly, time spent with fathers and instrumental support from fathers had negative impacts on children's final adjustment (controlling for initial adjustment). Fathers' instrumental support was statistically significant ($r = -.35, p < .05$) and time spent with fathers approached significance ($r = -.32, p < .10$). Children who received support from their mothers fared much better in achieving high final adjustment.

Table 7

Partial correlations of support and adjustment at Times 2 and 3

Control Variable: Adjustment Time 1	Correlations		
	Variables Time 1	Adjustment Time 2	Adjustment Time 3
Siblings	Emotional Support	-0.09	-0.10
	Instrumental Support	0.09	0.09
	Informational Support	0.25	0.01
	Conflict	-0.19	-0.14
	Time Together	0.00	0.33
Mothers	Emotional Support	0.32	0.44**
	Instrumental Support	0.24	0.44**
	Informational Support	0.29	0.40*
	Conflict	-0.43*	-0.23
	Time Together	0.19	0.38*
Fathers	Emotional Support	-0.09	-0.17
	Instrumental Support	-0.26	-0.35*
	Informational Support	0.00	-0.10
	Conflict	-0.03	0.14
	Time Together	-0.26	-0.32

* $p < 0.05$, two-tailed. ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed.

Note. $df=31$.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This study explored the process of children's adjustment to their parents' divorce and the influence that sibling relationships had on this process. Past research on children's adjustment has focused on the ways that parents' choices relate to adjustment. This study also lends credence to the idea that parents' support, particularly mothers' support, is critical in children's adjustment. While sibling emotional, instrumental, and informational support was not directly related to adjustment, a variety of forms of sibling support were identified by participants. Participants identified key events, or turning points, to use as a framework for talking about their post-divorce adjustment process. At each turning point, participants described the support or lack of support and communication or lack of communication with their sibling. They also tracked their adjustment at each turning point, which created an overall adjustment trajectory. From the turning points, support types, communication types, and trajectories, categories were created and compared.

Participants' adjustment experiences were framed using turning points. Coding of the turning points revealed 12 key types. The five most frequently reported turning points all involved some sort of change. Two of these, "move" and "change in family composition," dealt with physical changes within the home environment. Two more, "change in contact with non-residential parent" and "change in parent relationship status," focused on the reformation of relationships within the family. A fifth category, "intrapsychic change," involved participants shifting their perceptions of the experience for the better or for the worse. Periods of change were what most commonly stood out to people. Although it is conceivable that periods of change would stand out to anyone whether in divorced or non-divorced families, the events that participants in this study identified generally were attributed directly to the divorce. Children

felt that the changes took place because of the divorce and would not necessarily have happened if the divorce had not happened. Even events like holidays and vacations were interpreted differently because of the divorce. The feelings and unmet expectations that often came as a result of the reformed family state made these events stand out for participants in a way they might not have otherwise.

At each turning point, participants marked the extent to which they felt adjusted (from 0% to 100%). From those adjustment levels, participants mapped their adjustment trajectories. Five trajectories were discovered that closely matched the trajectories discovered in Baxter, et al.'s (1999) study of blended families. "Steady" seemed a more appropriate description in this data for the category Baxter, et al. (1999) called "accelerated," but the categories of "stagnating," "turbulent," and "declining" were similar in both studies. One additional trajectory, "interrupted" was found in the present study. Although blending a family and adjusting to divorce are distinctly different events, they both deal with the reorganization of the family. It is likely that these same trajectories might apply to other forms of family change like the death or birth of a family member. These same patterns may also apply to change situations beyond the family. Future research might examine this possibility.

Somewhat surprisingly, the quantitative data showed no relationship between sibling support and post-divorce adjustment. What was shown was that different types of support appeared together; a family member who provided support typically gave support in multiple forms. The data also showed that participants generally received support from one parent or the other. There was a negative relationship between mother support and father support. When linked to adjustment, participants who received more support from their mothers adjusted better than participants who received support from their fathers.

Divorce scholars have generally set as an ideal the situation where children have an ongoing relationship with both parents following divorce. Maintaining a close relationship with both parents has been proposed as one factor that can decrease signs of negative post-divorce adjustment such as low achievement in school, poor behavior, emotional problems and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Amato, 2001). Continuing contact has also been shown to lessen the degree to which children feel caught, or feel divided loyalties, between their parents (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). However, in this sample, a close ongoing relationship with both parents was rare. More often than not, participants sided with one parent over the other even when they had access to both parents. There were also many instances where the father faded from the children's lives as more time passed after the divorce. If an ongoing relationship with both parents is an unrealistic ideal, it appears that children who spend time with their mothers are more likely to adjust.

Yet the result that children who received more support from their fathers had lower levels of final adjustment was puzzling. Many explanations were probed to try to answer why this might be. Demographic influences were considered. Because a predominantly female sample was used, the possibility that poor adjustment was a product of daughters struggling in fathers' custody or wanting access to unavailable mothers was explored. However, participants with high father support were not all females and only few lived with their fathers full-time. Some lived with their fathers, some with their mothers, and others had joint custody arrangements. The interview transcripts revealed no important commonalities among these cases. Inter-parental conflict was not directly measured, although no prominent themes indicating strong inter-parental conflict emerged from the interview data. Conflicted parent relationships have been linked to poor adjustment in other divorce studies (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Ahrons &

Miller, 1993), which may be one possible explanation. On the other hand, the finding of a negative association between father's instrumental support and final adjustment may simply be an artifact of this sample.

Sibling support was considered to see whether it could aid in adjustment to divorce. Jenkins (1992) found that children who had a close relationship with at least one sibling in a disharmonious home had lower levels of symptomatic behavior. The same relationship was not found in the current study, although symptomatic behavior was not specifically assessed. In this sample, there was no clear relationship between sibling support and adjustment. In the same study by Jenkins (1992), however, it was discovered that children who had good relationships with their mothers also showed lower symptomatic behavior. This finding was replicated in the current study in that children who received certain types of support from their mothers showed higher final adjustment. Perhaps children who have good relationships with their mothers also have good relationships with their siblings and adjust more effectively to family strain. As the correlations between mother and sibling variables showed, instrumental support, informational support, time together, and conflict with mothers were positively related to the same variables with siblings. Therefore, children may benefit from supportive mother and sibling relationships although they perceive the support as coming from their mother. Emotional support from siblings was not correlated with mother emotional support. The emotional support children perceive from their mothers but not their siblings may also lead to adjustment. Additionally, the idea cannot be discounted that children who adjust more easily to their parents' divorce are better able to maintain positive supportive relationships with their family members. The data does not identify causality.

If children adjusted more effectively when they were supported by their mothers, yet sources of mother support and sibling appeared together, why was support from siblings unrelated to adjustment? One answer may be found in the categories discovered in the interview data. Most of the past research on social support and comforting has dealt with overt behaviors and the intentions of support givers (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002). Even in the current study, the goal was to explore the communicative functions of enacted support. However, the implicit nature of sibling support in participants' narratives could not be ignored. There was evidence of the most common categories of social support: emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support (Goldsmith, 2004). Yet the most common sources of support were implicit and symbolic. The most frequently reported forms of support were time together and working toward a common cause. In neither category did siblings offer direct, person-centered comforting messages. Rather, children felt comforted by knowing there was someone there who could relate to their experience. In the case of common cause, children liked having someone working with them toward a common goal or enemy. The perception that they were not alone in their experience was a source of support to siblings.

That siblings felt comfort from the mere continuity of the sibling relationship attests to the taken-for-granted nature of sibling relationships. Sibling relationships are non-voluntary and life-long (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993). As a result, siblings may just expect each other to "be there" rather than to fulfill specific needs. Even siblings in non-divorced families often spend more time together than they do with their parents (Bank & Kahn, 1982). Having a constant companion may become even more important to children as they move between households following divorce. And while sibling relationships change over time, they do not generally show

abrupt or dramatic shifts like spousal and parent/child relationships can during the divorce period. The mere continuity of the relationship may meet certain comforting needs for children.

The questionnaire used for this study may not accurately reflect the types of support that siblings receive from each other. The questionnaire measured only the three types of support most commonly identified in the social support literature (emotional, instrumental, and informational). None of these variables was statistically related to post-divorce adjustment. However, the variable of spending time with siblings approached significance when predicting adjustment at Time 3 ($r = .33, p < .10$). It may be that the more implicit and symbolic forms of support that were emphasized in the interviews are associated with children's adjustment to divorce. Future research might examine this possibility.

The finding from the interviews that children valued companionship from their siblings echoed the findings of Clark, et al. (2008) in their study of children and adolescent comforting strategies. The adolescents in their study preferred companionship over direct supportive messages like sympathy and advice. Because effective support messages are generally believed to be person-centered and delivered with high levels of immediacy (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002), this finding was surprising. Companionship was rated as only moderately person-centered and did not necessarily relate to immediacy (Clark, et al., 2008). Perhaps the types of support that are most often noted in adult relationships are less applicable to children and adolescents. Other less explicit forms of comforting may better capture the types of support that are significant within child peer and sibling relationships.

Another finding that stood out from the data was the vast amount of variety in participants' experiences. Although some participants' sibling relationships showed similar characteristics to others, these characteristics were based around an entirely different set of

turning points and changed differently over time. The time dimension of this study added tremendous complexity as sibling types were analyzed. Not only did these relationships evolve over time, they evolved in different and unpredictable ways.

Dunn, et al. (1994) found in a longitudinal study that sibling relationships remained fairly consistent over time unless there was a major life change within the family. In the case of marital disharmony, they reported that siblings who were already close offered each other substantial support whereas other siblings typically experienced greater conflict (Dunn, et al., 1994). Although examples that support these findings emerged in the current study, there were many alternative relationship types. Only 10 of 34 participants had stable relationships with their sibling across all three time periods. These were not just close relationships that remained close; some relationships were distant and remained distant. Most of the relationships in this sample changed over time, though, and only a few turned into conflicted relationships. Some siblings took on caretaking roles, some became more distant, and others began working together. Many of these changes in relationships can be attributed to changes in circumstances following the divorce. However, it is likely that many also evolved naturally because of changes in development and life stage. It is difficult to tease out how much sibling relationships changed because of the divorce and how much they would have changed on their own.

This study has several limitations, both in the method and in the sample. The critique of the RIT that participants may have inaccurate or diminished recall over time was substantiated by several participants. For instance, some participants had difficulty articulating what they and their siblings talked about at certain turning points. Many believed that they probably did talk about the divorce at certain points in time but could not remember any specifics of the interaction. An older participant referred several times to the fact that the divorce happened 40

years ago and he could not remember details. However, another older participant could remember the exact day, month and year that turning points occurred, although it was over 30 years ago. The events themselves seemed salient and memorable to participants, but the sibling relationship and communication at each point in time seemed largely reconstructed during the interview. While this inability for participants to recall specific instances of support and communication may reflect a limitation of the method, it may also reemphasize the implicit nature of sibling support. Most participants could not articulate specific examples, but rather tried to recreate their feelings and perceptions of the sibling relationship at certain points in time. Inability to identify direct messages may be a byproduct of the indirect forms of sibling support that participants reported receiving.

Like the method, the sample had its advantages and disadvantages. Using the students in upper-division college classes and members of their social networks provided a larger variety of participants than using just college students would have. The range in ages of participants contributed to the breadth of experiences discovered in this research. The use of older and younger participants had its benefits and drawbacks. Older participants had a harder time recalling details in their experience and it is likely that the things they did recall had been reconstructed over time. The important events during the divorce process were put into the context of subsequent life events and participants' perceptions of how they have been impacted by the events. Younger participants were good participants because the divorce experience was fresh for them. However, they did not have the depth of reflection on their experience that older participants did. Many were able to accurately recall minute details of their experience but could not yet see how the experience fit in to the bigger picture of their lives. For many, their story is not yet finished. Therefore, events that are salient to them presently are not events they may

consider to be turning points if they were looking back on their experience later in life. Because of the small sample size and inconsistencies between participants, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population.

Another limitation was the use of only one member of each family. Because participants were reporting from their own perspective, a complete view of the family following divorce was not possible. Comparing sibling experiences, their perceptions of the sibling relationship, and significant turning points could have offered a multi-sided view of sibling relationships following divorce. Genetic and environmental factors both contribute to children's differences in experiencing even the same event (Hetherington, Reiss, & Plomin, 1994). Children may also have completely different interpretations of their relationship with each other (Dunn & Plomin, 1990). Interviewing only one sibling in the family could not capture these differences.

Despite the limitations of this study, several worthwhile contributions were made. The turning points and adjustment trajectories in children's post-divorce adjustment found in this study validated past research on change in family structure. These patterns may extend to other periods of family reformation. What was not found in the present study was a relationship between sibling emotional, instrumental, and informational support and post-divorce adjustment. Evidence of support was seen in the interview data, however. Many of these forms of support were indirect and did not hinge on talking about the divorce. Rather, the ongoing presence of the sibling relationship functioned as support for many. Future research might explore some of the less-explicit forms of social support enacted in sibling relationships. Support typologies built from adult interactions may not be able to fully capture the nature of sibling support relationships.

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APPENDIX A: FAMILY MEMBER INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Family Member Information

Name _____

Participant # _____

Current Age _____

Your approximate age when you learned of your parents' intention to divorce _____

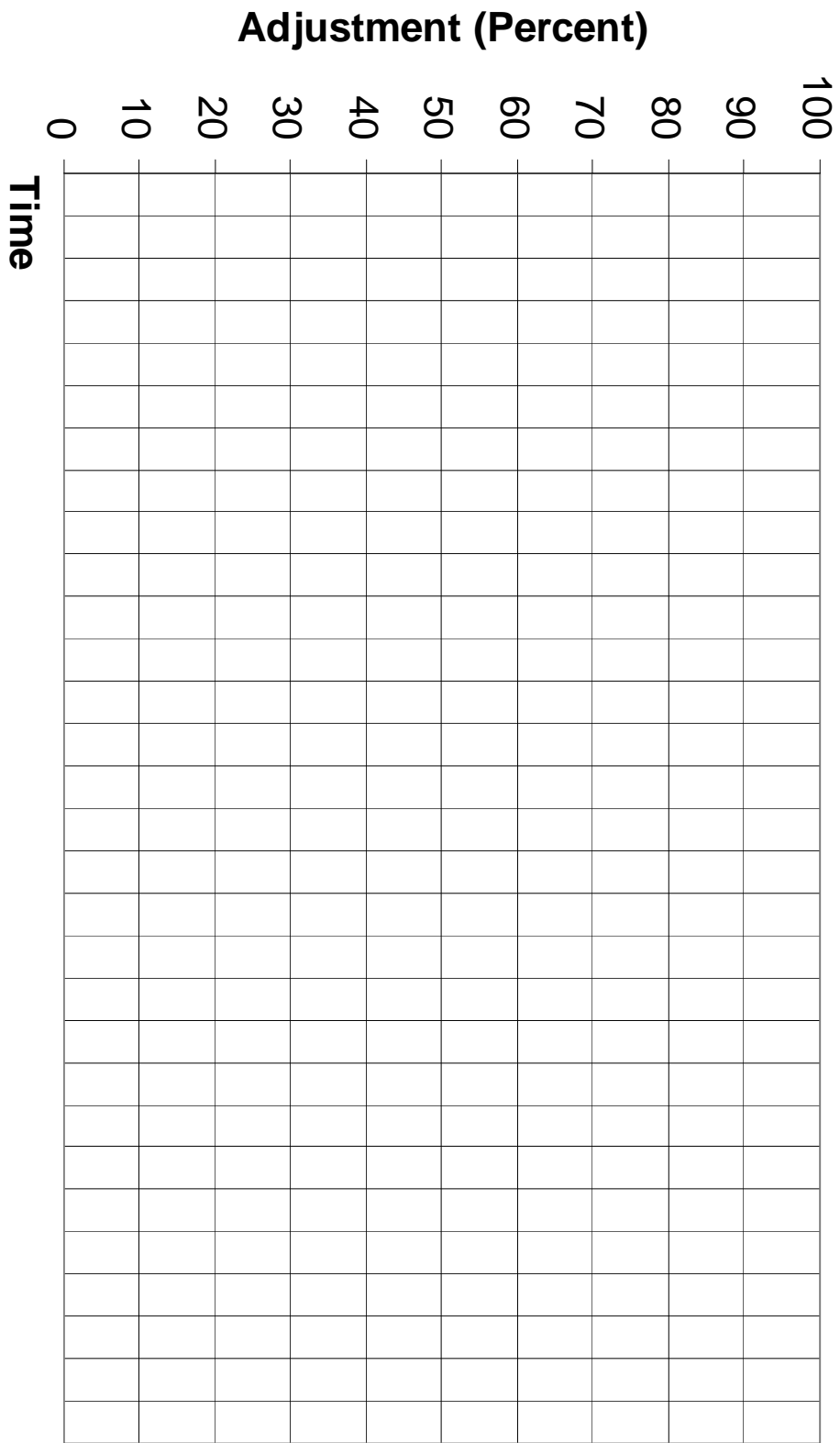
Your approximate age when the divorce finalized _____

Family Members

First Name	Gender	Relationship (ex: mother, brother, step-father, etc.)	Current Age

Custody Arrangement _____

APPENDIX B: BLANK RIT GRAPH



RIT Graph

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview questions

1. What was going on at this turning point?
Can you tell me more about it?
2. Did you communicate to your sibling about the divorce or your parents' relationship?
What sorts of things did you discuss?
3. Did you feel supported by your sibling at this point in time?
If no, how did they show lack of support to you?
If yes, how did they show support to you?

5	argue or disagree with you?	1	2	3	4	5
6	comfort you?	1	2	3	4	5
7	help you understand the changes in your family?	1	2	3	4	5
8	spend time with you?	1	2	3	4	5
9	help you take care of your daily responsibilities?	1	2	3	4	5
10	help you make sense of what was going on between your parents?	1	2	3	4	5
11	have conflict with you?	1	2	3	4	5
12	talk to you or let you talk to him/her?	1	2	3	4	5

In the next two sections, I am interested in your relationship with your parents. This section asks about your **mother**. Remember that you are reporting for the time at a specific turning point, not for your whole relationship.

At this point in time, to what extent did your **mother**:

1	help you feel emotionally supported?	1	2	3	4	5
2	give you information that helped you see your family situation in a new way?	1	2	3	4	5
3	help you with tasks like homework, housework, meal preparation, transportation, etc?	1	2	3	4	5
4	do things with you?	1	2	3	4	5
5	argue or disagree with you?	1	2	3	4	5
6	comfort you?	1	2	3	4	5
7	help you understand the changes in your family?	1	2	3	4	5
8	spend time with you?	1	2	3	4	5
9	help you take care of your daily responsibilities?	1	2	3	4	5

10	help you make sense of what was going on between your parents?	1	2	3	4	5
11	have conflict with you?	1	2	3	4	5
12	talk to you or let you talk to her?	1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the questions one more time, this time for your relationship with your **father**. Remember that you are reporting for the time at a specific turning point, not for your whole relationship.

At this point in time, to what extent did your **father**:

1	help you feel emotionally supported?	1	2	3	4	5
2	give you information that helped you see your family situation in a new way?	1	2	3	4	5
3	help you with tasks like homework, housework, meal preparation, transportation, etc?	1	2	3	4	5
4	do things with you?	1	2	3	4	5
5	argue or disagree with you?	1	2	3	4	5
6	comfort you?	1	2	3	4	5
7	help you understand the changes in your family?	1	2	3	4	5
8	spend time with you?	1	2	3	4	5
9	help you take care of your daily responsibilities?	1	2	3	4	5
10	help you make sense of what was going on between your parents?	1	2	3	4	5
11	have conflict with you?	1	2	3	4	5
12	talk to you or let you talk to him?	1	2	3	4	5