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The Relationship Between Mandatory Divorce Education in Utah and the Level of Postdivorce Parental Conflict

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANDATORY DIVORCE EDUCATION IN UTAH AND THE LEVEL OF POSTDIVORCE PARENTAL CONFLICT

by

Monte N. Criddle

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family and Human Development

Approved:

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

1999
ABSTRACT

The Relationship Between Mandatory Divorce Education in Utah and the Level of Postdivorce Parental Conflict

by

Monte N. Criddle, Master of Science
Utah State University, 1999

Major Professor: Dr. Scot M. Allgood
Department: Family and Human Development

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was an association between current level of conflict between divorced parents and their attendance or nonattendance at the divorce education pilot program. A telephone interview was used to examine current level of postdivorce conflict. The first portion of the telephone interview used questions that were taken from the Family of Origin Scale (FOS). Questions were selected as they related to various stages of divorce. The second portion of the questionnaire obtained sociodemographic data, as well as information regarding relitigation. The telephone interview was administered to 160 individuals who participated in the divorce education pilot program and to 59 individuals who did not participate.

Hypothesis one stated that attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the current level of postdivorce conflict. This hypothesis was
rejected as a statistically significant association between postdivorce conflict and class attendance was demonstrated. Both males and females in the nonattendance group had higher mean conflict scores than the attendance group. Also, females in both groups had higher mean conflict scores than their male counterparts.

Hypothesis two stated that attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the number of custody and visitation legal issues since the initial custody arrangement. Hypothesis two was also rejected as attendance at the divorce education class was found to be weakly associated with whether a subject will return to court or not. A demographic summary for subjects returning to court was also created.

The need for continued research on postdivorce conflict was addressed. The theoretical implications of the study were highlighted, as well as other recommendations concerning the role of marriage and family therapists who work with families experiencing divorce.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Scot M. Allgood, for his advice and support throughout this project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Brent C. Miller and Dr. Kathleen W. Piercy, for their helpful assistance. I am truly appreciative for Roxanne Pfister’s help with the statistical aspects of the project.

I would like to extend a special thanks to Kristine Prince, court program coordinator for the state of Utah, for the help and services she offered in gaining access to our sample. Without her help and cooperation this project would not have been possible. I also want to express appreciation to the interviewers for their help in collecting the data.

Most importantly I thank my wife, Marnie, for her understanding, encouragement, and patience throughout the entire course of this project. I cannot thank her enough.

Monte N. Criddle
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Divorce is one of the most stressful and disrupting events that a family or individual can experience (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Roeder-Esser, 1994). The turmoil involved in parental divorce can be especially troublesome and problematic for children (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Emery, 1982; Hetherington & Camara, 1984; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1980). Petersen and Steinman (1994) stated that while controversy exists as to the exact role divorce plays in the long-term problems of families, most professionals agree that individuals experiencing divorce constitute a population at risk.

Policy makers, clinicians, and social scientists have been concerned with the size of the divorcing population because of the potential problems and stress that divorce creates. Petersen and Steinman (1994) reported that one in every two marriages will end in divorce and 40% of all children born in the 1990s will experience a parental divorce. The authors also state that approximately one million children each year experience a parental divorce. Thus, it is important for helping professionals, and for society in general, to establish preventive and supportive services for this population.

The growing recognition of the negative consequences of divorce has dramatically increased the interest in court-connected educational programs for divorcing parents in recent years (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996; Salem, Schepard, & Schlissel, 1996). The high numbers of divorces in this country have led to increased legislation and court rules which strongly encourage, and often mandate, divorcing
parents to attend some type of divorce education program. These programs are continually gaining more support (Biondi, 1996).

Most of these educational programs attempt to reduce the amount and nature of parental conflict that children are exposed to during divorce in hopes of decreasing the negative impact of postdivorce parental conflict on children (Braver, Salem, Pearson, & DeLuse, 1996; Thoennes & Pearson, 1998). While initial reports in terms of client satisfaction appear positive, research assessing the effectiveness of the programs is not very common and is not always as positive (Arbuthnot, Kramer, & Gordon, 1997; McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999).

Theory

This study examined the relationship between divorce education and postdivorce conflict, using general systems theory concepts. According to Guttman (1991), systems theory implies that systems are organized in a hierarchical fashion. Therefore, “each system belongs to a class of systems, which in turn, is a subsystem of a metasystem” (p. 45). When this view is applied to the family, the entire family system can be conceptualized in smaller subsystems such as the sibling subsystem, parent-child subsystem, and of course, the parental subsystem. As noted earlier, divorce has an impact upon the entire family and all of its subsystems.

When divorce occurs, a major reconfiguration of family boundaries takes place. The change in family structure that the divorce causes often requires the creation of new rules or the reconstruction of old rule systems. This instability and change regarding
boundaries and rules can create hierarchical dilemmas such as a child aligning with one
parent or a child being placed in a parental role. The confusion that results from the
changing boundaries, rules, and hierarchies contributes to postdivorce conflict (Ahrons,
1994; Boss & Greenberg, 1984).

Guttman (1991) stated that the systemic concept of homeostasis is the “tendency
of families and other social systems to maintain a given configurational relationship
among their constituent elements” (p. 44). He noted that one way of maintaining
homeostasis is through feedback. Feedback occurs when “information that results from
a given action is recursively fed back into the system and allows it to regulate its further
activity in a modified manner” (p. 42).

Guttman (1991) stated that two types of feedback exist. The first, positive
feedback, is “information that increases the system’s deviation from its original state”
(p. 42). Postdivorce conflict can be viewed as either positive or negative feedback
depending on the circumstances of the divorce. Postdivorce conflict may be viewed as
positive feedback if it increases the deviation from the system’s original state. For
example, divorcing parents may become so concerned about the postdivorce conflict
that they seek help which decreases the conflict and allows the system to deviate from
the original state of arguing and fighting. In this situation conflict would be viewed as
positive feedback. The second type, negative feedback, is “information that brings the
system back to its original state and decreases deviation” (p. 42). Postdivorce conflict
may also be viewed as serving a negative feedback function. When the couple engages
in conflict, it keeps them in their original state of arguing and fighting. The conflict
decreases the chances of the couple changing or deviating from the original state of the relationship.

Within divorcing families, postdivorce conflict can be viewed as serving a homeostatic function by way of negative feedback. In other words, as the conflict continues between the parents, the family remains in its original state and the chances of changing are reduced. Divorce education can serve as a way of introducing change within the family through positive feedback. For example, the family uses the new information gained through divorce education as a way of perhaps improving the way they communicate or resolve problems, thus increasing the deviation from the original state of conflict.

Definition of Central Concepts

Divorce Education

Divorce education in the state of Utah is defined as a one-time course that runs from 2 to 3 hours in length. Each divorcing parent is required to attend one course. The courses are contracted out to private providers throughout the state who teach the class. Those providers are required to cover the following areas in class: divorce and its impact on children; how the parents can help the children through the divorce process; the stages of growth and development of children and normal reactions from children when their parents divorce; helpful ways to communicate with children about the divorce; the grieving stages common to divorce; the correlation between parental conflict and a child’s adjustment to divorce; helpful ways to share parenting
responsibilities; and potential ways to encourage cooperative behavior with an ex-
spouse.

Postdivorce Conflict

Most researchers agree that there is not only a lack of consensus on a definition of conflict, but also extreme difficulty in ever reaching an agreement (Cahn, 1992; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Straus, 1979). In this study, Straus’s (1979) conceptualization of conflict was used. He has defined conflict as both “the use of verbal and nonverbal acts which symbolically hurt the other, or the use of threats to hurt the other” (p. 77) and also “the use of physical force against another person . . . ” (p. 77). Custody and visitation disputes are often a significant reflection of, or contributor to, postdivorce conflict. In the present study, the incidence of legal proceedings in custody and visitation disputes was used as a measure of postdivorce conflict.

Statement of the Problem

From 1992-94 a divorce education pilot program took place in the state of Utah. One of the goals was to help divorcing parents decrease the amount of parental conflict to their which children are exposed. The participants of that pilot program voluntarily filled out index cards giving permission for someone to contact them at a later date for follow-up research. As of October 1998, these people had not been contacted for any type of follow-up studies. This study consisted of a 4- to 6-year follow-up that was conducted with the participants of the divorce education pilot program.
The problem that this study set out to address is that postdivorce conflict has a negative impact on children, and there is a lack of evaluation research showing the effects of mandatory divorce education programs on lowering postdivorce conflict. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if there was an association between current level of conflict between divorced parents and their attendance or nonattendance at the divorce education pilot program. This will help establish whether or not program participation is associated with level of postdivorce conflict of the parents. The study also examined the relationship between the number of legal proceedings to resolve custody and visitation disputes between the parents and attendance or nonattendance at the divorce education pilot program.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review the development of divorce education in the United States, as well as to discuss some of the salient features of divorce education. The legal aspects, goals, content, and the teaching strategies of divorce education programs will be discussed. Postdivorce conflict and the connection it has to divorce education programs also will be reviewed.

General Overview

The basic purpose of divorce education is to help people make it through the difficult life circumstances and situations that arise as a result of divorce (Braver et al., 1996). Bohannan’s (1970) work on divorce is important in gaining an understanding of the process that people go through when a divorce occurs. Although his work was completed many years ago, it is still widely used today (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Francke, 1983; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; Olson & DeFrain, 1994).

According to Bohannan (1970) there are six nonsequential stages that a person goes through when experiencing a divorce. The first stage is the emotional divorce, which deals with the problem of the deteriorating marriage, the couple growing apart, and predivorce issues. The emotional divorce is the “chain of events and feelings that lead up to divorce” (p. 37). This stage has already occurred by the time individuals go
through a divorce education program. This study focuses on post-divorce issues and will, therefore, not use this particular stage.

The second stage is the legal divorce. This stage addresses the grounds for and legal process of divorce. Once again, because this stage occurs before the postdivorce conflict, it will not be a point of focus in this study. The third stage of divorce is the economic divorce, which deals with money and property. Issues such as child support, property settlements, and alimony payments fall into this area. This particular stage will be one of the points of focus in this study because of its relevance to postdivorce interaction between parents.

The co-parental divorce is Bohannan's (1970) fourth stage. This stage takes into account issues such as custody, visitation, and single-parent homes. Bohannan (1970) stated that "the most enduring pain of divorce is likely to come from the co-parental divorce" (p. 52). Many researchers agree that disputes over custody and visitation are clearly the main issue of conflict for divorcing parents (Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Musetto, 1983). This stage will naturally be one of the focal points of the study. Stage number five is the community divorce, including the changes that occur within friendships and social networks after the divorcee. While it is understood that this stage is an important part of the divorce process, it will not be examined in this study. Because this study focuses specifically on the interaction and relationship between the divorcing parents, stage five is not relevant to the study. The final and most pertinent stage for this study is the psychic divorce. This stage deals with the problem that divorced persons experience of becoming a whole, complete, and
autonomous individual again. Bohannan (1970) stated that when "two people so interlock their old conflicts and solutions....they cannot become aware of them, and hence cannot solve them" (p. 61). Thus, this lack of individual autonomy can continue to create conflict between the two divorced individuals. This stage differs from the emotional divorce stage in that there is more of a focus on postdivorce issues whereas the emotional divorce stage focuses on more on predivorce issues.

According to Bohannan (1970), these six different stages are painful and difficult partly because people often do not know how to handle them. Divorce education is intended to help people learn how to manage these stages more appropriately.

Divorce Education

With the high incidence of divorce in this country, as well as research that shows the potentially harmful effects that divorce can have on children, many courts have implemented programs that provide parents with an opportunity to learn about these harmful effects and how to best manage them (Blaisure & Geasler, 1996). These programs are commonly referred to as divorce education programs.

Over the past few decades divorce education has developed into one of the largest and perhaps most important types of family court programs. Just 15 to 20 years ago there were only one or two such programs, and as recently as 10 years ago there were not even one hundred programs (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996). However, in a recent review of these court-connected programs, Blaisure and Geasler (1996) sent
questionnaires to every county in the United States ($n = 3,073$) inquiring about the existence of divorce education programs. The authors reported that 2,274 questionnaires were returned, showing that as of September 1994 there were at least 541 counties in 42 states that had some form of a divorce education program. Recently, Thoennes and Pearson (1998) commissioned Blaisure and Geasler to update this survey by once again mailing letters to every county in the United States ($n = 3,118$), including new counties that had been established since the previous survey. This follow-up survey indicated that 1,516 counties, 47.9% of all counties, were currently offering some type of divorce education program. This current estimate indicates a 180% increase in divorce education programs in just 4 years. The survey also showed that 68% of the program providers reported starting their program in or after 1998. Another indicator of the rapid development of divorce education programs occurred when over 400 people participated in the first international congress for divorce education, held in 1994 (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996).

In 1976 the first divorce education program was created through a cooperative effort by the Johnson County Mental Health Center and the Tenth Judicial District of the state of Kansas. The program was a weekend workshop that parents and children were ordered to attend. The workshop covered issues such as the grief experienced in divorce, the games that family members play, and effective ways for divorcing parents to communicate with one another. The name of the program was Families In Transition-A Divorce Workshop For Parents and Children (Roeder-Esser, 1994). In 1986 Johnson County passed legislation that made it mandatory for all parents with
minor children who were seeking a divorce to first attend the divorce education workshop. The program eventually became a 2-hour long program called General Responsibilities as Separating Parents (GRASP). The program has since been mandated in several other counties throughout Kansas (Roeder-Esser, 1994).

Biondi (1996) reported that authorization for determining who attends the divorce education programs falls into three categories. The first category is statewide mandatory attendance for divorcing parents. The second category is state-enacted legislation creating authority for either mandatory parent participation in court administrative districts to mandate parents to participate in parent education programs, or discretionary parent participation in court administrative districts in which the court determines which parents shall attend the programs on a case-by-case basis. (p. 82)

The final category is parent education programs that operate according to local court rules. Biondi (1996) stated that “authorization to mandate attendance at parent education programs is on the rise” (p. 90). In accordance with this statement, Thoennes and Pearson (1998) noted that all five of the divorce education programs that they selected for an in-depth study (New Jersey, Connecticut, Michigan, Oklahoma, and Arizona) had mandatory attendance policies. A mandatory attendance policy has been legislated in Utah as well (Kristine Prince, personal communication, September 24, 1998).

Salem et al. (1996) stated that mandatory programs have many advantages. These advantages include ensuring that both parents receive the appropriate
information, showing them that the welfare of children is taken seriously by the courts, and eliminating strategic planning by parents and lawyers so that attendance of the program cannot be used as a tool in court. The authors also noted that mandatory attendance has disadvantages including unnecessarily delaying some divorces, the financial resources required to run a program, and the legal issue of how much power the court should have.

At the first international congress for divorce education in 1994, a study of the content of divorce education programs was conducted by Braver et al. (1996). Questionnaires and pencils were distributed to the 400 participants who attended the luncheon ceremony. Responses were turned in from representatives of 102 currently functioning divorce education programs, revealing that the most common format of the various programs is a single, two-hour session. This session generally consists of a videotape, lecture, and group discussion.

Braver et al. (1996) also found that while many of these programs have specific goals, the overarching goals of divorce education are usually twofold. First, the programs seek to decrease the divorcing parents' reliance on the court system. Secondly, the programs try to inform parents of the effects and consequences of parental conflict on children before full-scale fights develop. Avoiding parental fights is potentially a relief for and a benefit to children adjusting to divorce.

Geasler and Blaisure (1995) noted that divorce education program goals generally fall into three categories. The first category is parent-focused goals. This category includes goals such as increasing communication, reducing conflict, teaching
parenting skills, facilitating divorce adjustment, and teaching about the emotional and behavioral components of divorce. The second category is child-focused goals. This category includes goals such as preventing delinquency, creating a safe environment for children, increasing awareness of the effects of divorce on children, and keeping children out of the middle. The final category is court-focused goals. This category includes goals that seek to reduce litigation and resolve custody issues.

The divorce education program in Utah emphasizes the child-focused category, although there is some overlap with the parent-focused category. The key child-focused goals of the Utah program are (a) to give parents information that will help them support their children’s emotional well-being, (b) to encourage parents to cooperate with each other to minimize the impact of conflict on children, and (c) to create a greater understanding of how and why conflict between parents creates stress for children. The key parent-focused goal, which is also partially child-focused, is to actually help parents decrease conflict.

Salem et al. (1996) noted that making decisions about course content is difficult because there are so many areas that could receive attention. However, Braver and other’s (1996) content survey showed that nearly all programs cover: (a) typical postdivorce reactions of children; (b) different reactions and needs of children of different ages; (c) typical postdivorce reactions of parents; (d) benefits of parental cooperation versus costs of parental conflict; and (e) impact of “brainwashing” children or “badmouthing” the other parent. Custody, visitation, and legal issues were only moderately covered.
Geasler and Blaisure (1998) stated that the teaching strategies in these programs range from passive parental involvement (lecture, handouts, video) to limited parental involvement (discussion, workbooks, self-assessment tools) to active parental involvement (skill building exercises, role plays, self-awareness activities). The authors stated that while the passive and limited involvement strategies have produced positive results and evaluations (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Kramer & Washo, 1993), the active involvement strategy appears to be a more effective strategy for reducing parental conflict and keeping children out of the conflict (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996).

Divorce education, although a relatively new form of family policy, is rapidly developing into one of the most important types of family court programs. There is not one set format that all divorce education programs follow. However, there are commonalities between the various programs such as goals, content, and teaching strategies. In general, divorce education programs are generating positive evaluations from parents and, depending on the teaching strategy that is used, they appear to be successful in reducing parental conflict (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Kramer & Washo, 1993).

The Utah Pilot Program and Current Program

The Utah divorce education program was developed partly in response to a divorce rate that has been around 5.0 divorces per 1,000 individuals for the past decade (Bureau of Economic and Business Research, 1996). The Utah divorce rate, which was 4.6 divorces per 1,000 individuals in 1996, is somewhat higher than the national rate.
which was 4.3 divorces per 1,000 individuals in 1996 (Morgan, Morgan, & Uhlig, 1998). The Utah divorce rate grew from 3.0 divorces per 1,000 individuals in 1950 to as high as 5.4 in 1980, where it has remained for nearly a decade.

According to Kristine Prince (personal communication, September 24, 1998), the current structure of the divorce education program in Utah is exactly the same as it was during the pilot program which ran from 1992-94. As mentioned earlier, the Utah program is child-focused, with some parent-focused overlap. The goals of the pilot program, which continue to be the goals of the current program, were as follows: (a) give parents information which will help them support their children’s emotional well-being; (b) create a greater understanding of how and why conflict between parents creates stress for children and encourage greater effort by parents to decrease conflict; (c) encourage parents to cooperate with each other to minimize the impact of conflict on their children; and (d) encourage parents to understand that children need a continued and meaningful relationship with both parents.

The divorce education classes in Utah are contracted out to private providers. Guidelines are set forth for the providers regarding what must be covered in the classes; however, providers have flexibility in the way that the material is presented. The teaching strategy of the classes in Utah ranges from passive parental involvement to limited parental involvement (Geasler & Blaisure, 1996).

There has only been an informal evaluation of the Utah divorce education program up to this point. Individuals who go through the program fill out an exit evaluation upon completion of the course. Of the first 13, 670 respondents since the
program became mandatory in July of 1994. 92% felt that overall, the course was worthwhile (Kristine Prince, personal communication, September 24, 1998).

This study has gone beyond what is already known about the Utah divorce education program by providing data that show an association between attendance at the divorce education class and lower levels of postdivorce conflict. This study has also identified variables within the class that are associated with lower levels of postdivorce conflict. The new data are useful for legislators, courts, clinicians, divorce education providers, and so forth in their respective areas, as they interact with or work with issues associated with those individuals participating in the classes. This new data can be a means of providing services that are more beneficial for this particular population.

Postdivorce Conflict

Canary et al. (1995) noted that in the literature there is a lack of consensus on the term conflict. This is evident as there are many different definitions of conflict. Terms such as tension, disagreement, stress, interruptions, anger, and negative interpersonal expressions are often used in defining conflict. The authors noted that from a theoretical standpoint, conflict can be approached developmentally, cognitively, or interactionally.

Interactional approaches to conflict “operate from the premise that couple systems are defined by microlevel interaction behavior, typically witnessed in particular sequences” (Canary et al., 1995, p. 17). In other words, interactional approaches look at the way couples communicate, behave, or, as the name implies, interact with one
another. This particular study examined communication and the interaction behavior of divorced couples and therefore viewed conflict from an interactional point of view.

The literature on postdivorce parental conflict is abundant (Cahn, 1992; Canary et al., 1995; Emery, 1982; Hetherington & Tryon, 1989; Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997). Some of the main sources of postdivorce parental conflict are centered on custody, visitation, and child support (Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Musetto, 1983). This literature overwhelmingly supports the stance that postdivorce conflict has a negative impact upon children (Hetherington et al., 1982; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1980; Wallerstein, Demo, & Acock, 1992). According to Emery (1982), the research shows that it is more specifically interparental conflict, rather than the actual parental divorce or separation, that has the most negative impact upon childhood problems and childhood adjustment. Similarly, Mechanic and Hansell (1989) reported that adolescents living in intact families with high conflict had significantly poorer well-being than adolescents in divorced families with low levels of conflict. The authors also reported that high levels of conflict were associated with increases in adolescents’ depressed mood, anxiety, and physical symptoms over time.

As part of a 10-year study conducted with 131 children from 60 divorcing families in California, Wallerstein, Corbin, and Lewis (1988) found that 5 years after the divorce, the responses of parents and children to the divorce showed that children’s adjustment was closely associated with the manner in which the divorcing parents had managed their conflict.
In a 6-month outcome evaluation of the divorce education program in Athens County of southeastern Ohio, Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) asked 131 parents to retrospectively rate the amount of conflict their children were exposed to during the three months prior to the class. The parents were then asked to predict the amount of conflict their children would be exposed to during the next 3 months. The authors used a 5-point scale and found the level of conflict exposure prior to the class to be 2.67 (1 = none, 2 = a little, 3 = a fair amount, etc.). The projected level of conflict exposure after the class was 1.80. In the 6-month follow-up the authors found that the parents reportedly achieved the projected decrease with postclass conflict exposure level reported at 1.76. Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996) stated that while “parents reportedly were able to achieve their goal of reducing the amount of conflict to which their children were exposed, this does not mean that conflict was avoided in interactions between the parents” (p. 77). Nonetheless, they stated that these findings are an encouraging sign “that the program results in lowered exposure of children to parental conflict...” (p. 79).

While it is difficult to achieve consensus about exactly what conflict is, there is consensus that postdivorce parental conflict has a negative impact on children. Parental conflict appears to have a more negative impact on children than does the actual divorce or separation. This is manifested in children’s depression, anxiety, overall well-being, and adjustment to the divorce. Initial signs are encouraging that divorce education programs have an effect on reducing postdivorce parental conflict, which could be expected to decrease children’s divorce-related emotional and behavioral problems.
Custody and Visitation

Two of the most important child rearing issues that must be addressed when a divorce occurs are commonly referred to as custody and visitation. Emery (1982) stated that "child custody encompasses determinations about children’s primary residence, as well as about which parent shall have primary parental authority" (p. 72). He also noted that "visitation involves a secondary determination about how noncustodial parents will spend time with their children" (p. 72).

Many researchers agree that disputes over custody and visitation are the main issues of conflict for divorcing parents (Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Musetto, 1983). Regarding divorce education, most studies show that these programs have had a positive impact in lowering the rates of relitigation involving the issues of custody and visitation (Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Di Bias, 1996; Zibbell, 1992).

Summary

Postdivorce parental conflict appears to have a negative impact upon children. Divorce education programs are quickly becoming a common method that family courts use to help families manage the difficulties associated with divorce. Divorce education is geared towards reducing parental conflict and minimizing its effect on children. Some of the most common sources of postdivorce parental conflict are the issues of custody and visitation. Divorce education programs are intended to reduce the rate of relitigation over these issues.
Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis One: Attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the current level of postdivorce conflict.

Null Hypothesis Two: Attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the number of custody and visitation legal issues since the initial custody arrangement.
CHAPTER III

METHODS

Research Design

This study was based on quantitative measurement and analysis. A sample of individuals who attended Utah’s divorce education pilot program was compared with a sample of individuals who did not attend the program. Comparisons were made between these two groups to assess differences or similarities in sociodemographic factors, the level of postdivorce parental conflict, and the number of legal proceedings that have occurred since the divorce. Random selection of the two samples was possible; however, random assignment was not possible because the two groups had already been created. Because of this, the study is not experimental, and the research design for this study is classified as quasi-experimental. The study employs a static group comparison. The comparison group did not go through the divorce education program, nor did they have the option of doing so. Thus, a nonequivalent control group design was used (Miller, 1986).

Sample

The study was based on two sample groups. One group consisted of 160 randomly selected, divorced individuals who participated in the divorce education pilot program in Salt Lake and Utah Counties from 1992-94. Of the 160 individuals, 58 were male and 102 were female. The sample was drawn from these two counties because
they are the only counties that offered the divorce education pilot program during that
time period. The other group consisted of 59 individuals whose names were taken from
available court records in Washington (n = 3), Cache (n = 6), Davis (n = 13), and Weber
(n = 37) counties. These individuals also divorced during 1992-94, but did not attend
the divorce education program. The divorce education program was not available in
any of these counties during 1992-94. These individuals were selected because of the
availability of their phone numbers on the court records. Of the 59 individuals in this
group, 34 were male and 25 were female. Both groups also met the criterion of having
dependent children during 1992-94. Table 1 is an overview of demographic
information for both groups. Both groups were rather similar in their make-up. The
group that did not participate in the class had fewer children. Interestingly, females in
both groups reported a higher number of yearly contacts with their ex-spouses than the
males did. It is not known whether this is a result of gender differences, a feature of the
particular population that was accessed, or attributed to some other factor.

Measurement

A telephone interview was used to collect the data. The interview consisted of
two portions, the conflict measure portion and the sociodemographic data portion.
Appendix A contains the telephone interview used for the group that participated in the
divorce education pilot program. Appendix B contains the telephone interview used for
the group that did not attend a divorce education class.
### Table 1

**Summary of Sample Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participation in class</th>
<th>No participation in class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male (n=58)</td>
<td>Female (n=102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>41.09</td>
<td>38.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>8.41</td>
<td>8.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of children</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of years married</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>9.48</td>
<td>10.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>7.40</td>
<td>8.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of contacts per year with ex-spouse</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td>43.53</td>
<td>75.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td>73.28</td>
<td>117.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conflict Measure**

The first portion of the telephone interview used questions that were taken from the Family of Origin Scale (FOS; Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine, 1985). Questions were selected as they related to Bohannan’s (1970) various stages of divorce. Bohannan’s work was used as it gives a thorough overview of the stages people go through during divorce.
The FOS is a scale that consists of 40 items based on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The Likert scale ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale was designed to “reliably measure perceived levels of autonomy and intimacy’s in one’s family of origin” (Hovestadt et al., 1985). For this study the items on the scale were modified to focus on autonomy from and intimacy with one’s ex-spouse.

The FOS is divided into concepts of autonomy and intimacy. Within each of these two concepts there are five constructs. The questions that come from these constructs address issues such as conflict, trust, responsibility, respect, and empathy.

Based on Bohannan’s (1970) six stages, 10 items were selected from the FOS that were deemed most relevant to the study, and to keep the interview brief. The scale that was used in this study used five questions that were selected from the autonomy concept and five questions that were selected from the intimacy concept. The questions come from 6 of the 10 constructs. The six constructs that are represented are 1. clarity of expression, 2. responsibility, 3. respect for others, 4. openness to others, 5. conflict resolution, and 6. empathy.

The reliability of the FOS was tested in two ways. First, a test-retest reliability coefficient of .97 ($p < .001$) was obtained on 41 graduate psychology students over the span of 2 weeks. Test-retest coefficients for the 20 items of the autonomy concept ranged from .39 to .88 with a median of .77; test-retest coefficients for the 20 items of the intimacy concept ranged from .46 to .87 with a median of .73. Reliability was tested in a second way by obtaining a Cronbach’s alpha of .75 and a Standardized Item alpha...
of .97. These two statistics were obtained in an independent study of 116 undergraduate students (Hovestadt et al., 1985).

Hovestadt et al. (1985) noted two studies that have tested the validity of the FOS. The first study, which tested construct validity, used the FOS to examine the way male members of alcohol-distressed and non-alcohol-distressed families perceive health in the family of origin. A significant difference, $t(48) = 3.20, p < .01$, in perceived health of the family of origin was revealed between men in non-alcohol-distressed marriages ($x = 140.24$) and men in alcohol-distressed marriages ($x = 119.76$). The second study, which tested concurrent validity, used the FOS and the Healthy Family Functioning Scale (HFFS) with subjects who were married and living in a household with their spouse and at least one child under 18. This study showed a significant correlation between FOS scores of perceived health in the family of origin and the perceived health in the current family, $r(169) = .48, p < .01$. Based on the results of these studies, there is evidence which provides validity for the FOS.

The three stages from Bohannan’s (1970) work that were determined to be most relevant were the economic, co-parental, and psychic divorce stages. These stages were selected because they were identified by Bohannan (1970) as being the stages most closely associated with conflict during divorce. The economic divorce was assessed by two questions that address child support and alimony payments. There were two questions that assess the co-parental stage. These two questions deal with child custody/visitation and issues such as discipline, holidays, and rules. The psychic
divorce was assessed by the 10 questions that were taken from the FOS (Hovestadt et al., 1985).

A reliability estimate for the FOS questions used in this study, that was based on the responses of the subjects, produced a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (α=.84). Based on this information, the study’s results can be interpreted with relative certainty as to the internal consistency of the instrument used.

Sociodemographic Data

The second portion of the telephone interview was used to obtain sociodemographic data such as age, gender, number of children from the marriage, length of marriage, remarriage status, and how long after the divorce the individual remarried. There were also five questions inquiring about the number of times legal proceedings have been initiated by either spouse to address issues related to the divorce (e.g., child support, child custody and/or visitation, alimony, protective orders, etc.). This information was used as a way of operationalizing the dependent variable of postdivorce conflict.

In addition, the individuals who participated in the divorce education class were asked three additional questions. These questions addressed whether the subject’s ex-spouse attended a divorce education class, how the subject rated the written material received at the class, and their overall rating of the helpfulness of the class (see Appendix A).
Procedures

In 1992-94 there were 23,050 divorces in the state of Utah (11,334 in 1993 and 11,716 in 1994). During that same time period there were 11,235 divorces in 3rd District Court in Salt Lake County (5,424 in 1993 and 5,811 in 1994). In 4th District Court in Utah County, there were 3,025 divorces during this time period (1,521 in 1993 and 1,504 in 1994). In these two counties where the divorce education program was offered from 1992-94, there were 14,260 divorces, well over half of all divorces in the state. Of those 14,260 divorces, an estimated 10,000 people took part in the divorce education pilot program. Of the 10,000 who participated in the program, approximately 6,000 individuals voluntarily filled out index cards so that they could be contacted at a later date for a follow-up study. There were no other counties throughout the state of Utah during 1992-94 where state-approved divorce education programs were offered.

A group of six interviewers was selected by advertising this research project in undergraduate courses. These volunteer interviewers were all undergraduate students at Utah State University majoring in psychology or family and human development. The interviewers were trained by the investigators in the procedures of telephone interviewing (Dillman, 1978). The issue of confidentiality was explained to the interviewers and all were required to sign a statement of confidentiality (see Appendix C). Also, all interviewers were informed and trained in the procedures for the protection of human subjects, which will be discussed in the following section. The interviewers were allowed to count the time spent conducting interviews towards
practicum or independent study credit in their various majors. Interviewers were also compensated financially by the state for the time spent conducting interviews.

The sample group of individuals who participated in the pilot program was randomly selected from the estimated population of 6,000 persons who completed index cards. The target number for the sample group was 200. Thus, all available cards were randomly organized and a marker was placed at every 30th card. The telephone interviewer then pulled the card for the individual at marker number one, two, three, and so forth, and called the listed phone number. If that individual was not available, the interviewer then called the individual on the first card behind marker number one, two, three, and so forth. If that individual was not available either, the interviewer then called the individual on the first card in front of marker number one, two, three, and so forth. This process continued until a subject was reached by telephone. The telephone interviewer used the above-mentioned sociodemographic data sheet to collect the necessary information. The interviewer then verbally administered the Conflict Measure over the phone. Each interview lasted about 5 to 7 minutes. According to Dillman (1978), telephone interviews are most effective when they do not become so long that the respondent loses interest and terminates the interview.

The sample group of divorced individuals who did not attend the divorce education program was selected from court records in Cache, Davis, Washington, and Weber Counties based on the availability of their phone number. They were also contacted via telephone by an interviewer. The telephone interviewer used the above-
mentioned sociodemographic data sheet to collect the necessary information and administered the Conflict Measure over the phone.

Protection of Human Subjects

All participants were given an explanation of the purposes and procedures of this study. They were informed that the study, based on their responses, had the potential of improving the divorce education program or correcting possible problems of the current program. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and they would not be penalized for refusing to participate or for withdrawing at any time during the study.

They were notified that if they began to experience any emotional distress, they were free to withdraw. Interviewers were given a list of family support services to which the subject could be referred should the need arise. Participants were informed that in answering the questions posed to them, they were giving their informed consent to use the information in the study.

The participants were informed that they would have 27 questions read to them, which would take about 5-10 minutes to answer. Participants were also informed that their responses would be treated in strict confidence. They were informed that their identity would be coded and would not be associated with any published results. They were informed that all material and information would be kept in a locked file. Participants were also informed that approximately 400 individuals would be involved in the study. Finally, participants were given the office phone number of the faculty
advisor for this study. Participants were informed that they could call if they had any questions, concerns, or problems regarding the study.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Null Hypothesis One

**Null hypothesis one: attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the current level of postdivorce conflict.** Null hypothesis one was analyzed by using analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). ANCOVA was used because this study employs a continuous level dependent variable (postdivorce conflict) and the effect of the covariates (length of marriage and number of children) on the dependent variable had to be adjusted for. After adjusting for the covariates, the significance of the independent variables (gender and class attendance) in predicting the dependent variable was examined. Postdivorce conflict, which was the dependent variable, was analyzed by using a 2 x 2 box with gender and class attendance. These two variables, gender and class attendance, are both independent, nominal level variables.

The analysis showed that the nonattendance group had a higher mean conflict score (M = 39.83) than the attendance group (M = 36.78). Table 2 shows that both males and females in the nonattendance group have higher mean conflict scores than the attendance group. Also, females in both groups had higher mean conflict scores than their male counterparts. The length of marriage and the number of children were used as covariates. These two moderating variables are both interval level variables. The association between postdivorce conflict, gender, class attendance, length of marriage, and number of children was analyzed by using the E-scores (see Table 3).
Table 2

Mean Conflict Scores of Males and Females in Attendance and Nonattendance Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>36.44</td>
<td>36.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>9.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No class attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>38.02</td>
<td>42.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>7.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows that there was no association between postdivorce conflict and gender, length of marriage, and number of children. However, there was a statistically significant association between postdivorce conflict and class attendance. This association was significant at the .01 level. Despite this association, the R-squared for the model is .05, showing that only 5.8% of the variance is accounted for.

Since class attendance helped to explain postdivorce conflict, a follow-up analysis was performed. A regression was used to determine which variables were associated with the divorce education class having an impact on postdivorce conflict. Regression was used because the study employs a continuous level dependent variable and the independent variables used in the regression were both nominal level and continuous level. The independent variables that were regressed against postdivorce
Table 3

ANCOVA for Postdivorce Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>254.87</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>215.94</td>
<td>2.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>227.93</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class attendance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>594.10</td>
<td>8.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S within-group error</td>
<td>213</td>
<td>(73.30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent mean square errors. S=subjects. *p < .01.

Conflict were gender, whether the ex-spouse attended a divorce education class, how subjects rated the helpfulness of the class, how subjects rated the helpfulness of the written material they received, and the amount of contact with the ex-spouse throughout the year. The stepwise method was used in the regression.

Table 4 shows the results of the regression for both models. In the first model, spouse attendance was statistically significant. In the second model, the helpfulness of the written material was also statistically significant. Despite this association, the $R^2$-squared for model two is .04, showing that only 4.6% of the variance is accounted for. However, hypothesis one was rejected because the analysis did show an association between attendance at the divorce education program and the current level of postdivorce conflict.
Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Divorce

Education Class Impact on Postdivorce Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse attendance</td>
<td>-3.48</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse attendance</td>
<td>-3.82</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written material</td>
<td>-1.42</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $R^2 = .02$ for Model 1; $R^2 = .04$ for Model 2. *p < .05.

Null Hypothesis Two

Null hypothesis two: Attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the number of custody and visitation legal issues since the initial custody arrangement. The second way conflict was analyzed was through discriminant analysis. Discriminant analysis was used to analyze this hypothesis because the dependent variable, which was whether or not the subjects had been back to court, is a dichotomous level variable and the independent variables were continuous and dichotomous level variables. Discriminant scores were computed for the variables
of class attendance and number of children to predict which of these variables might be associated with the subjects returning to court.

The discriminant analysis produced a canonical correlation of .19 between the dependent variable and the independent variables. This correlation suggests that these variables are only somewhat helpful in determining whether a subject will return to court or not. The discriminant function also generated a Wilks’ Lambda of .93 with a .01 level of significance. These numbers also suggest that the variables are somewhat predictive of subjects who return to court.

In discriminant analysis, the two independent variables together create a function that predicts whether or not subjects will go back to court. Correlations were created between the independent variables and the function itself. The correlation between attendance at the divorce education class and the function was -.53. This suggests that in the presence of both independent variables, there is decrease in the incidence of going back to court for those who have attended the divorce education class. The correlation between number of children and the function was .94. This suggests that in the presence of both independent variables, there is increase in the incidence of going back to court as the number of children increases.

Table 5 shows the classification results for the predictions of subjects going back to court and for subjects not going back to court, according to the function. When interpreting these numbers that were generated by the discriminant analysis, it is important to note that only 57.5% of the original grouped cases were correctly
Table 5

Classification Results for Predicting Relitigation of Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual group membership</th>
<th>Predicted group membership</th>
<th>Not been to court</th>
<th>Been to court at least once</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not been to court</td>
<td>74 (63.2%)</td>
<td>43 (36.8%)</td>
<td>117</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to court at least once</td>
<td>50 (49%)</td>
<td>52 (51%)</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>219</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

classified. It is also important to note that the model is more efficient at predicting those who do not go back to court than it is at predicting those who do go back to court.

Since attendance at the divorce education class and number of children were somewhat associated with relitigation, a summary of the demographics for subjects returning to court was created. Subjects were divided into three groups: (1) those who had not been back to court; (2) those who had been back to court one to four times; and (3) those who had been back to court five times or more. Table 6 shows the results of that summary.

Individuals who had been back to court five times or more were slightly younger than their counterparts who had never been back to court or who had been back to court less than five times (see Table 6). These individuals had also been married for a slightly shorter period of time than their counterparts (see Table 6).

The demographic summary showed a substantial difference in the number of contacts per year with ex-spouses between the three different groups. In particular, those individuals who had not been back to court had approximately 32 more contacts
Table 6

Sociodemographic Factors for Subjects Who Relitigate Compared to Subjects Who Do Not Relitigate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of times subjects have been back to court</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Number of years married</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of contacts per year with ex-spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not been to court</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>10.37</td>
<td>41.22</td>
<td>77.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>8.85</td>
<td>120.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to court 1-4 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>10.51</td>
<td>41.11</td>
<td>46.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>7.95</td>
<td>85.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to court 5 or more times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>40.09</td>
<td>44.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>9.02</td>
<td>8.68</td>
<td>75.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

per year with their ex-spouses than did the two groups who had returned to court. This finding seems to suggest an association between fewer number of contacts per year with the ex-spouse and a greater likelihood of relitigation. Because of this large difference a follow-up ANOVA was performed. This ANOVA produced no statistically significant results regarding the differences in number of contacts per year (df = 2, MS = 8.83, p =
This failure to produce statistically significant results is most likely explained by the large standard deviations for the three different groups (see Table 6).

Like hypothesis one, hypothesis two was also rejected. The hypothesis was rejected because an association between attendance at the divorce education program and lower rates of relitigation was shown. However, the association for the second hypothesis was weaker than the association that was established for the first hypothesis.
CHAPTER V
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Results from this study have shown that attendance at a divorce education program is associated with lower levels of postdivorce conflict and weakly associated with the number of legal proceedings initiated by ex-spouses after the divorce. The following is a critical review of the findings in relation to sample and measurement issues. Further observations about the hypotheses are presented, as well as the limitations of this study. Implications of these results in relation to intervention efforts designed to reduce postdivorce conflict also are presented.

Methodological Summary

This study was designed to evaluate the association between current level of conflict between divorced parents and their attendance or nonattendance at the divorce education pilot program. Previous studies have shown an association between postdivorce conflict and attendance at a divorce education program (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996), with individuals attending the class reporting lower levels of postdivorce conflict than individuals who did not attend a class. Research has also shown that disputes over custody and visitation are clearly the main issue of conflict for divorcing parents (Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Musetto, 1983). In regards to divorce education, most studies show that these programs are related to lower rates of relitigation involving the issues of custody and visitation (Arbuthnot et
al., 1997; Di Bias, 1996; Zibbell, 1992). The current research project was an attempt to clarify this association by looking at factors such as gender, length of marriage, number of children, and incidence of relitigation.

Summary of Findings

The current study was designed to analyze the effectiveness of divorce education programs. Specifically, the study set forth to look at two different hypotheses.

**Null hypothesis one: Attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the current level of postdivorce conflict.** The first null hypothesis was rejected. A statistically significant association was demonstrated between attendance at the divorce education class and the current level of postdivorce conflict. This is consistent with the findings of Arbuthnot and Gordon (1996), who showed that parents who had attended a divorce education class were able to achieve the goal of reducing the amount of conflict to which their children were exposed. In their study, the authors had parents predict the amount of conflict their children would be exposed to in the months following participation in a divorce education class. This task may be viewed as an actual intervention. The actual task of predicting the amount of conflict may help parents control their own level of conflict. This task is something that could be incorporated into current divorce education programs, and seems deserving of future research.

The association between class participation and current level of conflict is also consistent with previous research, which concludes that divorce education programs are
beneficial and have a positive impact on parents (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; Arbuthnot et al., 1997; Arbuthnot & Kramer, 1998; Kramer & Washo, 1993).

One explanation for this association is that the educational nature of the class helps divorcing parents to decrease the level of conflict between them. Another explanation may be that when individuals participate in the class, they come away with a better understanding of the negative effects of postdivorce conflict on children. This may indicate that these individuals are able to implement some of the information they have learned during the class in a way that helps reduce the conflict between them and their ex-spouses. Despite this apparent success of the divorce education program, it must be noted that only a small portion of the variance was accounted for ($R^2 = .05$).

The regression that was performed to help determine which variables associated with the divorce education class had the biggest impact on postdivorce conflict produced two interesting results. However, caution must be used when interpreting these results because of the low level of variance that was accounted for ($R^2 = .04$). One variable that achieved statistical significance in the regression was both spouses attending the class. This does not necessarily mean that they attended the class together, but that both spouses simply attend the class at some point in time. The state of Utah already requires both spouses to attend the divorce education program. In a recent review of literature on divorce education programs, no studies were identified as having previously noted this finding. This may suggest that this finding is a new contribution to the divorce education literature. When both parents participate in the class, they can both work on implementing the new information into the family, rather than just one
parent trying to do this. It may also indicate that both parents are better able to discuss the conflict issue with more informed points of view. This finding might also suggest that when both spouses attend the class, they are more responsible than parents who do not attend the class, and are therefore more likely to work at reducing conflict anyway.

The other variable in the regression that achieved statistical significance was the written material that is handed out during the divorce education class. Similar to the previous finding, no studies in the review of literature were identified as having previously noted this finding. Thus, it may be suggested that this information is also a new contribution to divorce education research. This finding, like the previous, might also suggest that when divorcing spouses are armed with helpful information regarding divorce, conflict, and children, they are able to use the information in a way that reduces the conflict between them. The written material, if kept in the home, may also serve as a visual reminder of the topics discussed and learned in the class.

**Null hypothesis two: Attendance at the divorce education program will not be associated with the number of custody and visitation legal issues since the initial custody arrangement.** Results of testing the second null hypothesis were not as clear as the first. The discriminant analysis that was performed suggested that class attendance was only somewhat helpful in predicting whether a subject would return to court or not. A moderate correlation was created between the function and attendance at the divorce education class ($r = -.53$). This correlation suggests that in the presence of both independent variables, there is a decrease in the incidence of relitigation for those individuals who have attended the divorce education class. This is somewhat consistent
with the findings of Arbuthnot et al. (1997), which showed that 2 years after participating in a divorce education program, parents who had attended the program had relitigated less than half as often as those parents who had not participated; however, the findings of the current study are not nearly as strong as the findings just noted. It should be noted, however, that the findings of Arbuthnot et al. (1997) involved a 2-year follow-up whereas the findings of the current study involved a 6-year follow-up.

There are a few explanations for this finding. First, it would appear that once again, the educational nature of the class may give the parents the resources needed to help them avoid returning to court. The parents may also be more highly motivated to avoid relitigation over issues involving the children because of the emphasis that is placed on children during the classes. However, similar to the first hypothesis, caution must be used when interpreting these results because of the low correlations. Also, it is important to remember that only 57.5% of the cases were correctly classified (been back to court or not been back to court) in this analysis.

A stronger correlation was created between the function and the number of children \( (r = .94) \). However, the same cautions should apply with this correlation as well. This correlation suggests that in the presence of both variables, the incidence of relitigation increases as the number of children increases. This correlation might be explained by the simple fact that as the number of children increases in the family, the amount of child support also increases. A parent with only one child who is not receiving child support from the ex-spouse might be able to get by financially without the support. However, a parent with several children who is not receiving child support
will most likely have a more difficult time paying the bills and providing food, clothing, and so forth for the children. Thus, the parent with more children might be expected to be more likely to return to court. This correlation may also be a reflection that the couple was married longer and had built up more animosity toward one another.

The demographic summary that was created to describe those individuals who returned to court shed little light on the issue of relitigation. In a review of literature, no research had been done on these particular demographic characteristics and their relation to relitigation. Thus, the findings that come from this demographic summary may be considered as new contributions to divorce education research.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding that came from the demographic summary is that which focuses on the amount of yearly contact between ex-spouses. The mean number of contacts during the year between ex-spouses who had never been back to court ($M = 77.50$) was substantially higher than that for ex-spouses who had been back to court one to four times ($M = 46.53$) and even higher than those who had been back to court five times or more ($M = 44.51$). Based on these data, it appears that conflict levels are lower for divorced partners with a higher amount of contact during the year than it is for divorced partners who have less contact. This may indicate the obvious, which is divorced partners with high levels of conflict and relitigation may not like to interact with one another as much as those with lower levels of conflict. Thus, high conflict couples have a lower amount of contact with one another than the lower conflict couples. However, it may also indicate a very important need for divorcing partners to
keep a line of communication open between the two of them in order to avoid possible conflict-provoking misunderstandings.

If two people dislike one another, their desire for contact is not going to be very high. However, if divorced parents are not in contact with one another, the opportunity for misunderstanding increases and the opportunity to discuss issues relating to the children decreases. This phenomenon might contribute to higher incidences of ex-spouses relying on the courts to solve disagreements rather than trying to solve the disagreements themselves. This problem could be addressed in divorce education classes by focusing on positive ways ex-spouses could communicate about issues regarding the children even though they may not like being in contact with one another.

Implications

With the findings of this study in mind, the implications for research and clinical practice regarding divorce education programs will be discussed.

Research Implications

Future research should address the issue of an agreed-upon definition of conflict, as well as developing a standardized measure used specifically for measuring postdivorce conflict. One of the problems regarding current divorce education research is that many different forms of instrumentation are being used. This makes it difficult to compare results from various studies. One problem encountered in this study was that it was difficult to even find a measure which focused on postdivorce conflict. This
type of undertaking would benefit from a cooperative effort between the various researchers who are currently studying divorce education programs. Better agreement about measurement of postdivorce conflict would allow researchers to differentiate between the different styles and degrees of conflict that are occurring in divorced families. This would enable divorce education programs to focus on the most problematic areas. A well developed measure of postdivorce conflict would also increase the reliability and validity of future divorce education research.

Another important consideration for future research is a focus on qualitative research. The current study has shown that there is some association between participation in a divorce education program and lower levels of postdivorce conflict; however, this study was unable to identify why this association exists. A future study with a strong qualitative component might be more effective at identifying the factors contributing to this association. Qualitative studies also could give psychotherapists and divorce education providers direction in helping ex-spouses reduce conflict and develop a more cooperative approach to postdivorce parenting.

In Utah, it is now mandatory for all divorcing individuals who have dependent children to attend the divorce education program. Because of this, there is no longer a comparison group of divorced individuals with children who have not attended the class. This current study could be replicated, however, by conducting pre- and posttests with those individuals attending the class. The conflict measure that was used for this study could be employed along with a strong qualitative component to produce some very valuable information.
This study only looked at a few of the variables that might be associated with postdivorce conflict. Future research should focus on examining more variables to help in predicting postdivorce conflict. Variables to examine could include an individual’s personality style, a couple’s level of predivorce conflict as compared to the level of postdivorce conflict, whether the divorce was initiated by the husband or the wife, and whether or not an affair was involved in the divorce. These are just a few of many variables that could be included in future research.

Finally, it would be wise for future research to focus on the perspective of the children in divorced families. In the review of literature for this project, research with observations from children was very rare. Because the focus of most divorce education programs is to reduce the negative impact divorce, and more importantly postdivorce conflict, has on children, it would make sense to find out what the children are thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Measuring child outcomes would be rather difficult because of a lack of access to them, but it is not an impossible task.

**Clinical Implications**

Thoennes and Pearson (1998) reported that divorce education “does not revolutionize relationships between divorcing parents” (p. 105). It would also be naive to think that divorce education programs can address all of the ills and problems associated with divorce. Likewise, the results of this study should be interpreted cautiously. However, there are some indicators that support some general implications for intervention efforts with divorcing individuals.
As stated earlier, research has shown that postdivorce conflict has an overall negative impact upon children. (Hetherington et al., 1982; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Long et al., 1988; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1980; Wallerstein et al., 1992) including childhood adjustment (Emery, 1982; Wallerstein et al., 1988), childhood problems (Emery, 1982), and overall well-being, depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms (Mechanic & Hansell, 1989). Thus, it becomes very important to determine the types of divorce education programs that are most effective in helping divorced parents decrease the level of conflict between them.

The findings of this study have shown an association between attendance at a divorce education program and lower levels of postdivorce conflict between parents. Fortunately, this issue has already been addressed in the state of Utah by the passage of legislation which mandates that all divorcing individuals who have dependent children must attend the divorce education program. It may be helpful at this point in time for the state of Utah to examine how many of these divorcing individuals actually attend the class, and how judges follow up with those individuals who do not attend. In other words, are there divorcing individuals who slip through the cracks who may benefit from attending the class? This study also showed a decrease in the levels of postdivorce conflict when both parents attended the divorce education program, rather than just one parent. This issue has also been addressed by the mandatory attendance law in Utah and is being incorporated into the current program. This finding also has systemic implications for therapists. When both parents have the same experience of attending the divorce education class and are armed with the same new information, they can both
work on implementing the new information into the family. This places responsibility on both parents rather than just one. The new information is used as a way of helping the relationship deviate from its original state of arguing and fighting, and thus conflict is reduced. Therapists may help divorced parents work towards more of a cooperative effort at implementing the new information for the benefit of their family.

The findings of this study also showed an association between written material being handed out during divorce education programs and lower levels of conflict. This finding may indicate the importance of bibliotherapy (the practice of clinicians assigning books and written material for clients to read) in working with divorcing individuals. Pardeck (1997) has suggested that self-help books and written material can be used as valuable tools to complement other treatment techniques. When individuals read about topics that are applicable to their lives, they may be more inclined to remember or use the material than they would be if someone just told it to them. Once again, the state of Utah has already addressed this finding by including and handing out written material in divorce education classes.

The results of this study indicated that females reported the highest levels of postdivorce conflict (see Table 2). This raises a question regarding the gender of individuals who are going through the divorce process. Are the higher conflict scores associated with gender differences, or are they linked to women’s frustrating experiences with the court system, difficulty in obtaining child support, and/or the greater responsibility that women often have in raising the children after a divorce as described by Musetto (1983)? Regardless of the answer, clinicians and professionals
who are providing divorce education classes should be aware of possible gender differences and take the steps necessary to ensure that the needs and concerns of all participants are being addressed.

This study did not produce very strong findings indicating an association between attendance at divorce education programs and lower rates of relitigation. This is somewhat disturbing, as returning to court can be a very stressful and conflict-inducing experience. However, as has been mentioned earlier, it would be naive to suggest that a divorce education program can create "perfect" divorces. Nevertheless, future research might focus on the reasons for relitigation and how those issues are being addressed or neglected in divorce education programs.

Limitations

Measurement Limitations

As previously mentioned, conflict is extremely difficult to define and operationalize. This made it difficult to obtain a measure that cleanly measured postdivorce conflict. One of the limitations regarding the instrumentation used in this study comes as a result of not being able to use all of the items on the Family of Origin Scale (FOS). The items from the FOS that were selected for inclusion in this study were deemed most relevant to the study based on the work of Bohannan (1970). The exclusion of some of these items results in lowered reliability scores for the measure.
Sampling Limitations

The sample group of individuals who had not participated in divorce education was much smaller than the group that had participated (n = 59 versus n = 160). The risk of committing a "type II error" is magnified when working with smaller samples (Cuzzort & Vrettos, 1996). As a result of this, there is a greater chance of the data not accurately indicating the actual trends that exist in the nonparticipation group than there is in the participation group.

Design Limitations

Random selection of the two samples was possible, but random assignment was not possible because the two groups had already been created. The individuals in the participation group volunteered to take part in the divorce education program and they volunteered to be contacted at a later date for research purposes. The individuals in the nonparticipation group did not have the opportunity to take part in the divorce education program because it was not offered in their counties. This made it impossible to randomly assign subjects to the two groups. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether these two groups are truly representative of their respective populations.

The third limitation is associated with the demographic characteristics of the study participants. All of the respondents lived in Utah at the time of divorce. Almost all of them lived in Utah at the time the questionnaire was administered. The limited geographical nature of this population raises questions regarding the possible effect of extraneous variables (e.g., religion, race, socioeconomic status, etc.). A larger-scale
study that controls for more variables and randomly assigns subjects might produce results that can be interpreted with a greater degree of certainty as to their generalizability to the larger population.

Another limitation is that Salt Lake and Utah Counties both have a number of divorce adjustment groups that are available for people to attend. Like the divorce education program, divorce adjustment groups are aimed at helping people manage the difficulties involved in divorce. If an individual were attending both the divorce education program and a divorce adjustment group, that individual would theoretically be receiving twice the amount of support services as the individual attending only the divorce education program. This factor could possibly confound the results of this study.

Strengths and Conclusions

The findings of this study are useful in indicating the potential that exists for divorce education programs to change negative parental behaviors and in the process reduce the amount of postdivorce conflict that children are exposed to. This study has shown an association between attendance at a divorce education class and lower levels of postdivorce conflict. This is inspiring given the negative impact postdivorce conflict has been shown to have upon children (Hetherington et al., 1982; Johnston & Roseby, 1997; Long et al., 1988; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1980; Wallerstein et al., 1992).

This study has also shown an association between lower levels of postdivorce conflict and both parents attending the divorce education class. This is positive news in
that the state of Utah has already taken steps towards ensuring that both parents do indeed attend a divorce education class. Thus, within divorced families in Utah where both parents have attended the class, lower levels of conflict may already be occurring, partially as a result of having attended a divorce education class.

Based on a review of current and past literature, extensive research regarding divorce education has only been available for the past 4 to 5 years. Because divorce education programs are a relatively new part of the family court system, it is only natural that divorce education research is somewhat limited at this point. Nevertheless, research projects exploring these programs are becoming more common. It is hoped that this study can be a part of this exploratory process in the state of Utah and that it will lead to larger, more in-depth studies regarding divorce education and postdivorce conflict.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Telephone Interview for Participation Group
DIVORCE EDUCATION TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

I am calling to do a follow-up study regarding the divorce education class which you participated in sometime between 1992-94. If you recall, you filled out an index card giving permission for someone to contact you at a later date. We are asking you to complete this survey so we can gain a better understanding of whether or not the divorce education program makes any difference to families in Utah. Based on your responses, this survey has the potential of improving Utah’s divorce education program. There will be approximately 400 individuals participating in the survey. I will read 26 questions that should take about 5-10 minutes to answer.

INSTRUCTIONS:
A. All of your responses will remain strictly confidential. Your identity will be coded and will not be associated with any published results. All material and information will be kept in a locked file.

B. Your participation is voluntary and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate or withdraw at any time during the survey.

C. Answering the questions in this survey indicates your consent to participate.

D. You may have been involved in more than one marriage. All of the questions which I will ask you are regarding the marriage and divorce that resulted in you taking the divorce education class in 1992, 93, or 94.

Answer the following questions as they pertain to you since the time you attended the divorce education class. You will answer these questions by selecting one of the following answers:
Strongly Agree with the statement (SA).
Agree with the statement (A).
Neutral (N)
Disagree with the statement (D).
Strongly Disagree with the statement (SD).

1. My ex-spouse often made excuses for his/her mistakes. 5 4 3 2 1
2. Conflicts with my ex-spouse never got resolved. 5 4 3 2 1
3. I found it difficult to understand what my ex-spouse
said and how s/he felt.

4. Resolving conflicts with my ex-spouse was a very stressful experience.

5. My attitudes and my feelings frequently were ignored or criticized by my ex-spouse.

6. My ex-spouse and I were not very receptive to one another’s views.

7. With my ex-spouse, I felt that I could talk things out and settle conflicts.

8. My ex-spouse and I often disagree about issues involving our children such as discipline, schooling, holidays, rules, etc.

9. I found it difficult to express my own opinions with my ex-spouse.

10. My ex-spouse and I usually were able to work out conflicts.

11. I found it easy with my ex-spouse to express what I thought and how I felt.

12. Financial concerns have reduced the number of times I have been in court with my spouse.

13. The written material that I received at the end of the divorce education class was helpful.

Now the second portion of the questions.

14. On a 10 point scale (1 being no help and 10 being very helpful) please rate the helpfulness of the divorce education class you took in 1992(3)(4). ______

15. Are you male or female? Male ____ Female ____

16. In what year were you born? Birth year ____

17. How many children do you have from that marriage? ____

18. How long did that marriage last? Years ____ Months ____

19. Did your ex-spouse participate in the divorce education class? Yes ____ No ____
20. Have you remarried? Yes ____ No ____

21. How long after that divorce did you remarry? Years ____ Months ____

22. How many times during the year do you have contact with your ex-spouse? ____

23. How many times have you initiated legal proceedings to resolve child support issues? ____

24. How many times has your ex-spouse initiated legal proceedings to resolve child support issues? ____

25. How many times have you initiated legal proceedings to resolve child custody and/or visitation issues? ____

26. How many times has your ex-spouse initiated legal proceedings to resolve child custody and/or visitation issues? ____

27. How many times have legal proceedings been initiated by you or your ex-spouse to resolve issues such as alimony or maintenance payments, protective orders, restraining orders, etc.? ____

If you have any concerns or questions you may call Scot at the Family Life Center at 435-753-5895. He will forward your concerns to the appropriate party.
Appendix B

Telephone Interview for Nonparticipation Group
DIVORCE EDUCATION TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

I am calling as part of a study being conducted by Utah State University and the Administrative Office of the Courts for the state of Utah. The study is focusing on divorced families in Utah. We are asking you to complete this survey so we can gain a better understanding of whether or not the divorce education program makes any difference to families in Utah. Based on your responses, this survey has the potential of improving Utah's divorce education program. There will be approximately 400 individuals participating in the survey. I will read 24 questions that should take about 5-10 minutes to answer.

INSTRUCTIONS:
A. All of your responses will remain strictly confidential. Your identity will be coded and will not be associated with any published results. All material and information will be kept in a locked file.

B. Your participation is voluntary and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate or withdraw at any time during the survey.

C. Answering the questions in this survey indicates your consent to participate.

D. You may have been involved in more than one marriage. All of the questions which I will ask you are regarding the divorce that occurred in 1992, 93, or 94.

Answer the following questions as they pertain to you since the time you divorced. You will answer these questions by selecting one of the following answers:

Strongly Agree with the statement (SA).
Agree with the statement (A).
Neutral (N)
Disagree with the statement (D).
Strongly Disagree with the statement (SD).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. My ex-spouse often made excuses for his/her mistakes.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflicts with my ex-spouse never got resolved.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I found it difficult to understand what my ex-spouse said and how s/he felt.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Resolving conflicts with my ex-spouse was a very</td>
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</table>
stressful experience.

5. My attitudes and my feelings frequently were ignored or criticized by my ex-spouse.  

6. My ex-spouse and I were not very receptive to one another's views.  

7. With my ex-spouse, I felt that I could talk things out and settle conflicts.  

8. My ex-spouse and I often disagree about issues involving our children such as discipline, schooling, holidays, rules, etc.  

9. I found it difficult to express my own opinions with my ex-spouse.  

10. My ex-spouse and I usually were able to work out conflicts.  

11. I found it easy with my ex-spouse to express what I thought and how I felt.  

12. Financial constraints have reduced the number of times I have been in court with my ex-spouse.  

Now the second portion of the questions.

13. Are you male or female?  Male ______  Female ______  

14. In what year were you born?  Birth year ______  

15. How many children do you have from that marriage? ______  

16. How long did that marriage last?  Years ______  Months ______  

17. Have you remarried?  Yes ______  No ______  

18. How long after that divorce did you remarry?  Years ______  Months ______  

19. How many times during the year do you have contact with your ex-spouse? ______  

20. How many times have you initiated legal proceedings to resolve child support issues? ______  

21. How many times has your ex-spouse initiated legal proceedings to resolve child support issues? ______
22. How many times have you initiated legal proceedings to resolve child custody and/or visitation issues? ______

23. How many times has your ex-spouse initiated legal proceedings to resolve child custody and/or visitation issues? ______

24. How many times have legal proceedings been initiated by you or your ex-spouse to resolve issues such as alimony or maintenance payments, protective orders, restraining orders, etc.? ______

If you have any concerns or questions you may call Scot at the Family Life Center at 435-753-5895. He will forward your concerns to the appropriate party.
Appendix C

Confidentiality Agreement for Volunteer Interviewers
The concept of confidentiality has been explained to me. I understand that the names and responses which I see and hear while participating in this research project must be kept confidential. This means not sharing stories or responses with others, even in the setting of University classes.

I also agree not to conduct the telephone interview with anyone I know. If a name or situation sounds familiar, I will let one of the other interviewers finish the interview. If any distress is noted in any of the subjects, I will refer them to a local mental health agency.

_________________________    ___________________________
(Telephone Interviewer)        Date

Monte Criddle    (Graduate Student Researcher)    Date

_________________________    ___________________________
Scot Allgood      (Principal Investigator)         Date