Grandmother—Grandchild Relationship Quality Predicts Psychological Adjustment Among Youth From Divorced Families
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This study investigates maternal grandmother–grandchild relationship quality as a predictor of psychological adjustment among youth from divorced families. Three hundred twenty-four adolescents aged between 17 and 20 report on the quality of their relationships with their maternal grandmothers and their relational competence, self-efficacy, and psychological symptoms. Structural equation modeling analyses support a model in which participants’ relationships with grandmothers predict their psychological adjustment. Family background (divorced vs. intact families) moderates the relationship between relationship quality and adjustment; youth from divorced families indicate that their relationships with their maternal grandmothers are more salient to their adjustment than do youth from intact families. These findings suggest that the bonds young people develop with their maternal grandmothers following their parents’ divorce may positively affect their psychological functioning.

Keywords: divorce; grandparents; well-being; structural equation modeling

Each year, the parents of 2% of children residing in the United States divorce, affecting 1.5 million children (Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Although some studies suggest that not all children suffer from negative long-term effects following parental divorce (Hetherington,
most studies indicate that on average divorce is associated with negative short- and long-term effects for children, such as difficulty relating to peers and family members, as well as increases in psychological symptomatology (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Wallerstein, 1987). Two meta-analyses examining the effects of divorce on children have indicated that children whose parents divorced had more difficult psychological adjustment, lower scholastic achievement, lower self-esteem, and more strained peer and parent–child relationships than their same-age peers from intact families (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991). Adolescents are likewise vulnerable to negative consequences of parental divorce, even if the divorce occurred several years in the past (Wallerstein, 1987).

A possible mechanism by which children exhibit postdivorce maladjustment is through deteriorated parent–child relationships (Amato & Booth, 1996). Parents who have divorced report less affection and interaction with their children than parents who have not divorced (Amato & Booth, 1996). Recent studies applying attachment theory to broader family relationships and ages beyond infancy suggest its relevance to negotiating family transitions such as divorce (Benoit & Parker, 1994). From this theoretical perspective, attachment bonds with parents may be disrupted as children experience multiple transitions, including separation of their biological parents, living in a single-parent household, and forming new parental relationships with stepparents (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002). Such life transitions underscore the importance of attachment relationships outside of children’s divorcing parents (Kenny & Barton, 2003). Indeed, grandchildren often become closer to their grandmothers following divorce (Gladstone, 1988), particularly those on their mothers’ side, a trend that may be related to parental custody (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

Grandchildren from divorced families are likely to benefit from this increased involvement with their grandchildren by gaining more emotional support and having less strain in their lives (Johnson, 1998; Lussier et al., 2002). However, the results from studies examining whether having strong relationships with grandmothers helps reduce the negative effects of divorce on children are equivocal. Some studies have shown that better relationships with grandmothers following divorce is associated with grandchildren having fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (Lussier et al., 2002). Furthermore, Kennedy and Kennedy (1993) hold that grandmother
involvement may compensate for parents’ physical and emotional unavailability as the family adjusts to new configurations and economic hardship. In other cases, even a symbolic, sentimental role may help ameliorate negative aspects of divorce (Johnson, 1998).

In contrast, other research has found that the grandmother–grandchild relationship had little impact on the postdivorce adjustment of the grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1986; Hetherington, 1989). Hetherington and colleagues have conducted some of the most comprehensive, longitudinal work examining vulnerability and protective factors that contribute to children’s long-term adjustment to divorce and remarriage (Hetherington, 1989). Hetherington reports that although grandmothers offer support to their divorced and remarried children, as well as their grandchildren, “there was little evidence that grandparents play a potent role in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of their grandchildren unless they live in the home” (p. 10).

However, some caveats are in order. First, Hetherington’s findings imply that grandmothers can have greater impact on their grandchildren when they live with them. Indeed, a cohort shift has occurred in the 15-plus years since Hetherington conducted her research, with grandparents today being more likely to assume full-time care of their grandchildren (Hayslip & Goldberg-Glen, 2000) as well as perceive their role as more hands-on (Hayslip, Henderson, & Shore, 2003). Cohort differences in the meaning and activities of grandparenting may partially explain discrepancies in the literature between studies suggesting that the quality of grandmother–grandchild relationships may diminish adjustment problems (Lussier et al., 2002) and those that do not (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986). Second, grandmothers’ active involvement in the lives of their grandchildren postdivorce may be a mixed blessing: Although mothers report appreciating the support and assistance, they also report conflict with their mothers when grandmothers take an active role in their grandchildren’s lives (Hetherington, 1989). Therefore, studies examining the impact of grandmother–grandchild relationships on grandchildren’s psychological adjustment may be needed at a point of development during which grandchildren are more autonomous and the postdivorce adjustment less acute. Few studies have compared emerging adults from intact and divorced homes with respect to the quality of their relationships with their grandparents. One exception to this general trend is the work of Cooney and Smith (1996), who found that young adults did not report closer relationships with their grandparents following a recent divorce. However, Cooney and Smith limited their participants to those whose parents divorced within 15 months. Furthermore, they
did not examine the impact that relationships with grandparents may have on the participants’ psychological adjustment.

This study compares participant reports of their relationship quality with their maternal grandmothers and psychological adjustment among youth in late adolescence or emerging adulthood (ages 17-20) from divorced and intact families. By studying older adolescents, we minimize the likelihood of parent–grandparent conflict over child rearing. Furthermore, studying older adolescents extends the literature on what we know about grandmothers’ roles in buffering the impact of divorce on children, which Hetherington (1989) and others (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998) indicate may persist even into young adulthood. Only data on maternal grandmothers were selected for analyses in this study based on previous research, which suggests the following: (a) Grandparent contact following divorce is much higher for maternal grandmothers than other grandparents (cf. Johnson, 1998); (b) the vast majority of young people have reported that their maternal grandmothers are significantly more influential in their current lives than are other grandparents (Kennedy, 1992); and (c) relationships with maternal grandmothers are associated with psychological adjustment to a greater extent than other grandparent configurations (Lussier et al., 2002). The particular indices of psychological adjustment were selected because meta-analyses have suggested that they are some of the most important in understanding youths’ postdivorce adjustment (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991).

In light of the above literature highlighting the role that grandparents may play in the adjustment of youth to the divorce of their parents, we propose the following hypotheses: (1) Among youth from divorced families, higher levels of relationship quality with grandmothers will be associated with lower levels of psychological symptoms and higher levels of relational competence and self-efficacy, and (2) the relationship between relationship quality and psychological symptoms, relational competence, and self-efficacy will be moderated by family type; that is, they will be stronger for youth from divorced families relative to youth from intact families.

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Three hundred twenty-four youth aged between 17 and 20 whose maternal grandmothers were living at the time the study was conducted were recruited from local high schools and from entry-level psychology classes
at a university located in north Texas. We intentionally targeted these two populations because many studies have not explicitly focused on this developmental period (emerging adulthood) and studies with this particular age group are mostly absent in the divorce literature. Although we attempted to make the recruitment strategies as similar as possible (identical recruitment scripts and study descriptions), it was necessary to make some modifications to recruit the separate populations. With respect to the high school students, meetings were arranged with principals at local high schools to secure their agreement to announce the study in classes and at Parent Teacher Association meetings. In compliance with research ethical standards, written parent permission was obtained for students under age 18, and these students also provided their informed assent to participate in the research. Because we could not provide extra credit for high school students (which we did as an incentive for the college students), a raffle for six $50 gift certificates was offered as an incentive for participation.

With respect to the college students, researchers presented the study in entry-level psychology classes; class extra credit commensurate with the amount of time it took to complete the research procedures was offered as an incentive for participation. These participants provided their informed consent prior to participating in the research. Analyses comparing high school and college students on demographic variables, proportion of students with divorced parents, the primary predictor and criterion variables (discussed below), and multiple group structural equation models (as described below) indicated no differences between the high school and college students (results available by authors on request). The study was approved and monitored by the institutional review board located at the university at which the research was conducted.

Participants were primarily Caucasian (72%) and female (75%). Nine percent of the participants were African American, 7% were Hispanic, 6% were Asian, and 4% reported being from other ethnic backgrounds. Overall, the participants averaged 18.7 years of age ($SD = 0.9$), with the youth from divorced families slightly older (but not significantly so, $M = 18.8$, $SD = 1.0$) than youth from intact families ($M = 18.7$, $SD = 0.9$). Seventy-one percent of youth reported that their parents were married, and 29% reported that their parents were either divorced or separated. Of those whose parents had divorced, on average the divorce occurred approximately 10 years ago ($SD = 5.2$; range <1 to 20 years). Furthermore, of the youth from divorced families, the majority reported they lived with a parent (63% mothers, 9% fathers), and a very small proportion (2%) reported that they lived with a grandparent.
Measures

Participants were asked to complete questionnaires beginning with a short demographic section (requesting information on the participants’ demographic backgrounds, family structure, the number of years since divorce if one had occurred, etc.) and a variety of measures targeting the participants’ relationship with their grandmothers and their psychological adjustment.

Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA). The IPPA (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987) is a 53-item self-report inventory measuring adolescents’ and young adults’ relationship quality with parents and peers. For the current study, we used the trust, communication, and alienation subscales for parents, modified to be appropriate for grandmothers. The alienation subscale was reverse scored to make the interpretation consistent with the other subscales. Samples of modified items include “My grandmother [formerly parent] respects my feelings” and “I feel my grandmother [formerly parent] is successful as a grandparent [formerly parent].” Participants completed this measure with respect to each grandparent (maternal grandmother and grandfather and paternal grandmother and grandfather) although we only used data for maternal grandmothers for the reasons described previously. Furthermore, participants reported many different combinations of living grandparents, making consistent comparisons unwieldy from an analytic standpoint.

Previous validity studies conducted by Armsden and Greenberg (1987) have shown that parent attachment scores correlated significantly with family support as well as with a tendency to seek out parents in times of need. Coefficient alphas were .90, .87, and .84 for the trust, communication, and alienation subscales, respectively.

Contact with grandmothers. Extent of contact between grandchildren and maternal grandmothers at the time the study was conducted was assessed by two items, one indicating the current frequency of visits and the other the current frequency of phone conversations with their maternal grandmothers. Response options included daily, at least once per week, at least once per month, and less than once per month. These items were summed to provide an index of contact the participants had with their grandmothers, with larger values indicating more contact. We also created a similar variable representing parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers by summing items indicating the parents’ frequency of visits and phone contact with the participants’ maternal grandmothers. Coefficient alphas were .70 for participants’ contact with their maternal grandmothers and .80 for their parents’ contact with them.
**Relationship Competence Scale (RCS).** The RCS (Hansson, Jones, & Carpenter, 1984) is a 100-item measure of competence in interpersonal skills. Relational competence measures abilities that serve to maintain and enhance relationships and is composed of the intimacy, trust, interpersonal sensitivity, empathic concern, and perspective-taking subscales. Internal consistency coefficients for the subscales range from .76 to .90. The interpersonal sensitivity and trust subscales were used in the current study, and the scales showed adequate reliability (αs = .81 and .76, respectively). Responses range on a scale from 1 to 4, with 4 meaning *strongly agree or very much like me* and 1 meaning *strongly disagree or very much unlike me*. Sample items include “People are usually very dependable and trustworthy” and “I really am thoughtful and considerate of others.”

**Self-Efficacy Scale (SES).** The Self-Efficacy Scale (Sherer et al., 1982) is a 23-item scale that was used to measure an individual’s estimate of his or her ability to cope with a situation. Woodruff and Cashman (1993) found that a general self-efficacy subscale could be divided into three subscales (general efficacy magnitude, strength, and competence). Concurrent validity estimates are reported by Woodruff and Cashman (1993), who used Pearson correlations to demonstrate moderate correlations between the SES and the Mastery Scale (.54; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (.54; Rosenberg, 1965). The magnitude, strength, and competence subscales of general self-efficacy were used in the current study. Alphas for these scales were .82, .78, and .66, respectively.

**Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL).** The HSCL (Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhuth, & Covi, 1974) is a 58-item self-report symptom inventory using a 5-point anchored rating scale and covering five symptom dimensions: somatization, obsessive–compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, anxiety, and depression. It is the precursor—and therefore very similar in terms of item content and targeted assessment areas—to the Symptom Checklist 90 (Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), which have been used in numerous studies. Because the participants were not sampled from a clinical population, subscales were selected on the basis of their relevance to non-clinical adolescent and young adult populations and included depression, anxiety, and somatization. Derogatis et al. (1974) report alpha coefficients from .84 to .87 for individual HSCL subscale scores. Several studies have supported the criterion-related validity of the measure by demonstrating its sensitivity to a variety of treatment effects (see Derogatis et al., 1974, for a review). The interpersonal sensitivity subscale was not used because of its
overlap with the RCS, nor was the obsessive–compulsive subscale because of the low probability of occurrence in the targeted population. Coefficient alphas for the depression, anxiety, and somatization subscales were .87, .89, and .85, respectively.

**Data Analysis**

The objectives of this study were to compare youth from divorced and intact families on the extent to which their relationships with their grandparents predicted three indices of psychological adjustment: self-efficacy, relational competence, and psychological symptoms. Both hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling (SEM).

The primary statistical advantage of SEM is that complex models can be tested for their goodness of fit to the observed data. Models explicitly specifying the number of latent variables (LVs), the manifest (measured) variable to LV relationships, and the LV to LV relationships are developed a priori, after which the model is tested in terms of model fit criteria (Kline, 1998). To assess model fit, in addition to the model $\chi^2$ we examined two fit indices, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the comparative fit index (CFI), with RMSEA values of .08 and below and CFI values of .90 and above being indicative of good model fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). It should be noted that in moderately sized samples ($N > 200$), the chi-square test tends to be inflated and may reach significance even with adequately fitting models (Kline, 1998). Therefore, when discrepancies between the chi-square test and other fit indices arose, we relied more heavily on the RMSEA and CFI fit indices.

First, we used confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to determine whether the subscales corresponding to each LV adequately loaded on the latent construct. Four LV measurement models were created from the subscales of the IPPA, RCS, SES, and HSCL to yield LVs corresponding to grandmother–grandchild relationship quality, relational competence, self-efficacy, and psychological symptoms, respectively. The robust maximum likelihood estimator was used to fit the model to the sample covariance matrix using the software Mplus (version 4.20; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2005). Modification indices (Lagrange Multiplier and Wald tests) were examined to determine if model fit could be improved by either constraining or freeing parameters; however, no modifications were made without having a theoretical justification for doing so (Silvia & MacCallum, 1988). All SEMs controlled for the participant’s gender, mother’s educational level (a proxy for socioeconomic status), amount of contact youth had with
their grandparents, and for youth from divorced families, the number of years since the divorce by including them in the models as exogenous manifest variables.

Next, we tested a sequence of SEMs. The first (Testing Hypothesis 1) examined the relationship between grandmother–grandchild relationship quality and adjustment specifically among the youth from divorced families. Second, we wanted to examine if the same configural pattern fit for the youth from intact families; therefore, we tested a second SEM model examining the same relationship configuration among the youth from intact families. Finally (Testing Hypothesis 2), we examined whether family type (divorced vs. intact) moderated the relationship between grandmother relationship quality and adjustment, conducting a multiple group analysis in which the relationship between grandmother–grandchild relationship quality and adjustment was compared in the two family types.

We then placed stronger invariance constraints on the models to focus more closely on the path coefficients between grandmother relationship quality and the adjustment variables. We constrained the measurement model parameters and all variances and covariances to equality between the two models, with the exception of the relationships between relationship quality and adjustment. This parameter was allowed to be free to permit a test of both within-group and between-group hypotheses regarding relationship quality–adjustment associations. This was followed by a series of analyses in which we systematically freed one relationship quality–adjustment path coefficient at a time. Chi-square difference tests were used to compare the nested models, with a significant test indicating that the relationship between grandmother relationship quality and adjustment reliably differed for the grandchildren from intact versus divorced families. Finally, we examined the extent to which results were influenced by the amount of contact participants’ parents had with participants’ maternal grandmothers.

**Results**

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the subscales of the IPPA as well as all adjustment variables by family type. As shown in Table 1, youth from both family types reported similarly close relationships with their grandmothers and similar values on the adjustment variables; however, participants from divorced families reported higher levels of psychological symptoms. Table 2 shows the zero-order correlations among the relationship
quality and adjustment variables for the two family types. Trends in Table 2 suggest that the relationships between relationship quality and adjustment were stronger for youth from divorced families relative to those from intact families.

**Confirmatory Factor Analyses**

Confirmatory factor analyses supported the validity of each of the four measurement models ($\chi^2$ ps > .05, CFIps > .99, RMSEAs < .08). For grandmother–grandchild relationship quality, each of the manifest variables was strongly associated with the latent variable (trust, $\beta = .95$; communication, $\beta = .76$; alienation, $\beta = .46$). The same was the case for each of
Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among Relationship Quality and Adjustment Variables by Family Type

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Note: Correlations among variables reported by youth from intact families appear below the diagonal. Correlations among variables reported by youth from divorced families appear above the diagonal. The sample covariance matrix is available from the authors by request. NA = not applicable.
*p < .05, **p < .01.
the adjustment variables: relational competence (sensitivity, $\beta = .90$; trust, $\beta = .53$), self-efficacy (magnitude, $\beta = .90$; strength, $\beta = .73$; competence, $\beta = .72$), and psychological symptoms (somatization, $\beta = .79$; depression, $\beta = .81$; anxiety, $\beta = .92$). The full measurement model, in which the data were fit to all four CFAs simultaneously, also demonstrated adequate model fit, $\chi^2(38) = 162.65, p < .001, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .09$, although the RMSEA was slightly higher than desired. The modification indices suggested that fit could be improved by allowing the error variances for two of the grandmother relationship quality variables (trust and communication) to correlate. Given the similarity of the two constructs, we allowed the errors to correlate, resulting in improved model fit, $\chi^2(38) = 99.83, p < .001, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .07$.

**Structural Equation Models**

To test Hypothesis 1, an SEM was tested in the youth from divorced families. The data demonstrated good fit to the model, $\chi^2(56) = 73.64, p = .06, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .07$. The path coefficients between the grandmother–grandchild relationship quality LV and the LVs representing participant adjustment were strong (relational competence, $\beta = .53$; self-efficacy, $\beta = .79$; psychological symptoms, $\beta = -.68$; see Figure 1), supporting our first hypothesis. Relationship quality with maternal grandmothers accounted for 33% of the relational competence LV, 57% of the self-efficacy LV, and 43% of the psychological symptoms LV.

Next, we tested the configural invariance of the model by testing the model with youth from intact families. Again, the error variances between the two grandmother relationship quality variables were allowed to correlate. The data also fit this model adequately, $\chi^2(48) = 118.13, p < .001, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .08$, indicating that similar overall structural relationships between relationship quality with maternal grandmothers and adjustment existed for the youth from intact families as well. However, the path coefficients between the grandmother–grandchild relationship quality LV and the LVs representing participant adjustment were, with the exception of relational competence, weaker than those found with the youth from divorced families (relational competence, $\beta = .77$; self-efficacy, $\beta = .55$; psychological symptoms, $\beta = -.47$; see Figure 2). For the youth from intact families, relationship quality with maternal grandmothers accounted for 59% of the relational competence LV, 31% of the self-efficacy LV, and 22% of the psychological symptoms LV.
We next tested a moderator model in which the association between relationship quality with maternal grandmothers and adjustment was moderated by family type. The $\chi^2$ difference test for nested models revealed that the model in which the associations between relationship quality with maternal grandmothers and relational competence, self-efficacy, and psychological symptoms was free to vary across family type fit significantly better than the model in which these relationships were constrained to be the same across youth from divorced and intact families, $\Delta \chi^2(3) = 48.90, p < .001$. These

Note: Control variables are not shown in the figure, but they were included in the model as exogenous variables. Comm = Communication; Alien = Alienation; Som = Somatization; e indicates error variance (e.g., e1), and D indicates disturbance (e.g., D1).
results supported our second hypothesis (please note that the absolute level of this relationship is still negative for those in intact families, but that it is stronger for those in divorced families). Tests in which one association between relationship quality with maternal grandmothers and adjustment variable was freed at a time revealed that the moderation was specific to psychological symptoms, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 48.80, p < .001$, as the relationships were not significant for either relational competence, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.10, ns$, or self-efficacy, $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 0.70, ns$. 

Note: Control variables are not shown in the figure, but they were included in the model as exogenous variables. Comm = Communication; Alien = Alienation; Som = Somatization; e indicates error variance (e.g., e1), and D indicates disturbance (e.g., D1).
Accounting for the Participants’ Parents’ Relationships with Maternal Grandmothers

As mentioned previously, all SEMs accounted for participants’ contact with their maternal grandmothers, and in the case of youth from divorced families, the number of years since the divorce occurred. However, because parents of at least younger children serve as gatekeepers in the amount of contact children have with their grandparents (Matthews & Sprey, 1984), we examined the extent to which the relationship between participants’ relationship quality with their maternal grandmothers and their adjustment was mediated by the amount of contact participants’ parents had with their maternal grandmothers. Because the results above indicated that differences between youth from intact and divorced families with respect to maternal grandmother relationship quality–adjustment relationships were specific to psychological symptoms, we confined our mediation analyses to the relationship quality and psychological symptom LVs. We examined mediation using the product of coefficients (for the indirect paths) method (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Hoffman, 2002). As noted by MacKinnon et al. (2002), the joint significance of the two paths comprising the indirect effect—in our case the paths between (a) relationship quality and parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers and (b) parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers and psychological symptoms—provides the “best balance of Type I error and statistical power” (p. 83). As implemented in Mplus, the significance of the mediated effect is tested by a pseudo $z$ statistic in which the product of coefficients is divided by its bootstrapped standard error (bootstrapping is used to compensate for the standard error’s nonnormality; Shrout & Bolger, 2002), and the critical value for determining statistical significance is ±1.96.

Results indicated that parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers did not mediate the relationship between participants’ relationship quality with their maternal grandmothers and psychological symptoms (pseudo $z = 1.02$, ns). Although relationship quality was significantly associated with parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers (pseudo $z = -2.67$, $p < .01$), the relationship between parents’ contact with maternal grandmothers and participants’ report of psychological symptoms was not statistically significant (pseudo $z = -1.10$, ns).

Discussion

Among youth from divorced families, grandmother–grandchild relationship quality was strongly related to adjustment, and moderator analyses
indicated that the relationships between relationship quality and adjustment outcomes were stronger for the youth from divorced families than for youth from intact families. Taken together, these results suggest that strong relationships with maternal grandmothers may help grandchildren adjust to the divorce of their parents, independently of the contact the middle generation has with the grandmothers. As such, the results are consistent with other research suggesting that youth from divorced homes are under many circumstances resilient to the negative consequences that some youth experience, especially when the divorcing parents are able to minimize their conflict (Amato, Spencer Loomis, & Booth, 1995). For instance, Hetherington’s (1989) landmark study highlights numerous individual, familial, and extrafamilial factors that contribute to better psychosocial adjustment among youth from divorced families. It is noteworthy that in the current study among youth from divorced families, the participants’ relationships with their grandmothers strongly predicted their psychological adjustment even when the divorce occurred many years ago. However, conclusions remain tentative until they are confirmed by longitudinal studies conducted with larger samples.

The findings in the current study are similar to those of Lussier et al. (2002), who found that closeness to maternal grandparents was associated with fewer internalizing problems among children from single-parent families. However, Lussier et al. did not compare the strength of closeness–adjustment relationships between children from intact and single-parent families. The current study also builds on Lussier et al. by replicating this relationship in a larger and older sample, using a stronger measure of relationship quality with grandparents (the IPPA has more breadth of item content and better psychometric properties), and using state-of-the-art SEM analytic procedures. The findings are also consistent with Cooney and Smith (1996) in that youth from divorced homes did not report that their relationships with their maternal grandmothers were stronger than youth from intact homes (a finding that may in part be driven by the homogeneity of our sample). Nevertheless the current findings extend this research by suggesting that the relationships that youth from divorced homes had with their maternal grandmothers were more strongly related to their psychological adjustment.

The findings are also consistent with other recent research highlighting the importance of studying divorce from within an intergenerational framework (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Johnson, 1998). Attachment theory has been posited as a framework for understanding the importance of intergenerational relationships to adolescent and young adult development (Simpson,
Rholes, & Nilligan, 1992). Although the measure of relationship quality we used in this study is not an explicit measure of attachment style, it has been used in previous studies examining youths’ attachment to important family members (Lopez & Gover, 1993). Applied to the current results, attachment theory suggests that those with strong relationships with their maternal grandmothers may have perceived them as a secure relationship with which they could connect during the stress of the divorce. As a result, the findings from this study suggest that these youth may have benefited from connecting to their grandmothers specifically in terms of minimizing psychological symptoms. However, because the research design is cross-sectional, the direction of effects is not entirely clear (i.e., better psychological adjustment may lead to closer grandmother–grandchild relationships). The results suggest hypotheses to be tested in future prospective studies carried out using longitudinal designs and using specific measures assessing attachment style as well as covering more youth problems such as depression diagnoses.

In addition to the limitations listed above, namely the fairly small sample, the cross-sectional research design, and our inability to definitively draw conclusions regarding the direction of the effects, the study is limited in other aspects as well. First, the sample was primarily Caucasian and female. Thus, our findings may not generalize to youth from other sociodemographic backgrounds. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the findings would generalize to grandparent kinship patterns other than maternal grandmothers, or to younger children and adolescents. In fact, with respect to younger children and adolescents, the relationships between maternal grandmother relationship quality and psychological adjustment may be stronger and also likely more influenced by the relationship the middle generation (the grandchildren’s parents) may have with the maternal grandmothers. Third, although we controlled for participant gender, mother’s education level, and contact with grandparents in our structural equation models, previous studies have suggested that proximity to grandparents and socioeconomic status (with which mother’s education level is highly correlated) are important variables in understanding grandparent–grandchild relationships (Uhlenberg & Hammill, 1998). Unfortunately, we did not collect data in this study so that we could control for these variables as well. That said, it is likely that proximity would be highly correlated with contact and mother’s education level would be correlated with family socioeconomic status. Fourth, it is possible that recruiting from two populations may have introduced selection bias into the study results. For example, high school students under age 18 were required to obtain parent permission as well as provide informed assent, whereas college students for the most part only had to provide informed
consent. It is possible that we may have obtained different results if we had used a single recruitment strategy. Fifth, all data were collected from the grandchild’s perspective and therefore, the findings of the study may have arisen in part due to common method variance. Therefore, we were unable to control for some potentially important variables such as the quality of the relationships between the participants’ mothers and their maternal grandmothers (albeit our findings suggest that the contact mothers had with maternal grandmothers did not affect the results). Finally, in many cases, the data were collected several years after the divorce had occurred. It is possible that other findings may have emerged if the research were conducted with younger children in the immediate aftermath of divorce.

Despite these limitations, these findings suggest interesting hypotheses to be tested in future studies. It is noteworthy that we found adolescents’ relationships to their grandmothers to affect their adjustment several years later. Indeed, one would assume that grandmothers would exert less influence in the lives of 17- to 20-year-olds (Cooney & Smith, 1996; Kennedy, 1990). Our findings suggest that these youth may have had a continuing bond with their maternal grandmothers that transcended the divorce. Furthermore, many of the participants were college students and as such may be more resilient to hardships than the general population. Perhaps the influence of maternal grandmothers may contribute in some way to the resilience of young people from divorced homes and perhaps may diminish the impact of divorce on their lives (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). Prospective studies incorporating larger samples and longitudinally following children in the immediate aftermath of divorce, and the way in which their relationships with their grandmothers unfold over time, are needed to examine these possibilities.

References


