

The Impact of Non-Custodial Mothers:
A Missing Piece in Adult Children of Divorce Research
Kent Darcie
Moody Theological Seminary

Abstract

This paper explores the lack of research and available resources for adults with divorced parents whose mothers were the non-custodial parents after the divorce. Though there is a substantial body of research which details the impact absent fathers have on children of divorce, a systematic literature review produced just one article that directly addressed the impact of a mother's absence on the children after the divorce. Nor was any found regarding the long-term impact into their adulthood. The research that does address this issue focuses either on the strengths of the single-parent father, or the emotions and struggles of the non-custodial mother. A survey by this researcher intended to ascertain any deficits that resulted from the mother's absence. Survey results indicated feelings of abandonment and betrayal as a recurring theme among the female respondents. However, the survey, and outside literature, both emphasize the need for further research to identify additional areas adult children of divorce may have been affected by their mother's absence during their developmental years. Research is also needed to identify the long-term impact from any incurred childhood deficits as a result of the mother's absence.

Keywords: non-custodial mother, adult children of divorce,

Table of Contents

	Page
Abstract.....	2
Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Definitions.....	7
Literature Review.....	8
Mothers' Attributes.....	9
Exploring the Absent Mother Experience.....	11
Research.....	13
Objective.....	13
Methods.....	14
Results.....	15
Limitations	17
Discussion.....	19
Research Challenges.....	20
Potential Research Topics.....	21
Important Research Elements.....	23
Conclusion.....	25
References.....	27
Appendix.....	34

The Impact of Non-Custodial Mothers:
A Missing Piece in Adult Children of Divorce Research

Over one million children experienced their parents' divorce in 2009 and in each of the prior forty years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011; National Center for Health Statistics, 1991). An estimated thirty to fifty percent of children in the United States will experience parental divorce (Wolchik, Sandler, Tein, Mahrer, Millsap, Winslow & Reed, 2013). Though there is some disagreement as to how long the children are impacted by their parents' dissolution, a preponderance of evidence-based research indicates children from divorced homes are prone to be negatively impacted by a variety of issues. Many of these result from disruptions in their lives which include changes in residences, parental relationships, exposure to interparental conflict, and their standard of living (Amato & Anthony, 2014). Behavioral challenges are common among children of divorce and tend to fall into internalizing and externalizing issues (Hilton, & Devall, 1998). These include, but are not limited to, having unresolved anger (Conway, 1990, p. 48; Maldonado, 2008; Steinmann, Gat, Nir-Gottlieb, Shahar, & Diamond, 2017), a decreased ability or willingness to trust (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007), higher levels of anxiety and depression (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009), lower levels of relationship quality (Cui & Fincham, 2010), decreased inhibition toward risky behavior (Gustavsen, Nayga, & Wu, 2016), are more likely to drop out of school or be unemployed (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998), and decreased religious involvement (Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007; Warner, et al., 2009). Children with divorced parents also score lower on measures of academic success than their peers from intact families (Amato, 2000), are less likely to attend college (Wolfinger, 2005) or complete a four-year degree when they attend (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue,

2007). Marital success is also challenging to adults with divorced parents who often have a higher risk for marital difficulties and divorce (Cui & Fincham, 2010). As disconcerting as this list may be, adolescents in one study universally responded that the negative effects of divorce are understated (Gatins, Kinlaw, & Dunlap, 2013).

Other research has indicated that additional issues occur in more gender specific ways. For example, research from Gaspard and Clifford (2016) indicates that daughters of divorced parents almost universally exhibit trouble trusting romantic partners, are reluctant to make commitments, have damaged self-esteem, and struggle with obtaining and maintaining healthy intimacy. In a ten-year follow-up to Judith Wallerstein's earlier research, Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) found moderate to severe depression in 35% of the daughters. In psychological and social adjustment, almost twice as many daughters had declined than improved (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989). The literature indicates that depression in females with divorced parents can continue well into adulthood (Hurree, Junkkari, & Aro, 2006).

Negative effects of divorce also stem from the absence of the father. Within the last thirty years, a substantial body of research has confirmed that the absence of the father after the divorce (which occurs in the majority of cases) can have a negative impact on the children's psychological development. A father's absence after the divorce can affect self-esteem (Erickson, 1996), and contribute to compromised physical and emotional security (Kruk, 2012). Sons in a Norwegian study exhibited insecure masculine identification and demonstrated this insecurity with compensatory masculinity (Lynn & Sawrey, 1959). This could be a pre-corroboration of what Kruk described as the "swaggering, intimidating persona in an attempt to disguise their underlying fears, resentments, anxieties and unhappiness" (Kruk, 2012). Neil

Kalter (1987) reported that boys in this category had an inhibition of assertiveness, deficient impulse control, and lowered academic performance.

Though the lingering effects of parental divorce has been well documented, a significant area of impact has been overlooked. In approximately fifteen percent of homes, the children are living without their mother (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In the early 1990's estimates on the number of non-custodial mothers ranged from 500,000 to 1.2 million (Herrerias, 1994). In 2011, mothers were absent from over 2.6 million households (Coles, 2015). Reasons for the mother's post-divorce absence include being psychologically unfit, cases of abuse or neglect, involvement in substance abuse, custody decisions, incarceration, financial reasons, and personal choices. Personal reasons were noted in a 2011 survey in the United Kingdom which estimated there were 100,000 "walk-away" moms and stated the number of mothers leaving their families was increasing twelve percent each year (Drexler, 2011).

Another potential cause of a mother's absence from the home is due to joint custody arrangements. The number of joint custody (fifty/fifty) decisions, where the children spend half of the time with the father and half of the time with their mother after the divorce, is increasing. However, these situations still reflect a relatively small percentage of divorces in the United States and keep the mother in regular contact with her children. Therefore, situations where fifty/fifty joint custody arrangements are in effect are outside of the parameters addressed here and not a consideration in this work.

A mother's death also creates a psychological impact on the children. While there is some research on the impact of a mother's loss through death, there is a significant difference in the children's perception when comparing a mother's untimely death with a mother who makes a conscious choice to leave—even via actions like substance abuse, substandard care due to

psychological dysfunction, abuse, or incarceration. As such, the focus of mother absence in this paper will be the mother who is absent after a divorce.

Definitions

Due to changes in culture and variations in language use and definition, accuracy in linguistic intent is important. Therefore, the following definitions are provided:

- Intact family – 1) A family comprised of two parents—a father and mother, who are married to each other, with no previous marriages, and have no children that are not biological to both spouses, or 2) A family whose parents may have been previously married, but there were no children from either of those marriages. As such, there are no children in the family that are not biological to both spouses. Intact families with adopted children are not considered in this work.
- Marriage – A legally or formally recognized union of two people as partners in a personal relationship (oxfordictionaries.com). Furthermore, in the context of this paper, the term *marriage*, and any related terms, refers to the recognized marital union of a man and women.
- Non-custodial mother – This paper will use Pieterse’s definition of the non-resident mother “as a mother who, after divorce, lives away from her children most of the time (at least five nights during the week), while the bulk of the childcare and nurturing responsibilities rest elsewhere, usually with the father” (Pieterse, 2009).

Literature Review

In conducting a review of applicable literature, Google Scholar and PsycARTICLES (from the American Psychological Association [APA]) were used as primary sources. Keywords and phrases that were searched included, but were not limited to, “parental divorce,” “non-custodial mothers,” “father-headed households,” “single fathers with custody,” “walk away woman,” “walk away mom,” “walk away mother,” “absent mothers effects” (to which Google Scholar prompted *Did you mean: absent fathers effects*), “absent mothers after divorce,” “mother abandonment effects,” “mother abandonment,” and “when mothers leave their children behind”—which did produce a study, but focused on a mother’s post-divorce absence from the mother’s perspective (Schen, 2005).

Curiosity led to a cursory review of *Dr. Phil* programs—some, of which, did address mother abandonment. Unfortunately, the segments focused more on the mother’s act of abandonment than the short or long-term impact of any intrinsic losses incurred by the lack of a regular maternal influence in the developmental years of the children (McGraw, 2006, 2017, 2015).

Consequently, very little is known about non-custodial mothers (Pieterse, 2009; King, 2008). Literature that discusses the impact of a mother’s absence on the children after the divorce is sparse. Furthermore, research that describes the impact of mother-absence from the children’s or adult children’s perspective is even rarer. This void in data is despite the reality that over three million children were being raised by their fathers in 2002 (King, 2008). The majority of the limited literature details the impact of non-custodial mothers from their perspective and how the non-custodial role impacts them. When the subject of how the children are being impacted by the mother’s absence is investigated, the children’s feelings about the

arrangement are almost universally conveyed through the self-reports or interviews with the mothers or fathers.

Interestingly, even when the opportunity is presented to adult children of divorce first hand to share thoughts and concerns about their missing mother, the chance can be lost. Two books that were written by adult children of divorce whose mothers left after the divorce are *The Love They Lost* by Stephanie Staal and *Generation Ex: Adult children of divorce and the healing of our pain* by Jen Abbas. Though they both address the divorce experience from their personal perspective and those of the adult children of divorce they interviewed, both authors dealt with the loss caused by the divorce from a more global perspective. Neither addressed, in any detail, the impact of their mother leaving in regard to long term personal consequences that correlated specifically to not having a mother in the home.

Mothers' Attributes

In order to ascertain any deficits, it's important to briefly summarize some of the qualities mothers offer. Herrerias (1994) indicates that motherhood, by definition is immersed in nurturing. The relationship and emotional bond between the mother and child is "unique, non-interchangeable, and critical to the healthy development of the child" (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). Research strongly indicates that an emotionally and mentally fit mother provides a variety of intrinsic benefits to their children who have experienced the collapse of the collective parental unit through divorce. Both social learning theory and evolutionary theory give strong support for the tendency for women to have a greater investment in their children (Gunnoe & Hetherington, 2004). Kruk's research indicated that mothers and fathers have different priorities in child rearing. (See Table 1) The mother's list indicates that relational needs received the

highest priority in regard to what would most benefit their children (Kruk, 2015). Love was selected on its own merits, but also, *de facto*, as part of a “stable relationship with both

Table 1	
Parents View of Children's Needs After Divorce-most to least important	
<u>Mothers' View</u>	<u>Fathers' View</u>
Stable relationship with both parents	Physical needs (basic)
Love	Stable relationship with both parents
Parental cooperation	Safety/Security
Stability/Consistency	Love
Safety/Security	Roots
Physical needs (basic)	Parental cooperation
Roots	Stability/Consistency
Chart based on research from Kruk, E. (2015).	

parents” and “parental cooperation” as listed on the table. Love of this type could build a strong foundation for a positive relationship with their children. Research shows that positive mother/child relationships can promote an increased use of active coping rather than avoidant coping, and higher levels of coping efficacy (Vélez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler, 2011). Due to the myriad of external stressors that can impact young people experience parental divorce, successful coping and individuation are critical components for emotional and mental health in childhood and adulthood.

Along these lines, research indicates that mothers were more likely than their male counterparts to provide their children with interpersonal resources like talking with them and

spending time sharing children's activities (Hilton & Devall, 1998). These efforts strengthen the likely development of positive behaviors in the children. Though specific to daughters, Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) found that mothers who conveyed traits including mutual affection, firm but flexible limits, age-appropriate support, and clarity of generational boundaries, contributed to the likelihood of better emotional and relational adaptation as they grew older. The relational nature of mothers may facilitate the application of these necessary elements. However, fathers in one study admitted that meeting the affectional and emotional needs of their children could be challenging (Houtte & Jacobs, 2004). This, with other factors, may contribute to the findings that daughters reported having especially close relationships with their custodial mothers. Therefore, it is logical to conclude, that the absence of the mother would have some impact on the children's success in acquiring these benefits to some degree.

Exploring the Absent Mother Experience

One piece of research, by Sheree Gardner, accessed the impressions of adult children of divorce who had a non-custodial mother and were raised by their father. Her primary method of gathering information was interviewing the participants and drawing conclusions from the interviewees words. Sheree Gardner's dissertation titled, *The Experiences of Divorce Among African American Women with an Absent Mother* (Gardner, 2016) explored the impressions and experiences of women regarding being raised without a mother's ongoing influence. The adult women in this research were all raised solely by their father. There was no stepmother or other in-home female influences.

Gardner's objective was to answer the question "What is the lived experience of African American females with an absent mother after the divorcing of their parents during childhood?" (Gardner, 2016). Her findings distilled into eight themes. These themes were: "(a) feelings of

abandonment, (b) views of appearance during childhood, (c) father relationships, (d) independence and self-reliance, (e) characteristics in motherhood, (f) no tolerance for unhealthy intimate relationships, (g) self-concept and identity, and (h) being strong” (Gardner, 2016).

Ninety percent of the participants discussed experiences of filling a void as a child pertaining to events, situations, and circumstances that are typically reared by a mother (Gardner, 2016). The respondents indicated that they wish their mother had been available to help them navigate the bumps and challenges that occur while developing into a young lady (Gardner, 2016).

Examples include one participant’s observation that, though she felt free to speak with her father about a variety of things, feminine issues (e.g. menstrual cycle and female-related changes in her body) were not discussed with him, because she didn’t think he could relate in a helpful way (Gardner, 2016). Perhaps due to the characteristics of African American hair, the participants all remarked about having bad hair days all the time growing up, and the inability of their fathers to comb their hair correctly, or the way they would have liked—though he tried valiantly (Gardner, 2016). Gardner observed that Bowlby (1988) suggested that a family environment that cannot provide adequate security, emotional availability, or understanding of what is needed to match a child’s specific needs results in either problematic dependency or detachment between children and parents. The participants experienced a significant detachment from their father in reference to their image and appearance (Gardner, 2016). This is an area where the average mother would complement the father’s weakness.

Appearance is very important to females, in particular, and one participant noted being picked on at school because of how she was dressed (Gardner, 2016). While this is not unusual behavior to occur in school, the inference was that this was not an issue of missing the latest

style. It was a result of a father who had the ability to cover the basics, but lacked any intrinsic frame of reference for feminine nuance or style. Consequently, Gardner's participants described a process of trial and error in identifying proper body image and appearance (Gardner, 2016).

Other issues that were raised included a desire to do girly things because they didn't get to do those type things with their fathers (Gardner, 2016). Additionally, feelings of abandonment were expressed by all of the participants. These feelings were conveyed as thoughts of being left alone and wondering where the mother was or why she wasn't visiting (Gardner, 2016).

Overall, Gardner's study supported the literature in how the participants struggled early on with not having their mothers or the input of a woman, and identified difficulties adjusting to changes that arrived after the divorce, puberty, and their appearance (Gardner, 2016).

Research

Objective

The objective of the research was to gather data from adults with divorced parents, whose mother was the non-custodial parent, regarding the psychological impact of not having their mother's regular influence in the home after the divorce. The purpose was to compare the acquired information to existing research and to identify areas where research needs to be conducted.

The survey questions were structured to provide the researcher with the ability to identify and quantify deficits respondents described that occurred as a direct result of their mother's absence from the home following the divorce.

Methods

The survey was not intended to serve as an exhaustive battery. The survey was created on Survey Monkey and consisted of sixteen questions. Demographic questions included the respondent's age, sex, race, religious affiliation—if any, and current marital status.

A group of divorce-related questions were also asked. These inquired if the mother or father was the non-custodial parent and the respondent's age at the time of the divorce. This facilitated the ability to identify what developmental stage was in place at the time of the divorce. Respondents were also asked to what degree the mother's departure impacted them at the time of the divorce and if they felt there was any current impact on their lives.

The survey was composed of multiple choice responses and open-ended questions that required the participant to fill in the blank. The fill-in boxes had a large capacity for input due to the researcher's anticipation that responses could be lengthy.

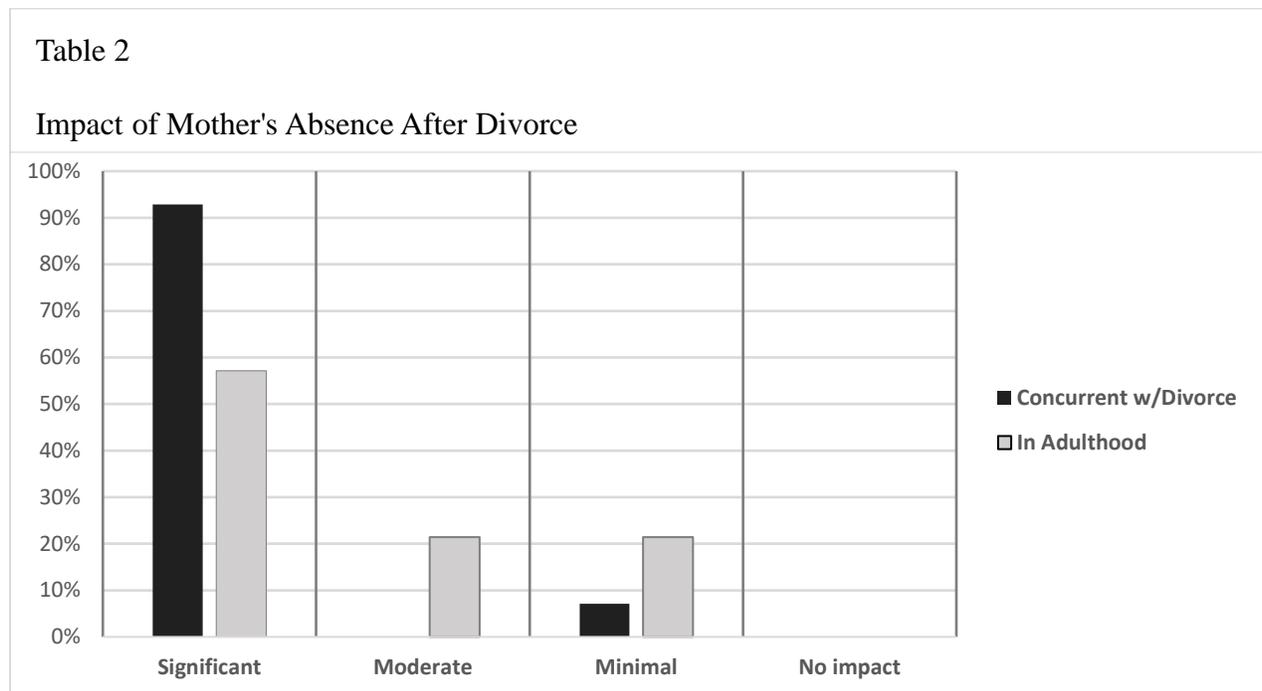
The survey was distributed with instructions that stated the desired participants were adults. Though the option was available, no respondents with an age under 18 completed the survey. Survey participants were made aware of the topic of the survey, the desired requirements for participation—have divorced parents in which the mother was the non-custodial parent, and that the survey would be part of a thesis for a Master's degree. Confidentiality was assured to the participants. Provisions were made to insure identifying information was not made available to the researcher through the survey.

The survey was distributed on at least three different Facebook pages. The link to the survey was also emailed to researcher contacts. Additionally, the survey link was posted on three websites that adult children of divorce and two websites frequent. The survey was available for approximately thirty days.

Results

Fourteen individuals, whose mother was the non-custodial parent after the divorce, completed the survey. Thirteen respondents were female. One respondent was male. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents reported ages between thirty and fifty. Ninety-three percent of the respondents selected *Caucasian* for ethnicity. Ninety-three percent of the respondents selected *Catholic/Christian* as their primary religious practice. The mean age of the participants at the time of the mother’s departure after the divorce was 15.7 years.

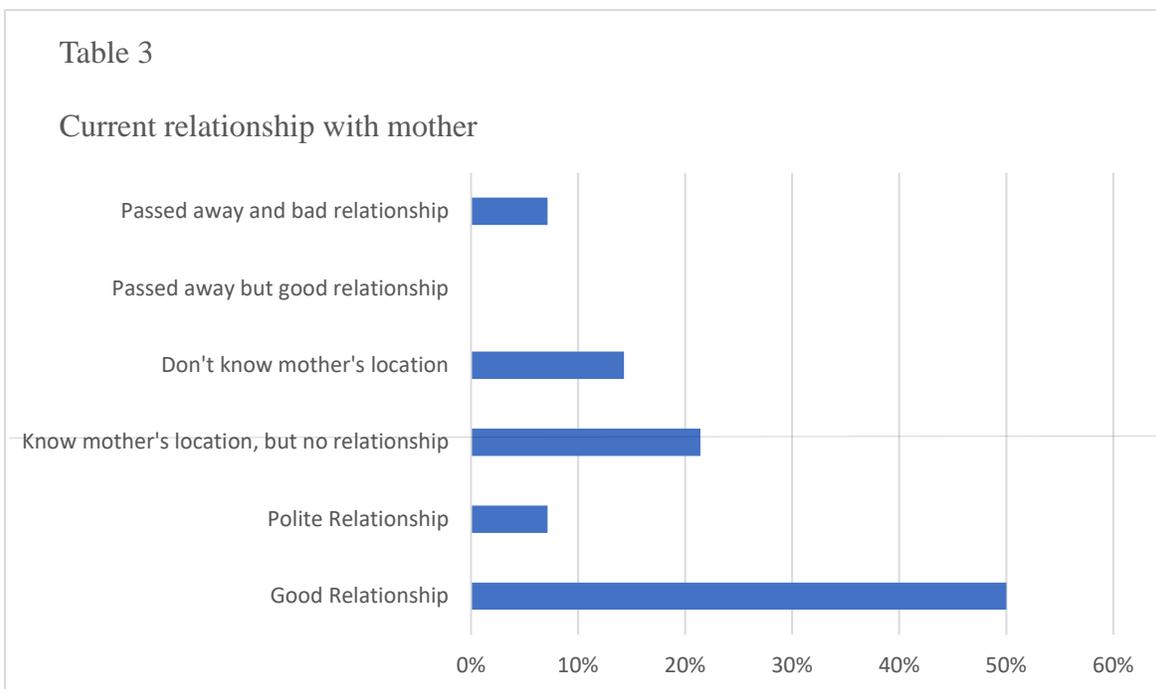
Participants were asked if their mother’s departure had a significant, moderate, minimal, or no impact on their lives at the time of the divorce. Ninety-three percent indicated a significant impact. However, when asked about the impact in their adulthood, the percentage of individuals who indicated that there continued to be a significant impact on their lives dropped to fifty-seven percent. None of the respondents reported *no impact* on their lives at the time of the divorce. All of the respondents indicated their mother’s departure continued to have an impact on their adulthood. (See Table 2)



When participants were asked to describe how they were affected by their mother’s departure after the divorce, a variety of issues were raised, but one theme emerged. Sixty-four percent of respondents described feelings of abandonment or betrayal. One participant noted, “I was going through a lot in my personal life and I did not have my mother there to support me.”

Some respondents indicated that their mother’s absence meant they faced Erickson’s Identity vs Role Confusion stage without a guide. One respondent reported that it “was just me fumbling through life trying to figure out what womanhood means.” Others wrote that their mother’s absence affected their ability in areas like knowing how to be a mother, knowing how to handle female developmental issues (because she didn’t feel comfortable speaking with their father about it), and obtaining a sense and understanding of their femininity.

Participants were also queried as to the quality of their current relationship with their mother. Despite a plethora of responses that were laden with strong negative emotions regarding their mother’s departure and subsequent behavior, half of the respondents indicated they currently have a good relationship with their mother (See Table 3). Though a fifty percent rate



of good relationships was encouraging, one caveat to the “good” response was the repeated indication that the primary reason for the “good” relationship was the participants were intentional in making it so. One respondent replied, “Life is too short to keep punishing her for her mistakes.” This was indicative of the attitude that was prevalent in the “good relationship” responses. The prevailing conveyance was the respondent had a duty or responsibility to mend the frayed or broken relationship with their mother. One possible explanation was the participant’s religious inclinations which would encourage forgiveness and reconciliation efforts that could foster a stronger relationship.

Four of the respondents were affected by Gray Divorce—marriage dissolution among adults over age fifty and after approximately twenty or more years of marriage (Canham, Mahmood, Stott, Sixsmith, & O’Rourke, 2014). All four described one hundred percent causality between their mother leaving and significant negative effects on them personally. These included depression, trust issues in relationships, and challenges maintaining healthy emotional boundaries between themselves and their mothers.

An unexpected phenomenon in the data was the high percentage of respondents that had not experienced their own divorce. Only 7% (one respondent) indicated they were divorced. This rate is contrary to the strong research base that supports the intergenerational transmission of divorce (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). This may be attributed to the high percentage of respondents (ninety-three percent) indicating religious participation.

Limitations

The survey only produced a minimal response. The small sample size creates potential limitations with the application of the results to a broader population. The smaller response is likely due to the significantly reduced size of the targeted demographic of post-divorce

households with non-custodial mothers. The specificity of the requested demographic may also have deterred a broader sharing of the survey by unrelated recipients of the link since people may know a person has divorced parents, but not know which parent left. A future redistribution of the survey should be open to all adults with divorced parents. This would likely produce a significantly larger response and a correspondingly larger pool of the desired demographic.

Another limitation was the survey size limited the number of questions that were asked. Because the survey was not initially intended to serve as an exhaustive battery, the overall qualitative format was restrictive. For example, additional questions could better quantify what “understanding my femininity” means. Question delineation between psychological issues like depression and anxiety, physiological issues like body image and development, and social and individuation issues like awareness, understanding, and control of hair and appearance or masculine identity issues would enable more extensive clarification of the actual issues faced by children whose mothers leave after the divorce.

The survey was also subject to a limitation in the area of adults whose parents divorced after they were adults—Gray Divorce. Adult children can be negatively affected by a parental divorce even though they are older and not living in their parents’ home anymore (Loucks, 2014). Gray Divorce creates a different dynamic and issues that occur from a different point of view. For example, the loss of a mother’s influence during the teen years is different than the loss of a mother’s influence during the marriage and childbearing years. It is important to have questions that reflect this dynamic.

The last limitation, to be discussed here, is it’s possible that those with perceived issues as a result of their mother leaving after their parents’ divorce were more likely to respond to the

survey, thereby affecting their effectiveness as a representative sample. A larger sample would mitigate this concern.

One note about the aforementioned limitations was noted by Pantelis, Bonotis, and Kandri (2015) who wrote that though their findings, like this research, did not facilitate generalization, rich insights regarding participants' experiences related to parental divorce were obtained.

Discussion

Because millions of individuals are impacted by the loss of regular contact with their mothers, it is important to assess the long-term impact of that loss with the same methodology that is used to identify the implications on the children when a father is the non-custodial parent. Challenges to this type of research start with the small sample size—which is substantially less than the bulk of children with divorced parents whose father is the non-custodial parent. Nevertheless, research must be done in this area.

Future research regarding the impact of absent mothers is necessary because the percentage of mothers who are non-custodial as a result of divorce is expected to increase. Gray Divorce is one cause. Brown and Lin note that “married individuals aged 50 and older, including the college-educated, are twice as likely to experience a divorce today as they were in 1990. For married individuals aged 65 and older, the risk of divorce has more than doubled since 1990” (Brown & Lin, 2014). Additionally, the number of single father households—fathers who retain custody of the children for various reasons, is expected to increase (Gardner, 2016).

Future research in this area can facilitate a decrease in the divorce cycle—adult children of divorce breaking up, and creating children of divorce who continue the cycle. Research indicated that “the odds of divorce increased by 69% if the wife’s parents had been

divorced and by 189% if both the wife's and the husband's parents had been divorced” (Amato, & DeBoer, 2001). Cohen and Finzi-Dottan (2005) cite a review of the literature by Van Ijzendoorn (1992) that “provides support for the intergenerational transmission of parenting styles, defined as the earlier generations’ influence on the parenting attitudes and behaviors of the next generation.” Unfortunately, the parenting style of the absent mother is perceived as either unfortunate (those who are incarcerated or struggling with substance abuse) on one end of the spectrum, or selfish—reflecting a woman whose husband and children simply don’t fit her life scheme, on the other end. But regardless of where a mother places on this spectrum, difficulties are created for children caught in the motherless void. The Bible speaks of the woman whose “*children arise and call her blessed*” (Proverbs 31:28). This woman would teach her children the qualities of a godly woman as analogized in Proverbs 31. But in her absence, the intergenerational transmission of womanhood and femininity is usually thwarted. How and why it’s thwarted, and in what way, is still a mystery that needs demystifying with sound qualitative research.

Additionally, adults with divorced parents often report feeling that they are alone in their struggles. Research that validates, or at least identifies, their cognitions and emotions could be very helpful in normalizing what is often perceived as abnormal and isolating.

Research Challenges

Researchers can experience the dilemma that adult children of divorce often exhibit a lack of cohesive awareness of what they may have missed growing up—which makes identification of issues difficult. Parental divorce is a *multidimensional construct* (Shulman, Cohen, Feldman & Mahler, 2006), and children raised in the transitory, challenging, and often disruptive divorce environment require substantial adaptation and coping mechanisms that often

mask the deficit in potential benefits they could be receiving. For example, in the survey, this researcher anticipated not having a mother in the home would be perceived as a deficit when attempting to grasp what it means to be and live as a female individual, wife, and mother. Quite unexpectedly, just a small number of participants named or alluding to being ill equipped for femininity-related issues. Further clarification is needed to establish if there were no additional deficits, or if they did not come to mind during the taking of the survey, or if any issues were missed due to being subconscious in nature.

This researcher's survey and the work of Gardner indicated a general lack of awareness or verbalization of any significant losses other than the father's inadequate skill set when applied to apparel and accessory issues. Research is needed to address the question as to the reasons for this apparent blind spot. Is the omission of any issues due to avoiding the position of painting their mothers in a bad light, or would raising issues reflect poorly on their fathers, or is there simply a lack of awareness? For example, Finley and Schwarz (2007) reported research that indicated children of divorce have an unmet desire for more involvement with their fathers. Would this desire be revealed with open-ended questions? Unless properly worded, this might go unmentioned or unidentified in a survey.

Potential Research Topics

Research on the issues of abandonment and betrayal should be conducted to access the similarities, differences, and situations that trigger the two feelings and the underlying impact of those schemas on future behaviors. Multiple survey respondents in this researcher's survey and the Gardner research mentioned the feeling of abandonment—either feeling abandoned or fearing being abandoned. The fear of being abandoned is a common theme among adults with divorced parents. However, the word *betrayal* was also used in a number of the responses and

this term is not normally listed among common negative effects experienced by children of divorce. Even when addressing Father Hunger—the desire for a missing father’s attention after the divorce, the daughters expressed feelings of being rejected by the father, not betrayed.

Research indicates that having divorced parents may interfere with a girl's accepting and valuing her femininity (Kalter, Riemer, Brickman, & Chen, 1985). Though, often correlated with the father’s absence, it is reasonable to conclude that mothers model aspects of femininity that are important for healthy development. As such, the impact of a mother’s absence on the Identity vs. Confusion level of Erickson’s Developmental Stages is an important area for future research. In Gardner’s research, for example, the participants conveyed a solid love for themselves and understanding of who they are as women who were only raised by their father. “None of the participants discussed any identity issues or problems with trying to find themselves and figure out who they were” (Gardner, 2016). This would tend to indicate that *Identity* succeeded over *Confusion* at that development level of the girls. But would these results be found in a larger sample? Also, with their strong affinity toward their fathers, was their “identity” female, male, female-leaning, male-leaning, or some other combination that is either fixed or fluid depending on the situation?

Research opportunities are also available in the area of Attachment Theory. Given Attachment Theory is based on the close attachment to one figure, who is usually the mother (Lowenstein, 2010), its impact and resilience through and beyond the divorce process is highly applicable. Research already indicates that, for females, a secure attachment pattern was negatively associated with distant or absent mother characteristics, and, for males, a secure attachment pattern was positively associated with emotional attachment to mother (Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009). Furthermore, Gardner cites Rogers as stating the ability of a

female child to adjust and attach appropriately is imperative as it forms behaviors that are carried into adulthood and influence relationships (Gardner, 2016).

Important Research Elements

Coles (2015) notes that more studies focusing on the adult population, where the long-term results can be detected, are essential. Data gathered during the initial period around and after the divorce can draw conclusions that are largely based on coping mechanisms rather than intrinsic cognitive or emotional adjustments.

Ytterberg (2008) states that “understanding young adults' lived experiences—their relationships with custodial fathers and their relationships with noncustodial mothers—requires talking directly to the young adults.” One of the advantages of talking directly to the people involved is you can observe the nuances of expression, inflection, and changes in speech patterns that can reveal additional un conveyed emotions or cognitions.

Capturing emotion is a crucially important part of comprehensive research in the area of divorce. An example of why this is important is illustrated by a recurring experience of this researcher. When speaking about absent fathers to women, this researcher has found that tears will come to many women's eyes very quickly. This is an important part of the equation and can convey far more than checking “yes” to a box that asks if their father's absence was troubling to them. Even a fill-in-the-box answer (particularly now that many surveys are done electronically) doesn't show the tears that fell on the keyboard as the respondent was typing. An individual can state that their mother's absence bothered them at first, but things are good now, but belie the statement with a nonverbal grunt when asked about the mom's new boyfriend. Proverbs 20:5 says, “*The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it*

out.” Drawing out the true cognitions and emotions must be a key objective of research with children of divorce and the adults they become.

Research should continue to consider gender differences when gathering data on divorce ramifications. For example, there is a general tendency of boys to focus on people's observable actions and characteristics, while girls are more likely to empathize with the internal states of another (Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 1989). These inherent differences can affect how boys and girls see the absence of their mother. These tendencies also don't abate in adulthood. Though applying scientific method to identifying mother-absence issues, we are bound by the truth that *“from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female’”* (Mark 10:6) Women tend to be more relational and emotional. Men tend towards the pragmatic. Together the strengths of each come together when *“the two become one flesh”* (Mark 10:8). But divorce separates the strengths and weaknesses of both. Thereby nullifying the complimentary effect of the whole.

Thus, when Gardner's participants identified themselves as strong, and they defined strength as *“the ability to take care of their family, to be non-emotional in decision making, and to be self-sufficient”* (Gardner, 2016), it is made clear in Gardner's work (and other research) that these traits were a direct result of being raised in a male-headed home. It is important for women to have a low tolerance for men who are deceitful, dishonest, and manipulative (Gardner, 2016) as those studied in her research. The literature is replete with examples of daughters without fathers who are susceptible to these types of men. However, is it possible to identify and quantify the strengths from the single-father homes and teach them to single-mothers and vice versa? Research could facilitate an exchange of information among parents with the potential to

foster stronger psychological and physiological strength among children of divorce, and the adults they become.

Lastly, the research opportunities previously listed should be conducted with a comparable control group of individuals from intact families. For example, the strength of the research Judith Wallerstein discussed in her book *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce* was her use of a comparison group of individuals. These were participant contemporaries who were the same age, attended the same school, and lived in the same neighborhood. Consequently, with input from the individuals of intact and divorced environments, Wallerstein was able to “enable the growing up experience and adulthood of each group to stand out in bold relief” (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). It was with this comparison that the difference in cognitive schemas, between those from divorced homes and those from intact families, was revealed. Likewise, a baseline for identifying the deficits a mother’s absence might be created by comparing, for example, how daughters from intact families view their femininity. Basically, if femininity is composed of A through E for girls from intact families, but only A, C, and D are present in girls with absent mothers, research on the deficit of B and E, and its impact, could be conducted.

Conclusion

It is disappointing that only one piece of research reported the views of those individuals whose mother left after the divorce. Divorce is not a popular topic and a strong contention swirls around regarding if parental divorce impacts the children at all, for how long, and in what ways. An even less popular topic and research target are non-custodial mothers who are subject to scorn, ridicule, misunderstanding, and shunning (Babcock, 1998; Kielty, 2008; Drexler, 2011). But regardless of popularity, over three million people have the potential for unknowingly

functioning at less than cognitively and emotionally healthy levels as a direct consequence of their parent's divorce and their mother's departure.

Spiritually speaking, the openings for spiritual warfare abound. Fiery darts like doubt, condemnation, and lies are plentiful in the divorce arena. For example, when a mother chooses to leave the family, it is logical to assume that there could be lingering doubts about a daughter's own ability to mother and not desert their family when the situation gets tough or undesirable. This is mirrored by the common occurrence of adult children of divorce who say they would never put their kids through what they experienced with their parent's breakup, only to divorce themselves—and expect their kids to understand (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). Or, because his own mother left home capriciously, it is likely he will distrust his girlfriend and wife's loyalty to him. This can occur in spite of the fact that the wife has exhibited no behavior that would warrant the errant conclusion.

Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44) will plant lies and distortions in order to create marital discord and, ultimately, the dissolution of marriages. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:16), so Satan works to perpetuate it. Yu, Pettit, Lansford, Dodge, and Bates (2010) cite Lamb's observation that divorce can make it difficult for non-residential parents to maintain strong relationships with their children. This can result in disrupting the mother/child bond and potentially effect generations through intergenerational transmission of dysfunctional behaviors, beliefs, and divorce.

However, with solid research to expose the issues, lies, and distortions, and God's truth to reframe negative cognitions and related behaviors, adult children of divorce can overcome the deficits created by the absence of their mother. And with this, the propensity toward divorce can be decreased.

References

- Abbas, J. (2004). *Generation ex: Adult children of divorce and the healing of our pain*. Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press.
- Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62(4), 1269-1287.
- Amato, P. R., & Anthony, C. J. (2014). Estimating the effects of parental divorce and death with fixed effects models. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76(2), 370-386.
- Amato, P. R., & DeBoer, D. D. (2001). The Transmission of Marital Instability Across Generations: Relationship Skills or Commitment to Marriage?. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63(4), 1038-1051.
- Babcock, G. M. (1998). Stigma, identity dissonance, and the nonresidential mother. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 28(1-2), 139-156.
- Brown, S.L., & Lin, I. (2014). Gray Divorce: A Growing Risk Regardless of Class or Education. Retrieved from <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/growing-risk-brief-report/>
- Bulduc, J. L., Caron, S. L., & Logue, M. E., (2007). The Effects of Parental Divorce on College Students. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*. 46(3/4), 101.
- Canham, S. L., Mahmood, A., Stott, S., Sixsmith, J., & O'Rourke, N. (2014). 'Til Divorce Do Us Part: Marriage Dissolution in Later Life. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 55(8), 591-612
- Carranza, L. V., Kilmann, P. R., & Vendemia, J. M. (2009). Links between parent characteristics and attachment variables for college students of parental divorce. *Adolescence*, 44(174), 253.
- Cohen, O., & Finzi-Dottan, R. (2005). Parent-child relationships during the divorce process: From attachment theory and intergenerational perspective. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 27(1), 81-99.

Coles, R. L. (2015). Single-father families: A review of the literature. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7(2), 144-166.

Conway, J (1990). *Adult children of legal or emotional divorce*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Cui, M., & Fincham, F. D. (2010). The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 17(3), 331-343.

Drexler, P (2011). *When Mothers Leave*. Retrieved from www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-gender-ourselves/201108/when-mothers-leave

Erickson, B. M. (1996). Men's unresolved father hunger: intervention and primary prevention. *Journal of family psychotherapy*, 7(4), 37-62.

Finley, G. E., & Schwartz, S. J. (2007). Father involvement and long-term young adult outcomes: The differential contributions of divorce and gender. *Family Court Review*, 45(4), 573-587.

Gardner, S. G. (2016). *The experiences of divorce among African American women with an absent mother* (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). Capella University, Minneapolis, MN.

Gaspard, T., & Clifford, T. (2016). *Daughters of Divorce: Overcome the Legacy of Your Parents' Breakup and Enjoy a Happy, Long-lasting Relationship*. Naperville, IL:

Sourcebooks, Inc

Gatins, D., Kinlaw, C. R., & Dunlap, L. L. (2013). Do the kids think they're okay? Adolescents' views on the impact of marriage and divorce. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 54(4), 313-328.

Gunnoe, M. L., & Hetherington, E. M. (2004). Stepchildren's perceptions of noncustodial mothers and noncustodial fathers: Differences in socioemotional involvement and

- associations with adolescent adjustment problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18(4), 555-563. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.18.4.555.
- Gustavsen, G. W., Nayga, R. M., & Wu, X. (2016). Effects of parental divorce on teenage children's risk behaviors: Incidence and persistence. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 37(3), 474-487.
- Herrerias, C. (1994). Noncustodial mothers following divorce. *Marriage & Family Review*, 20(1-2), 233-255.
- Hetherington, E. M. (1992). I. Coping with marital transitions: A family systems perspective. *Monographs of the society for research in child development*, 57(2-3), 1-14.
- Hetherington, E. M., Bridges, M., & Insabella, G. M. (1998). What matters? What does not? Five perspectives on the association between marital transitions and children's adjustment. *American Psychologist*, 53(2),
- Hilton, J. M., & Devall, E. L. (1998). Comparison of parenting and children's behavior in single-mother, single-father, and intact families. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 29(3-4), 23-54.
- Houtte, M. V., & Jacobs, A. (2004). Consequences of the sex of the custodial parent on three indicators of adolescents' well-being: Evidence from Belgian data. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 41(3-4), 143-163.
- Huurre, T., Junkkari, H., & Aro, H. (2006). Long-term psychosocial effects of parental divorce. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, 256(4), 256-263.
- Kalter, N. (1987). Long-term effects of divorce on children: A developmental vulnerability model. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57(4), 587.
- Kalter, N., Kloner, A., Schreier, S., & Okla, K. (1989). Predictors of children's postdivorce adjustment. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 59(4), 605.

- Kalter, N., Riemer, B., Brickman, A., & Chen, J. W. (1985). Implications of parental divorce for female development. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24(5), 538-544.
- King, B. R. (2008). The influence of parental gender and custodial status on perceptual stigmatization: Are noncustodial mothers viewed more negatively than other parent types?. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 48(3-4), 55-65.
- Kruk, E. (2012). Father Absence, Father Deficit, Father Hunger: The Vital Importance of Paternal Presence in Children's Lives. Retrieved from www.psychologytoday.com/blog/co-....parenting-after-divorce/201205/father-absence-father-deficit-father-hunger.
- Loucks Greenwood, J. (2014). Effects of a mid-to late-life parental divorce on adult children. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 55(7), 539-556.
- Lowenstein, L. F. (2010). Attachment theory and parental alienation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 51(3), 157-168.
- Lynn, D. B., & Sawrey, W. L. (1959). The effects of father-absence on Norwegian boys and girls. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 59(2), 258.
- Maldonado, S. (2008). Taking account of children's emotions: Anger and forgiveness in renegotiated families. *Va. J. Soc. Pol'y & L.*, 16, 443.
- McGraw, P. C. (2006). *Abandoned*. <https://www.drphil.com/slideshows/abandoned-michael-confronts-his-mother/>
- McGraw, P. C. (2017). *Three boys who claim their mom abandoned them as young boys*. <https://www.drphil.com/videos/three-brothers-who-claim-their-mom-abandoned-them-as-young-boys-describe-what-it-was-like-to-see-her-leave/>
- McGraw, P. C. (2015). *Yes, I Abandoned My Children, but I'm Not a Bad Mom*. <https://www.drphil.com/shows/2340/>

National Center for Health Statistics (1991). Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1988.

Monthly Vital Statistics Report, Vol. 39, No 12(5)2, May 21, 1991. Retrieved from

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/mvsvr/supp/mv39_12s2.pdf

Oxford Dictionaries. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/marriage>

Pantelis, K., Bonotis, K., & Kandri, T. (2015). It attacked my change: An exploratory study with young adults on the impact of divorce and their adjustment processes during adolescence.

Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 56(8), 634-656.

Pieterse, J. T. (2009). *Parenting from a distance: Illuminating the lived experiences of non-*

resident divorced mothers (Unpublished Doctoral dissertation). University of the

Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Schen, C. R. (2005). When mothers leave their children behind. *Harvard review of*

psychiatry, 13(4), 233-243.

Shulman, S., Cohen, O., Feldman, B., & Mahler, A. (2006). Emerging adult men and their

mothers in divorced families: A typology of relationship patterns. *Journal of Social and*

Personal Relationships, 23(3), 465-481.

Staal, S. (2001). *The love they lost: Living with the legacy of our parents' divorce*. New York,

NY: Random House, Inc.

Steinmann, R., Gat, I., Nir-Gottlieb, O., Shahar, B., & Diamond, G. M. (2017). Attachment-

based family therapy and individual emotion-focused therapy for unresolved anger:

Qualitative analysis of treatment outcomes and change processes. *Psychotherapy*, 54(3), 281-

291. doi:10.1037/pst0000116

U.S. Census Bureau. (2011), Marital Events of Americans: 2009. Retrieved from

www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acs-13.pdf

- U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). *The Majority of Children Live with Two Parents, Census Bureau Reports*. Retrieved from www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html
- Vélez, C. E., Wolchik, S. A., Tein, J. Y., & Sandler, I. (2011). Protecting children from the consequences of divorce: A longitudinal study of the effects of parenting on children's coping processes. *Child development, 82*(1), 244-257.
- Wallerstein, J. S., & Corbin, S. B. (1989). Daughters of divorce: Report from a ten-year follow-up. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 59*(4), 593.
- Wallerstein, J. S., Lewis, J. M., & Blakeslee, S. (2000). *The unexpected legacy of divorce: A 25 year landmark study*. New York, NY: Hyperion.
- Warner, H. L., Mahoney, A., & Krumrei, E. J. (2009). When parents break sacred vows: The role of spiritual appraisals, coping, and struggles in young adults' adjustment to parental divorce. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, 1*(4), 233.
- Whitton, S. W., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2008). Effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence. *Journal of Family Psychology, 22*(5), 789-793. doi:10.1037/a0012800
- Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., Tein, J. Y., Mahrer, N. E., Millsap, R. E., Winslow, E., & Reed, A. (2013). Fifteen-year follow-up of a randomized trial of a preventive intervention for divorced families: Effects on mental health and substance use outcomes in young adulthood. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 81*(4), 660.
- Wolfinger, N. H. (2005). *Understanding the divorce cycle: The children of divorce in their own marriages*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 109.

- Ytterberg, D. A. (2008) Thoughts and Feelings About Divorce: Young Adults from Father-headed Households. Retrieved from https://arizona.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10150/192271/azu_etd_mr0246_sip1_mpdf;jsessionid=CF48AA7744C86AB027EA5A1D0C38D659?sequence=1
- Yu, T., Pettit, G. S., Lansford, J. E., Dodge, K. A., & Bates, J. E. (2010). The interactive effects of marital conflict and divorce on parent–adult children's relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(2), 282–292.
- Zhai, J. E., Ellison, C. G., Glenn, N. D., & Marquardt, E. (2007). Parental divorce and religious involvement among young adults. *Sociology of Religion*, 68(2), 125–144.

I. Appendix

Survey for Adults Whose Mother Left After the Divorce.

Thank you for taking this survey.

I'm gathering research for my Masters thesis on the impact of a mother leaving after the divorce. A substantial amount of research tells of the impact on the children when a father leaves, but very little, if any, speaks to when the mother leaves. Your thoroughness and honesty is greatly appreciated.

This survey is confidential. No identifiers are received, reviewed, or maintained. Please complete this survey by March 31, 2018.

The results of this survey will be summarized, upon the completion of the thesis, at adultchildrenofdivorce.net.

Please feel free to pass this link to people (siblings, relatives, friends, coworkers) who could complete this survey.

Thank you helping to shed light on this very important, but overlooked issue.

* 1. What is your gender?

Female

Male

* 2. What is your age?

17 or younger

18-20

21-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60 or older

* 3. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status?

Married

Widowed

Divorced

Divorced and remarried

Separated

In a domestic partnership or civil union

Single, never married, but cohabiting with a significant other

Single, never married

4. Please describe your race/ethnicity.

5. Do you identify with any of the following religions? (Please select all that apply.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Protestantism | <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Catholicism | <input type="checkbox"/> Hinduism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Christianity | <input type="checkbox"/> Native American |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Judaism | <input type="checkbox"/> Inter/Non-denominational |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Islam | <input type="checkbox"/> No religion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) | |

* 6. Were you raised without your mother present after the divorce?

- Yes
 No

* 7. Please enter your age when your mother left after the divorce?

* 8. How did your mother leaving your home after the divorce affect you at that time?

- It had a significant impact on me
 It had a moderate impact on me
 It had a minimal impact on me
 It had no impact on me

* 9. Please describe how you were affected by your mother leaving after the divorce.

* 10. How has your mother leaving continued to affected you in adulthood?

- It had a significant impact on me in adulthood
 It had a moderate impact on me in adulthood
 It had a minimal impact on me in adulthood
 It had no impact on me in adulthood

* 11. Please describe how your mother's leaving has affected you in adulthood?

* 12. How would you describe your current relationship with your mother?

- We have a good relationship
- We have a polite relationship
- I know where she is located, but we don't have a relationship
- I don't know where she is located
- She has passed away, but we had a good relationship
- She has passed away and we didn't have a good relationship

* 13. Please explain your answer to Question #12.

* 14. Regarding the impact on the children, do you believe there is a difference between the father leaving or the mother leaving after a divorce?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- I have no opinion on this question

15. Which parent has the greater impact when leaving?

- Father
- Mother

16. Please explain your answer to question #15