

# Being Caught in the Middle of Inter-Parental Conflict: Relationship between Inter-Parental Conflict and Attitudes towards Marriage among Male and Female Adolescents from Divorced Families

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## Abstract

Children of divorced family are at greater risk to divorce themselves in later years. In an attempt to understand the process of “transmission of divorce” across generations, the current study examined the potential moderation role of gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced Muslim family. A total of 341 secondary school students across three states in Malaysia were recruited to participate in the current study. Results of multivariate analysis revealed that being male and exposure to high inter-parental conflict predicted less positive attitudes towards marriage. Gender has no moderating effects in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage. These findings underscore the deleterious effects of inter-parental conflict on adolescents.

**Keywords:** attitudes towards marriage, inter-parental conflict, gender, divorced Muslim family

## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a stage which is often accompanied by various colourful fantasies and imaginations. One of the most luminous fantasies among adolescents is yearning for future married life. Adolescents often express high desirability towards marriage while being optimistic towards their future married life (Bachman, Johnston, & O'Malley, 2014; Wood, Avellar, & Goesling, 2008). In examining data from the Monitoring the Future study which spanning from 1976 through 1992, Schulenberg, Bachman, Johnston, and O'Malley (1994) noted that adolescents consistently displayed positive attitudes towards marriage across the study years. That is, most adolescents (90.8%) rated having a good marriage and family life as quite or extremely important for them (Schulenberg et al., 1994). Clearly, the beautiful fantasy of future married life signifies the positive attitudes towards marriage among adolescents.

On the other hand, analyses of gender differences revealed that female adolescents tend to express more positive attitudes towards marriage than male adolescents (Ganong, Coleman, & Brown, 1981; Goslin, 2014; Servaty & Weber, 2011). As an illustration, Shukla, Deodiya, and Singh (2013) developed Marriage Perception Scale (MPS) in order to measure attitudes towards marriage among 1,569 adolescents in Varanasi, India. Consequently, they found that 31.6% females and 17.4% males reported high marital attitudes. This implied that more females are optimistic towards their future marriage than males.

### 1.1 Attitudes towards Marriage Following Parental Divorce

Given the positive attitudes towards marriage among adolescents, the experience of parental divorce at this stage might completely ruin the lovely fantasy of future married life. Mounting evidences pointed a close relationship between parental marital status and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents (Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin, 2003; Pan, 2014; Riggio & Weiser, 2008; Wood et al., 2008). Specifically, adolescents from divorced family are more likely to show negative attitudes towards marriage than those from intact family. For instance,

Sodermans, Vanassche, Bastaits, Matthijs, and Van Peer (2010) demonstrated that adolescents from divorced family tend to perceive higher chance of getting divorce in future than their intact counterparts.

As a matter of fact, divorce is similar to other infectious disease, where it can be transmitted to the next generation. Existing evidence indicated that individuals who experienced parental divorce are at greater risk to divorce themselves in later years (Cui, Fincham, & Durtschi, 2011; Teachman, 2002), signalling a need of research focusing on offspring of divorced families.

### *1.2 Divorce in Malaysia*

Although the detrimental effect of divorce is well-documented in the literature, it is worrying that the total divorce case in Malaysia skyrocketed from 29373 cases in 2008 to 38273 cases in 2012 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013). In addition, the divorce rate among Muslim families lies between 17.40% and 20.68% from 2008 to 2012, while the divorce rate among non-Muslim families lies between 10.14% and 15.11% within the same period. Conceivably, Muslim families in Malaysia are at greater risk to suffer from the detrimental effect of divorce than non-Muslim families. In light of this consideration, the current study put the main focus among divorced Muslim families in Malaysia.

### *1.3 Mechanism Affecting Attitudes towards Marriage among Adolescents from Divorced Families*

In an attempt to understand the process of “transmission of divorce” across generations, various studies examined mechanisms that can change attitudes towards marriage among adolescents (Cavanagh & Sullivan, 2009; Hewitt, Skrbis, & Western, 2007). One possible mechanism which might greatly affect adolescents is the exposure to inter-parental conflict. Research consistently displayed that adolescents who are exposed to intense inter-parental conflict have greater tendency to perceive negative attitudes towards marriage (Cui et al., 2011; Jennings, Salts, & Smith, 1992; Tasker, 1993; Tasker & Richards, 1994; Valerian, 2001). For example, Dennison and Koerner (2006) found a significant negative relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents who aged from 11 to 17 years old. Indeed, exposure to overt inter-parental conflict will generate bad impression about marriage among adolescents.

However, there are counter arguments which opposed the mentioned relationship, and suggested no significant relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents (Stone & Hutchinson, 1993). Given the contradictory claims, Dennison and Koerner (2006) suggested that there may be moderators that influence the magnitude of the aforementioned relationship. That is, gender is suspected to be a potential moderator in the relationship (Tasker & Richards, 1994).

Of the many studies which examined the potential moderating role of gender, there is no single conclusion which can be drawn on the direction of gender differences. The current literature yielded mixed findings on the moderating role of gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage. For example, there are evidences which suggested that females are more vulnerable to inter-parental conflict than males (Cummings & Davies, 2011; Gore, Aseltine, & Colten, 1993; Unger, Brown, Tressell, & McLeod, 2000). However, there are also counter arguments which claimed that males are at greater risk for maladjustment than females following parental divorce (Branje, Hale, Frijns, & Meeus, 2010; Brown & Portes, 2006). Nevertheless, some other studies found no moderation effect (Caples & Barrera, 2006; Eberhart, Shih, Hammen, & Brennan, 2006). One possible reason for the inconclusive findings is that parental divorce may affect males and females in different ways. As an illustration, Hetherington, Bridges, and Insabella (1998) found that male adolescents reported more conduct problems after parental divorce, while females reported more depression. Upon the inconsistent findings from the literatures, it seems worthwhile to further investigate the moderation effect of gender on the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced family.

It is also noteworthy that several background variables be considered when examine adolescents' adjustment from parental divorce, which includes age (Usakli, 2013) and frequency of contact with father (de Wit, 2013; Flouri, 2008). In general, it is commonly agreed that adolescents at older age and maintain frequent contact with father tend to cope better from parental divorce than those who are younger and reported less frequent contact with father. Hence, in order to achieve more accurate findings, the adolescents' age and frequency of contact with father is controlled in the current study.

### *1.4 Research Objectives*

The objectives of the current study are:

- (1) To compare differences in attitudes towards marriage between male and female adolescents,

- (2) To determine the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents, and
- (3) To examine the moderating role of gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents.

**2. Methodology**

*2.1 Participants and Procedure*

A total of 341 adolescents from divorced Muslim family in Malaysia participated in the current study. The respondents were aged between 13 to 18 years old, with an average age of 14.84 years old (standard deviation = 1.369). The respondents were 152 males (44.6%) and 189 females (55.45) secondary school going adolescents.

Respondents for this study were drawn from a project on children and adults from divorced Muslim family which was funded by *Geran Putra - Inisiatif Putra Berkumpulan* (IPB) Universiti Putra Malaysia. Permissions for data collection in secondary schools were approved by Ministry of Education Malaysia, relevant state education departments, Ethics Committee for Research involving Human Subjects of Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM), and school principals. Secondary school students who fulfilled the criteria of the study identified by school counselors were invited to participate in the project.

*2.2 Instrumentation*

Data were collected through self-administered questionnaire. The participants were asked to provide some demographic background, such as gender, age, and frequency of contact with father. The frequency of contact with father was dummy coded into (0) “once in few months or no contact” and (1) “at least once in a month”.

Attitudes towards marriage were measured using General Attitudes toward Marriage Scale (Park & Rosén, 2013). This 10-items measure instructed participants to rate their perception towards marriage by using a 7-point likert scale, ranging from (0) “strongly disagree” to (6) “strongly agree”. All items score were summed up upon adjusting for inverse score, where the total score ranged between 0 and 70. Higher total score indicates more positive attitudes towards marriage. In the present study, the internal consistency of this measure was relatively good (Cronbach’s alpha = .882).

Inter-parental conflict was measured by The Overt Marital Conflict (Porter & O’Leary, 1980). This measure was initially designed to measure overt marital conflict between spouses. This measure consists of 10 items which required the participants to rate the level of conflict between their parents after divorced. Participants were asked to rate the occurrence of several inter-parental conflict scenarios. Response options were designed in 5-point likert scale, ranging from (1) “very often” to (5) “never”. The seventh item of this measure implement a different scale than other items, which ranged from (1) “More than 75%” to (5) “Less than 10%”. The internal consistency of this measure in the present study was relatively high (Cronbach’s alpha = .926).

**3. Result**

*3.1 Independent t-Test*

Independent t-test was conducted to compare the differences in attitudes towards marriage among male and female adolescents. The result of the independent t-test was presented in Table 1. In line with the past findings (Blakemore, Lawton, & Vartanian, 2005; Shukla et al., 2013), the current result unveiled significant gender differences in terms of attitudes towards marriage. Females of the current study adopted more positive attitudes towards marriage than males (t-value = -3.297, p < .01). In other words, females tend to view marriage as an important element in life and show more eagerness to marry than males. In contrast, males tend to report more fears and doubts on marriage while expecting future marriage to be unsuccessful.

Table 1. Attitudes towards marriage between male and female adolescents

Variable	Mean Score	t-value	p
Gender		-3.297	.001
Male	33.71		
Female	39.22		

### 3.2 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among the respondents. The result was presented in Table 2. The pattern of relationship between the variables is consistent with the previous findings (Dennison & Koerner, 2008), where significant negative relationship was found between the variables ( $r = -.188$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Adolescents who experienced higher inter-parental conflict tend to have more negative attitudes towards marriage than their counterparts.

Table 2. Correlation of inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage

Variable	Attitudes towards marriage	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Inter-parental conflict	-.188	.001

### 3.3 Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Hierarchical multiple regression was performed to examine the moderating role of gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among the respondents. The result was presented in Table 3. In step 1, the respondents' age and frequency of contact with father were entered into the regression against attitudes towards marriage. The model was significant with F value of 9.783 (sig-F < .001). Both of the control variables explained around 5.5% of the variance in attitudes towards marriage ( $R^2 = .055$ ).

In step 2, inter-parental conflict and gender was entered into the regression simultaneously. The model was significant with F value of 11.053 (sig-F < .001). Both inter-parental conflict ( $\beta = -.182$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and gender ( $\beta = .152$ ,  $p < .01$ ) were found to be significant predictors for attitudes towards marriage. All of the variables in step 2 explained for 11.7% of the variance in attitudes towards marriage ( $R^2 = .117$ ). This implies that inter-parental conflict and gender explained for 6.2% of the variance in attitudes towards marriage ( $R^2$  change = .062).

In step 3, the interaction between inter-parental conflict and gender was taken into account. Given the F value of 8.884 (sig-F < .001), the model is significant. Consistent with the past evidences (Dennison & Koerner, 2006; Sodermans et al., 2010), the current findings also indicate that inter-parental conflict is a significant predictor of attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced Muslim family ( $\beta = -.211$ ,  $p < .01$ ). While adolescence is a stage which accompanied by dazzling imaginations of future married life, witness of fierce and intense inter-parental conflict will shatter this beautiful fantasy into pieces. This finding provides some clues on the process of "transmission of divorce" across generations. Essentially, the experience of inter-parental conflict will directly influence the perceptions about marriage among adolescents, such as making them to perceive marriage as disadvantageous or even nightmarish.

While many of the past studies demonstrated gender differences in attitudes towards marriage among young adults (Goslin, 2014; Servaty & Weber, 2011), the current study adds to the literature by linking the gender to attitudes towards marriage among adolescents. Particularly, gender was statistically proven to be a significant predictor for attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced Muslim family ( $\beta = .152$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Female adolescents in the current study showed more positive attitudes towards marriage than male adolescents.

Last but not least, the potential moderation effect of gender in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage was tested. Surprisingly, the interaction between inter-parental conflict and gender has no predictive power on attitudes towards marriage ( $\beta = .041$ ,  $p = .583$ ) and the  $R^2$  remained almost unaffected ( $R^2$  change = .001). This implies that gender has no moderating effect in the relationship between inter-parental conflict and attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced Muslim family. Given that family is the central determinant of development among adolescents (Marshall & Henderson, 2014; Montemayor & Adams, 1985), being caught in the middle of inter-parental conflict is undoubtedly deleterious for adolescents regardless of their gender. Hence, it is reasonable that the magnitude of the relationship is similar for both male and female adolescents.

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis for adolescents' attitudes towards marriage

Variable	Step 1			Step 2			Step 3		
	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β	B	SEB	β
Age	-1.354	.594	-.121*	-1.211	.577	-.108*	-1.189	.579	-.106*
Frequency of contact with father	6.271	1.687	.197***	6.601	1.641	.208***	6.661	1.647	.209***
Inter-parental conflict				-.289	.083	-.182**	-.336	.119	-.211**
Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female)				4.688	1.592	.152**	4.675	1.594	.152**
Inter-parental conflict*gender							.875	1.593	.041
F		9.783***			11.053***			8.884***	
R <sup>2</sup>		.055			.117			.118	
R <sup>2</sup> Change					.062			.001	

Note. B = Unstandardized Coefficients B; SEB = Unstandardized Coefficients Standard Error; β = Standardized Coefficients Beta

\* p < .05; \*\* p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

To recap, significant gender difference in attitudes towards marriage was found among adolescents from divorced Muslim family, where males particularly displayed statistically more negative attitudes towards marriage than females. Hence, divorced parents and school counsellors should pay extra concerns for males from divorced Muslim family. Early signs of fear or hatred towards marriage should be handled with care before it exacerbate into more severe problems in later years.

It is completely normal for having some level of conflicts and disagreements between ex-spouses. Even so, being stuck in the middle of inter-parental conflict can be a painful experience for their adolescent-aged children. The result of the current study confirmed the deleterious effects of inter-parental conflict against attitudes towards marriage among adolescents from divorced Muslim family. More precisely, adolescent who perceived less hostility between parents are more likely to possess positive attitudes towards marriage. Conversely, adolescents who perceived serious conflict between parents tend to develop less positive attitudes towards marriage. They are more inclined to express fear towards marriage.

Seeing that gender has no moderating effects in the aforementioned relationship, it is most probable that inter-parental conflict is equally deleterious for both male and female adolescents. Therefore, divorced parents are advised to avoid overt conflict right in front of their children. The outbreak of open hostility between parents will destroy the beautiful fantasy of marriage among their adolescent-aged children.

There are a few limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional research design of the current study provides limited information on the direction of causality. Although the result demonstrated inter-parental conflict as a significant predictor for attitudes towards marriage among adolescents, the direction of causality can only be accessed through longitudinal study. Second, all participants of the present study were recruited from four states in Malaysia, namely *Selangor*, *Kedah*, *Johor*, and *Pahang*. Hence, implication of the current findings should not go beyond this scope. Third, all participants in the current study are from divorced Muslim families. We invite future study to examine this issue among non-Muslim families, which can further build on the literature. Last but not least, data of the current study was collected through self-administered questionnaire. Thus, some level of respondent bias is inevitable. Future research is recommended to examine the current issue using in-depth interview, which will provide a clearer picture on the inner world of the adolescents.

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