Attachment Style Differences
in the Parental Interactions
and Adaptation Patterns
of Divorcing Parents

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ABSTRACT. A longitudinal design was used to explore attachment style
differences in the positive (cohesion, expressiveness, support) and negative
(conflict, verbal aggression) interactions of divorcing parents. One hundred
men and women participated within one week of attending a court-man-
dated parenting workshop; 63 provided Time 2 data three months later. At
Time 1, securely attached participants reported enhanced positive, and re-
duced negative, parental interactions compared to those with insecure at-
tachment styles. Over time, participants experienced increases in positive
parental interactions and decreases in negative interactions, a pattern most
dramatic for those with insecure attachment styles. Implications of these in-
dividual differences for program development and implementation are dis-
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KEYWORDS. Attachment style, parental divorce, parenting, divorce
education, parental conflict, divorce adaptation

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Parental divorce is one of the most prevalent stressful transitions experienced by both children and adults in contemporary American society. Although children’s adjustment to divorce is a controversial issue, researchers generally agree that while many children are resilient and experience few long-term negative effects from parental divorce, others may react more profoundly to this difficult transition. Divorce involves a course of events with a range of stressors, including financial strain, change in residence, change in parent-child relationships, and continued parental conflict. Individual adaptation to this life change has been shown to follow a range of trajectories (Bursik, 1991).

Attachment style is believed to play a critical role in negotiating difficult life transitions such as divorce. Research has demonstrated that attachment style is associated with differences in interpersonal style, emotion regulation, and coping style (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998). Given the relationship between adult attachment style and psychological adjustment, this individual differences variable may predict differential patterns of both positive and negative parental interactions, as well as differential patterns of adaptation during the divorce process. The aim of this study was to explore individual differences in these parental behaviors viewed as crucial to post-divorce family functioning.

PARENTAL RESPONSES THAT MODERATE CHILDREN’S POST-DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

Recent studies of children’s post-divorce adjustment have explored numerous factors that may undermine or support the adjustment of children as they cope with the challenges of their new family situation. Researchers have identified parental conflict and lack of cooperation as significant predictors of children’s adjustment in divorced families (Amato, 2000; Hanson, 1999; Kelly, 2000; Morrison & Coiro, 1999; Schmidtgall, King, Zarski, & Cooper, 2000). When divorce is associated with increased stress and conflict, children show more adjustment problems in divorced families than in high-conflict non-divorced families (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). Further, research indicates that the frequency and intensity of parental conflict, as well as the manner of its resolution, play a critical role in children’s adjustment to divorce. High-frequency conflict is linked to more negative consequences for children (Buehler, Krishnakumar, & Stone, 1998), and high-intensity conflict is associated with the presence of externalizing and internalizing symptoms in older children and adolescents (Cummings & Davies,
1994). Chronic, unresolved conflict between parents has been linked to greater emotional insecurity in children (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Alternatively, some researchers argue that it is not the overall level of conflict that is predictive of children’s adjustment to divorce, but rather the degree of parental cooperation and ability to resolve parental conflict. Mothers and fathers whose cooperative parenting provided the opportunity for their children to be loved and nurtured by both parents greatly improved the children’s ability to cope and adjust to the divorce (Garrity & Baris, 1994). The quality of parenting that continues beyond divorce has also been identified as a strong moderator of outcomes for children of divorce.

**PREDICTING DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSES TO DIVORCE: ATTACHMENT THEORY**

Less attention has been paid to predisposing parental characteristics that may influence the process of adaptation during the divorce process. Attachment theory provides a coherent framework for understanding interpersonal adaptation, coping styles, and psychological adjustment (Cooper et al., 1998). Attachment theorists have suggested that the formation of an attachment relationship between infant and primary caregiver is essential for the physical and psychosocial development of the child (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The early coordinated relationship between infant and primary caregiver becomes internalized as a mental model including representations of self and representations of relationships. Throughout life, the internalized working model is invoked to conceptualize one’s social world, contributing to the differential experience of emotion, coping style, and psychological adjustment (Cooper et al., 1998). Individual differences in parental attachment style may hamper or facilitate negotiation of life changes such as separation and divorce.

Grounded in empirical research based on mother and infant interactional dyads, Ainsworth and her colleagues delineated three attachment styles, typically called secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978). More recently, researchers have proposed that the three attachment styles exist in adulthood and continue to influence the ways in which adults experience romantic love. Hazan and Shaver (1987) modified the existent descriptions of attachment style in order to increase applicability to adults. They defined secure individuals as those who feel comfortable getting close to and
depending on others. Avoidant individuals are described as feeling uncomfortable getting close to or depending on others. Anxious-ambivalent individuals have a strong desire to get close to others in conjunction with a fear of abandonment and rejection.

Attachment styles shape personal expectations about love and ultimately lead to particular sorts of relationships (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). Individuals with a secure attachment style described their love experiences as characteristically including intimacy, closeness, supportiveness, and trust. Fear of intimacy and difficulty depending on others characterized the love experiences of avoidant individuals. Anxious-ambivalent individuals described their love experiences as being characterized by obsession, emotional instability, jealousy, worry about being abandoned, and desire for union (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991). Researchers have also demonstrated predictable links between adult attachment style and relationship quality in dating couples (Collins & Read, 1990; Stackert & Bursik, 2003).

Life disruptions, such as divorce, typically “activate the attachment system,” to use Bowlby’s phrase, and reveal the strength of attachment style (Berscheid, 1983). A securely attached person who experiences the loss of a loved one through divorce may suffer great distress; it may be buffered, however, by the presence of inner resources that help secure individuals to cope effectively with the loss, often by seeking appropriate social support. Insecurely attached individuals may experience overwhelming levels of distress upon the termination of a marriage. The divorce may reactivate earlier unresolved separations from attachment figures, leading to a flood of negative feelings. Unlike secure individuals, insecure individuals may be unable to cope effectively with the distress. Insecure persons tend to adopt maladaptive coping strategies that hinder the resolution of the grief process and have a deleterious effect on psychological well-being (Mikulincer & Florian, 1996). For example, avoidant individuals may tend to withdraw from others both emotionally and physically. As adult attachment style predicts the differential experience of relationships, emotion, and coping style, it is likely to predict both adjustment to difficult life transitions and the ability to utilize and incorporate directives provided in an intervention.

**DEVELOPMENT AND PROLIFERATION OF DIVORCING PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Recognition of the challenges that children face in adapting to their parents’ divorce has led to the widespread development of interventions
designed for children and parents (Hodges, 1986; McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999). In concordance with the extensive development and implementation of divorce intervention programs across the country, the Chief Justice of the Probate and Family Court of Massachusetts designed and implemented a parent education program in the interests of minor children. The program was designed to achieve the following seven goals: reduce parental conflict; increase communication; teach co-parenting techniques; provide normalizing data; increase parents’ awareness of financial responsibility; decrease problems in children; and decrease court litigation. By the end of 1999, Standing Order 1-99 mandating parent education for all divorcing parents with minor children was in effect for each county within the state of Massachusetts (Dunphy, 1999). While different program providers vary slightly in format and presentation of the information, the Probate and Family Court requires compliance with certain guidelines regarding program length, size, and fee, as well as facilitator training and background.

Despite the proliferation of court-connected education programs for divorcing parents, empirical data documenting the efficacy of divorce education programs is limited (Arbuthnot & Gordon, 1996; McKenry et al., 1999; Whitworth, Capshew, & Abell, 2002). The majority of evaluations are self-reports of consumer satisfaction derived from exit questionnaires upon completion of the divorce education programs, rather than empirical studies of a program’s effectiveness as a catalyst for change in parental attitudes and behaviors (Geasler & Blaisure, 1999; Stone, Clark, & McKenry, 2000). Overall, divorce program evaluations indicate that parents who are mandated to attend may initially be angry, resistant and bitter, but report high levels of satisfaction with the program upon completion (Brown, Portes, Cambron, Zimmerman, Rickert, & Bissmeyer, 1994; Geasler & Blaisure, 1999).

This study examined the parental functioning of men and women participating in court-mandated parent education programs at seven different sites in Massachusetts. Given the relationship between attachment style and psychological adjustment, the attachment style of participants was expected to predict differential levels of adjustment and patterns of adaptation. Specifically, insecurely attached individuals were expected to demonstrate a greater need for the parent education program given their more limited adaptive coping styles and inner resources. For the avoidantly attached individual, maladaptive coping styles involving compulsive self-reliance or a dismissing attitude may interfere with the ability to effectively co-parent during the divorce process. Similarly, individuals with an anxious-ambivalent attachment
style may be more likely to experience heightened levels of distress and to utilize maladaptive coping strategies; they may have particular difficulty attempting to mitigate conflict with their former spouse. Based on both theory and empirical research, a number of specific hypotheses were examined in this study.

**HYPOTHESES**

*Time 1 Positive and Negative Parental Interactions.* At Time 1, participants with a secure adult attachment style were expected to score higher than those with an insecure attachment style on three indicators of positive parental interaction: cohesion, expressiveness, and support. Avoidantly attached participants were expected to report lower levels of expressiveness than both the securely attached and anxiously attached participants. Participants with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style were expected to score higher than securely and avoidantly attached participants on measures of negative parental interaction: conflict and verbal aggression.

*Time 2 Positive and Negative Parental Interactions.* Insecurely attached participants (both avoidant and anxious-ambivalent) were expected to report greater improvement in parental functioning over time, compared to securely attached participants. Between Time 1 and Time 2, insecurely attached participants were expected to report greater increases in positive parental interaction (cohesion, expressiveness, support), compared to securely attached participants. Insecurely attached participants were also expected to report the greatest decreases in negative parental interactions (conflict and verbal aggression).

*Workshop Satisfaction.* Based on previous research demonstrating satisfaction with similar programs, participants were expected to report moderate to high levels of satisfaction with the court-mandated parenting education workshop for divorcing parents.

**METHOD**

*Participants*

Time 1 participants included 100 individuals, 29 men and 71 women, who attended a court-mandated parent education program for divorcing
parents and completed questionnaires one week following attendance. Participants at Time 1 ranged in age from 22- to 53-years-old with the average age being 39.8 (SD = 7.10). Ninety-five of the participants were Caucasian, three were Hispanic or Latino, one was Asian American, and one was of mixed racial background. In terms of educational level, three of the participants had discontinued their education at the high school level; 11 were high school graduates; 27 attended college but did not graduate; 34 had earned a bachelor’s degree; and 25 had completed a graduate degree.

Length of participants’ marriages ranged from less than one year to 33 years with the average duration of marriage being 12.28 years (SD = 7.39). Twenty-nine percent of participants had only one child, 48% had two children, and 23% had three or more children. Seventy-five percent of participants reported sharing joint legal custody of their children with their former spouse. Twenty-eight percent of participants had joint physical custody of their children, 51% reported sole physical custody, 16% reported that their spouse had custody, and 5% reported that custody of their children was split with different children residing with each parent. Eighty-three percent of participants had been married once, while 17% had been previously married.

Sixty-three individuals, 19 men and 44 women, who completed data collection at both Time 1 (one week following workshop attendance) and Time 2 (three months following workshop attendance) served as Time 2 participants. Chi-squares and t-tests indicated that the Time 2 participants did not significantly differ from the Time 1 only participants in terms of age, educational level, or length of marriage.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited at court-mandated parenting education courses in several Massachusetts locations: Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline, Lexington, Danvers, Newburyport, and Northampton. Attendees of the workshops listened to a brief presentation that introduced the research project as an attempt to assess the effectiveness of the workshop they were attending. Attendees who expressed an interest in volunteering for the research were asked to complete a contact information sheet for the purposes of receiving questionnaires by mail.

The initial data collection was completed approximately one week following completion of the court-mandated parenting education program (Time 1). Participants were mailed a packet of self-report measures, including an informed consent form. They were instructed to
complete the questionnaires and return the packet in the enclosed addressed and stamped return envelope. Approximately three months following completion of the workshop (Time 2), participants received the follow-up packet of measures along with a stamped return envelope.

**Measures**

**Demographic Data.** Personal data, such as age, gender, and education were obtained from a short questionnaire completed at Time 1. The measure also assessed additional information regarding the separation and divorce process, including custody arrangements.

**Adult Attachment Style.** Adult Attachment Style was measured at Time 1 using the Hazan and Shaver General Relationship Attitudes measure (1990). The General Relationship Attitudes measure was adapted from Ainsworth, Blehars, Waters, and Wall’s (1978) descriptions of infant attachments. Hazan and Shaver translated these descriptions into language appropriate to adult romantic relationships, yielding a single-item measure of three attachment styles to be endorsed by the participants. The measure consists of three vignettes describing relational styles; participants responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from **unlike me** (1) to **like me** (7). Further, a final question asked participants to indicate which one description of the three adult attachment styles was most representative of their feelings and experiences.

**Positive Parental Interaction.** Positive parental interactions were assessed at Time 1 and Time 2 using three different measures. Familial cohesion and expressiveness were assessed using two subscales of the Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1994). The FES is composed of 90 true-fals statements comprising 10 subscales that measure the social environment of the family. The cohesion subscale measures the degree of aid, support, and commitment family members provide for one another. The expressiveness subscale measures the degree to which family members feel able to express their feelings directly. A raw score is calculated for each of the subscales which is then converted into a standard score based on a conversion table in the FES Manual. The FES subscales have both adequate internal consistency and good test-retest reliability (Moos & Moos, 1994). The support subscale of the Quality of Co-parental Communication Scale (QCCS; Ahrons, 1981) was used as a third indicator of positive parental interaction. This scale was developed to assess the relationship between divorced parents as they began the process of redefining their relationship. The support subscale consists of 10 items; participants re-
spond to each item according to a five-point scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). Items are then summed to yield a total score. The authors report adequate internal consistency and construct validity for the measure.

Negative Parental Interaction. Several measures were used to assess negative parental interaction, in particular inter-parental conflict, at both Time 1 and at Time 2. First, the conflict subscale of the FES was administered to measure the amount of openly expressed anger and conflict existing among family members. Second, the verbal aggression subscale of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) was used as an additional measure of inter-parental conflict. The CTS lists actions that a family member might take when in a conflict with another member, beginning with those low in coerciveness and escalating to higher levels of aggression (e.g., hitting). The response categories ask for the number of times each action occurred during the past year, ranging from never to more than 20 times. The manual documents the measure’s concurrent and construct validity (Straus, 1979). Participants were asked to reflect on the last year in the initial testing packet; the Time 2 packet included specific instructions to reflect only on the three months following attendance at the workshop. The conflict subscale of the QCCS was administered as a third indicator of inter-parental conflict. This 10-item subscale measures the frequency of hostility and arguments in the current co-parental relationship. Participants completed the QCCS at both Time 1 and Time 2.

Workshop Satisfaction. Satisfaction with the parenting workshop was measured at both Time 1 and Time 2 utilizing a questionnaire generated by the Massachusetts Family and Probate Court. This measure includes specific questions about the nature of the workshop, the method of presentation of materials, and satisfaction with the workshop overall; items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from excellent (1) to terrible (5). The overall satisfaction rating was used in the analyses that follow.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

Analysis of the attachment style data indicated the following classification of the sample: secure attachment style, 56; avoidant attachment
style, 26; and anxious-ambivalent attachment style, 18. This pattern was similar to samples of both divorced and non-divorced participants in which the frequency of self-report as secure ranged from 49% to 56%, avoidant ranged from 21% to 30%, and anxious-ambivalent ranged from 19% to 24% (Hazan & Shaver, 1987, 1990).

A Chi-square analysis demonstrated no gender difference in adult attachment style, with men and women equally distributed across the three groups. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the three attachment style groups differed in age, $F(2, 99) = 3.68, p < .05$. Those with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style ($M = 36.1$) were significantly younger than those with secure ($M = 40.2$) and avoidant ($M = 41.7$) attachment styles. Although the attachment style groups did not differ significantly in education, educational level was significantly correlated with both age ($r = .37$) and QCCS parental support ($r = .23$), and thus age and educational level were used as covariates in the analyses that follow. Table 1 presents the intercorrelations of the six positive and negative parental interaction variables at Time 1.

**Attachment Style Differences in Time 1 Parental Interactions**

Securely attached participants were predicted to score higher on the Time 1 measures of positive parental interaction (cohesion, expressiveness, support), while insecurely attached participants were predicted to score higher on the Time 1 measures of negative parental interaction (conflict, verbal aggression). A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed to examine attachment style (secure, avoidant, anxious-ambivalent) differences for the six parental functioning variables. The MANCOVA revealed a significant overall effect for attachment style, Wilks’ Lambda = .782, $F(12, 176) = 1.92, p < .05$; neither of the covariates yielded a significant multivariate effect. Univariate analyses revealed significant attachment style differences for FES cohesion, $F(2, 93) = 2.91, p = .05$. Post hoc comparisons (Scheffe) indicated that secure participants ($M = 49.09, SD = 16.66$) scored higher on cohesion than those participants with an anxious-ambivalent adult attachment style ($M = 38.56, SD = 19.65$). The univariate results for FES expressiveness also yielded significant attachment style differences, $F(2, 93) = 3.91, p < .05$. As predicted, post-hoc comparisons (Scheffe) indicated that secure participants ($M = 52.31, SD = 11.36$) scored significantly higher than avoidant participants ($M = 44.28, SD = 14.28$). The univariate results for CTS verbal aggression approached significance, $F(2, 93) = 2.75, p = .06$, with the anxious-ambivalent
group reporting the highest levels of conflict. The univariate ANCOVAs for spousal support and spousal conflict, as measured by the QCCS, indicated no significant attachment style differences. Attachment style comparisons for the six Time 1 parental interaction variables are presented in Table 2.

**Change in Parental Interactions Over Time**

Due to cell size reduction, Time 2 repeated measures analyses were conducted utilizing a dichotomous attachment style grouping: secure \((n = 35)\) and insecure (avoidant and anxious-ambivalent combined, \(n = 28)\). It was hypothesized that insecurely attached participants would report greater increases in positive parental interaction from Time 1 to Time 2, compared to securely attached participants. The repeated measures ANOVA for cohesion yielded a main effect for time, \(F(1, 59) = 4.63, p < .05\), indicating that participants overall reported significant over time improvement in cohesion. A significant Attachment Group \(\times\) Time interaction was also found, \(F(1, 59) = 6.21, p < .01\); insecure participants reported significantly greater increases in cohesion over time compared to secure participants (see Table 3).

Participants with an insecure attachment style were also expected to report greater increases over time in expressiveness and support. The

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**TABLE 1. Intercorrelations of Time 1 Measures of Positive and Negative Parental Interactions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tr>
<td>Positive Parental Interaction</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. FES Cohesion</td>
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<td>.55***</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>−.56***</td>
<td>−.18</td>
<td>−.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. FES Expressiveness</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>−.30***</td>
<td>−.20*</td>
<td>−.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. QCCS Support</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>−.20*</td>
<td>−.46***</td>
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<td>Negative Parental Interaction</td>
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<td>4. FES Conflict</td>
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<td>--</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>5. CTS Verbal Aggression</td>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>.39***</td>
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<td>6. QCCS Conflict</td>
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*Note. FES = Family Environment Scale. CTS = Conflict Tactics Scale. QCCS = Quality of Co-Parental Communication Scale.  
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.*
repeated measures ANOVA for expressiveness produced a main effect for time that approached statistical significance, *F*(1, 59) = 3.54, *p* = .06, with participants generally reporting increased expressiveness at Time 2. The Attachment Group × Time interaction was not significant. The repeated measures ANOVA for QCCS support yielded no significant main or interaction effects, although the means were in the expected direction.

Insecurely attached participants were expected to show the greatest decreases in conflict and verbal aggression over time, compared to securely attached participants. Repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted on the three conflict measures. For the FES conflict scale, there were no significant main or interaction effects. The ANOVA for CTS verbal aggression indicated a significant effect for time, *F*(1, 60) = 107.41, *p* < .001; participants reported significant decreases in parental verbal aggression over time. A significant Attachment Group × Time interaction was also found, *F*(1, 60) = 5.62, *p* < .05, with insecurely attached participants reporting the greatest decreases in verbal aggression. Finally, a repeated measures ANOVA for QCCS conflict yielded a significant effect for time, *F*(1, 60) = 17.88, *p* < .001, with participants reporting significant decreases in conflict over time. The Attachment Group × Time interaction was not significant.
Workshop Satisfaction

Examination of the workshop satisfaction items indicated that participants were moderately satisfied with the workshop overall ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.06$). Twenty-one percent rated the workshop as excellent, 46% responded that it was good, 15% said it was O.K., 15% rated it as fair, and 3% described it as terrible. A one-way ANOVA indicated there were no significant attachment style differences in satisfaction ratings, $F(2, 99) = .11$, ns.

To explore whether workshop satisfaction varied based on education, participants were classified into two groups: those with less than a bachelor’s degree ($n = 41$) and those with a bachelor’s degree or higher ($n = 59$). A t-test was performed to compare these two groups on their overall rating of satisfaction with the intervention. A significant education level effect was found, $t(99) = -2.88$, $p < .01$. Participants with less education ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.99$) expressed significantly more satisfaction with the workshop than those with a bachelor’s degree or higher ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.05$).

A repeated measures ANOVA for overall workshop satisfaction indicated no significant change in satisfaction ratings. Despite the passage of time, participants remained favorable in their ratings of the workshop.
overall \((M = 2.45, SD = 1.10)\), with the majority responding that the parenting workshop was \textit{good} or \textit{excellent}.

**DISCUSSION**

Our findings indicate that adult attachment style is an important individual differences variable that allows a greater understanding of the variable trajectories of adaptation following marital separation and divorce. These data imply that parents with a secure adult attachment style may be better equipped to negotiate the early stages of this life transition, compared to those parents with insecure adult attachment styles. Securely attached individuals experienced both enhanced positive parental interactions, such as greater familial cohesion and expressiveness, as well as lessened negative parental interactions, such as verbal aggression. Consistent with our hypotheses, parents with an anxious-ambivalent adult attachment style reported heightened levels of verbal aggression with the co-parent. Anxiously attached individuals tend to experience emotions with great intensity, increasing the probability of utilizing maladaptive conflict resolution techniques such as verbal aggression. These relationship capacities are likely correlates of both individual adjustment and parenting effectiveness during the process of marital separation and divorce.

Three months following completion of the court-mandated parenting education program, most participants reported increases in positive parental interactions and decreases in negative parental interactions. Attendance at the workshop may have provided these parents with additional tools to enhance and redefine their parenting skills within the context of a post-separation family system. Their positive feedback regarding the education program lends support to the belief that for at least some parents, the workshop may have been beneficial.

Despite an overall improvement in parental interaction patterns over time, trajectories of adaptation differed as a function of attachment style. Parents with an insecure attachment style showed greater over time improvement compared to those with a secure attachment style. Insecurely attached individuals experienced greater increases in cohesion and greater decreases in spousal verbal aggression. Insecurely attached individuals may be particularly vulnerable to utilizing maladaptive coping strategies by withdrawing completely from their former spouse or instigating high-intensity conflict. The court-mandated parenting education for divorcing parents may have provided insecurely attached
individuals with previously unused directives, tools, and strategies to facilitate familial support and diffuse spousal conflict. Securely attached individuals may not benefit from the parenting education to the same degree because they habitually utilize the directives, tools, and strategies taught in the workshops. This can be inferred from their initial higher levels of positive parental interaction and lower levels of negative parental interaction.

Satisfaction with the parenting education program differed based on the educational level of the attendee. Attendees with less education were generally more satisfied with the parenting education than attendees with more education. Court-mandated parent education may contribute to an understanding of child development and an increased repertoire of skills for negotiating life transitions, especially for individuals with less formal education. Those with more education may have had previous exposure to this information, given their more extensive educational background. Overall, participants rated the parent education programs between good and O.K. both immediately following their attendance and again three months later, suggesting that they were generally satisfied with their experience of the mandated intervention.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although yielding useful data on individual differences in the parental interactions targeted by the parenting education workshop, several limitations of this research are worth mentioning. Although efforts were made to utilize a diverse sample by soliciting participants from urban and rural areas, the sample was primarily Caucasian. Future research in this area needs to include a more diverse sample to assess the generalizability of the findings.

Further, the design of the present study was limited in two ways. First, access to participants prior to their attendance at the parenting workshop was not permitted by the Chief Justice of the Probate and Family Court due to confidentiality concerns. Given the limited access to participants, it was not possible to collect true pretest data from the participants. Instead, questionnaires were completed within a week following workshop attendance. To adequately assess the benefit of these programs, researchers investigating court-mandated parenting education for divorcing parents need greater access to attendees prior to their attendance of the workshop. Sound empirical research utilizing a pre-test and posttest design would help clarify whether or not participant changes were the product of the court-mandated parenting education. Unfortunately, this type of design cannot be con-
ducted with the current confidentiality restrictions imposed by the Family and Probate Court.

Second, the design of the current research is limited by the absence of a control or comparison group. Since the parenting education program is required for all divorcing parents of minor children, finding an appropriate comparison group would have entailed sampling divorcing individuals from a different state. Thus, these findings should be viewed as demonstrating changes in parental interaction patterns over time, ones that may or may not be due to the efficacy of the court-mandated program. Inclusion of a control or comparison group would allow researchers to better determine the cause of decreases in conflict and increases in communication during this time period.

This research highlights the significance of individual differences in post-divorce parental interactions and adaptation processes. The findings suggest that the experience of marital separation varies widely due to factors such as adult attachment style and educational level. Parenting education may need to be individualized to better suit parent characteristics and needs. The curricula of these court-mandated parenting education programs appears more relevant and beneficial for individuals with an insecure adult attachment style, compared to individuals with a secure attachment style; it was also viewed more favorably by individuals with less formal education. Professionals responsible for developing program curricula need to take such differences into account and incorporate knowledge and directives that will more appropriately acknowledge client individual differences. Securely attached individuals may experience greater educational benefits with more group interaction, while smaller groups or individual sessions may be more appropriate for an individual with an avoidant attachment style. If all divorcing parents with minor children are mandated to attend such workshops, it is reasonable to tailor programs more specifically with individual characteristics and needs in mind.

Our findings are hopeful in that they demonstrate that, in general, parental interactions improved during the process of marital separation and divorce. It remains unclear, however, whether the improvements were due to the passage of time, attendance in a divorcing parent education program, or other therapeutic interventions. Individual differences in the experience of positive and negative parenting were also significant: adult attachment style was a powerful predictor of the quality of parental interactions during this difficult period. Given the differential experience of the transition, individuals developing mandated intervention programs would do well to attend to these individual differences in order to develop interventions with the greatest short- and long-term efficacy.
REFERENCES


