

# Italian Adults' Recall of Childhood Exposure to Parental Loyalty Conflicts

Maria Cristina Verrocchio · Amy J. L. Baker

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**Abstract** Seven hundred and thirty nine adults in Chieti, Italy completed an anonymous and confidential paper and pencil survey regarding their childhood exposure to 20 parental loyalty conflict behaviors (one parent made untrue and negative statements about the other parent, one parent asked the child to keep secrets from the other parent, and the like), psychological maltreatment (spurning, terrorizing, and the like), and measures of current functioning (self-esteem, attachment, character, and symptoms). Results revealed high levels of reported exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors, with elevated levels in those whose parents divorced/separated and those who reported that—regardless of marital status—their parents' relationship at its worst was “very bad.” Rates of 19 specific loyalty conflict behaviors were higher in those who reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent. Overall rates of reported exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors were statistically significantly associated with exposure to psychological maltreatment as well as the four measures of current well-being and functioning. The pattern of findings supports the theory that children's exposure to parental conflict has detrimental effects on their long-term functioning and poses a significant risk factor for adult well-being. Implications for primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention are discussed.

**Keywords** Divorce · Loyalty conflicts · Psychological maltreatment

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M. C. Verrocchio  
Department of Psychological Services, Humanities and Territory, University “G. d'Annunzio” of Chieti, Chieti, Italy

A. J. L. Baker (✉)  
New York, NY, USA  
e-mail: amyjlbaker@aol.com

## Introduction

In Italy divorce has become a significant social phenomenon since the end of the 1980s; the number of separations and divorces has increased to the same proportions observed in other parts of the Western world. In 2010 there were 88,191 separations and 54,160 divorces. In 15 years the number of separations and divorces has doubled. Almost 50 % of the cases of separation and one third of divorce involved a child. Approximately twenty percent of the cases were judicial divorces with disputes regarding child custody (ISTAT 2012).

As the number of divorces and separations rise, so too does the potential for children to be exposed to parental conflict. Research has consistently found significant associations between inter-parental conflict and negative outcomes in various domains of child development (Cummings and Davies 1994; Grych and Fincham 2001). One reason offered for the poor outcomes is that children who are involved in their parent's post divorce struggles can suffer from intense feelings of divided loyalties and stress (Amato and Afifi 2006; Grych et al. 1992). Several studies have found that these children develop identity problems, difficulties in relationship, a tendency toward manipulative behavior and a distorted view of the family's reality, feelings of abandonment and adversarial and ambivalent affectivity (Johnston et al. 2005; Lubrano et al. 2012). These children may develop a “false self” as an adaptive response to the situation, thereby sacrificing an authentic expression of their desires, needs, and characteristics (Lubrano et al. 2012). Some studies suggest that parents who experience low marital quality and inter-parental conflict have more psychologically controlling parenting styles (Krishnakumar et al. 2003; Soenens and Vansteenkiste 2010) and that psychologically controlling behaviors encourage dependency and inhibit individuation

of the child's emotional expressions (Barber and Harmon 2002). These characteristics create a risk condition for the development of negative outcomes in adulthood. However, to date empirical documentation of the developmental consequences of exposure to parental conflict in adulthood has been limited.

One emerging body of knowledge that aims to study these linkages is that of parental alienation (e.g., Gardner 1998; Kelly and Johnston 2001). Drawing on this framework, Baker (2007) has investigated the specific ways that parents can involve their children in their parental conflict from the perspective of adults who had the experience in their childhood; and Baker and Darnall (2006) confirmed and expanded this list of behaviors in a study of parents who believed that the other parent was trying to turn their child against them. Initial validity of these behaviors was established by Baker and Chambers (2011) who found that rates were higher for respondents who endorsed the single item, "one of my parents tried to turn me against the other parent." In two studies, significant long-term associations were found between childhood exposure to these parental loyalty conflict behaviors and compromised functioning in adulthood, including lower self-sufficiency, depressive disorder, lower self-esteem, and insecure attachment style (Baker and Ben Ami 2011; BenAmi and Baker 2012; Baker and Elicher, in press).

A proposed mediator of these outcomes is psychological maltreatment (Baker 2007, 2010; Baker and Ben Ami 2011; Rand 1997). Associations between reported exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors and reported exposure to parental psychological maltreatment have been found in a sample of staff in a child welfare agency (Baker 2010) as well as in a convenience sample of adults (Baker and Ben Ami 2011) and university students in the United States (Baker and Elicher, in press) and university students in Italy (Baker and Verrocchio, under review). As Baker and Ben Ami (2011) note, "The psychological foundation of parental alienation—lack of empathy and the inability to tolerate the child's separate needs and perception—is also the foundation of psychological maltreatment" (p. 473). The loyalty conflict behaviors can be viewed as a specific form of psychological maltreatment in light of the fact that exposure to these behaviors are likely to result in children feeling "worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs," the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, Bingsgeli et al. 2001).

The current study was designed to replicate the findings of Baker and Verrocchio (under review) in a second Italian sample regarding the prevalence and correlates of childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors in order to determine the extent to which this poses a problem for an Italian population of adults. The study also aimed to contribute to the knowledge base regarding the internal and

external validity of a measure of these behaviors. The specific questions addressed in this study included: (1) What are the rates of exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors, (2) with respect to internal validity, we asked: were rates higher for those who endorsed the item "one parent tried to turn me against the other parent"; (3) with respect to external validity, we asked were rates higher for those whose parents divorced/separated and for those who rated their parent's relationships as "very bad" and were rates of exposure associated with reports of being psychologically maltreated as well as measures of current well-being and functioning?

## Method

### Participants

Between January 2013 and March 2013 960 adults were invited to participate in the anonymous and confidential survey. These individuals were identified through a group of psychology students who promoted the study to their colleagues, friends, and family. Initial participants identified additional people via snowball sampling to participate in the study. In all 960 people were invited to participate, 759 of whom agreed to participate (70 % response rate). Of those who agreed to participate all but 20 actually completed the survey (97 % completion rate). After giving informed consent, the subjects responded to the written questionnaire.

### Sample

Seven hundred and thirty nine individuals completed the survey. The sample was 55 % females, ranging in age from 18 to 66 years (mean = 27.5, SD = 9.5). Approximately 40 % of the subjects were students.

### Measures

The paper and pencil survey consisted of a series of demographic questions two of which were included in this study in addition to age, gender, and student status: whether the parents of the respondents had ever been divorced or remarried (0 = no, 1 = yes) and at its worst how bad was the parental relationship (coded as 1 = very bad, 0 = everything else) and a series of standardized measures, seven of which were examined for this study.

### *Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) Baker and Chambers (2011)*

The BSQ is a 20-item measure comprised of a list of 19 specific behaviors and one general behavior that parents

might engage into induce loyalty conflict in their children. Total scores on the scale have been found in other studies to be statistically significantly associated with relevant measures including self-esteem, prior abuse, and self-sufficiency (Baker and Ben Ami 2011; BenAmi and Baker 2012). A 7-item version has been found to be statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment and depression (Baker and Brassard, in press). In this study, respondents answered on a five-point scale from never (0) to always (4). A summary score of total exposure to the behaviors was found to be skewed and so a total score was created which represented the number (out of 20) items endorsed. Total scores could range from 0 to 20 (mean = 6.1, SD = 5.9), Cronbach's alpha = .94.

#### *Psychological Maltreatment Measure (PMM)*

A five item measure of respondent exposure to behaviors by a parent that meets the definition of psychological maltreatment was developed by Baker and Festinger (2011). The measure was modeled on the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Binggeli et al. 2001) with one item each related to spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness. In prior research the measure was validated against four already established measures of psychological maltreatment (including the Conflict Tactic Scale and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire), with statistically significant correlations indicating good validity (Baker and Festinger 2011). Each of the five items was rated separately for mother/step father and father/step mother on a five point scale from never (score of 0) to very often (score of 4). Total scores could range from 0 (score of 0 on all five items) to 40 (score of 4 on all five items for both parents). In this sample total scores ranged from 0 to 30 (mean = 3.6, SD = 5.3) and reliability was established with a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

#### *Relationship Questionnaire (RQ)*

Attachment style was assessed with the Relationship Questionnaire, (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991), which was comprised of a single item presenting four short paragraphs describing prototypical adult attachment patterns, from which the respondent selects the one that best describes his or her interpersonal relationships. Each of the paragraphs represented one of the following four styles: secure, preoccupied, fearful, or dismissing. Responses were recoded as secure (score of 1) or not secure (score of 0). Prior research has established statistically significant associations between parental alienation and attachment style (e.g., BenAmi and Baker 2012), in which higher

reported exposure to parental alienation was associated with greater likelihood of an insecure styles of attachment.

#### *Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSE)*

Self esteem was assessed with the 10-item self-report Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965), in which each item was rated on a four-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (4). Total scores were created by summing the 10 items after reverse coding. In this study the summary score ranged from 15 to 40 and had an internal consistency coefficient of .82.

#### *Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), Care Scale*

The PBI was developed by Parker et al. (1979) and validated in Italian by Scinto et al. (1999). The PBI is a widely used research tool for assessing adult retrospective accounts of two dimensions of the parent-child relationship: care and over-protectiveness. The Care scale is comprised of 25 items, each rated on a four-point Likert scale from very unlike (0) to very like (3). After reverse coding a Care scale was created for each parent and then summed to create an overall care index. The score could range from 0 to 72. Total scores in this sample ranged from 8 to 72 (mean = 47.4, SD = 11.8) and the Cronbach's alpha was .86.

#### *Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (The SCL-90-R)*

This is a self-report questionnaire originally oriented towards symptomatic behavior of psychiatric outpatients (Derogatis 1977). It was initially developed for drug trials to assess the "relative efficacy of psychotherapeutic agents" (Derogatis 1977). It has since been applied as a psychiatric case-finding instrument, as a measure of symptom severity, and as a descriptive measure of psychopathology in different patient populations (Derogatis and Savitz 1999). The SCL-90 is intended to measure symptom intensity on nine different subscales. The 90 items of the questionnaire are scored on a five-point Likert scale from none (0) to extreme (4), indicating the rate of occurrence of the symptom during the time period in question. The instrument's Global Severity Index (GSI) is created as the mean value of all of the items and ranges from 0 to 4. In this sample the GSI ranged from 0 to 3.26 (mean = .72, SD = .54), with a Cronbach's alpha of .97.

#### *The Temperament and Character Inventory (TCI-125) Self-Direction and Cooperation Scales*

The TCI-125 (Cloninger et al. 1994) is a self-report questionnaire with a "true/false" response format designed to

measure dimensions of Cloninger's model of personality (Cloninger et al. 1994). Specifically, the TCI measures individual differences in the way that people feel, act, or behave. It has been found to be a reliable and valid instrument to assess personality. For example, lower self-direction and cooperation scale scores have been found consistently in individuals with personality disorders (Cloninger 1999; Svrakic et al. 1993). These two character scales were selected as most likely to be related to childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors as the behaviors are designed to undermine the individual's cooperation with the other parent and self-directedness with respect to knowing and trusting one's own perceptions and goals. The Cooperativeness scale is created by summing 25 items, each of which is coded true (1) or false (0), after reverse coding. Total scores can range from 0 to 25 and in this sample ranged from 0 to 25 (mean = 17.7, SD = 4.4), with a Cronbach' alpha of .75. The Self-Directedness scale was comprised also of 25 true false items with a possible total score of 25. In this sample the total score ranged from 2 to 25 (mean = 15.9, SD = 5.3). Internal consistency was established with a Cronbach's alpha of .82.

## Results

To address the first research question we began with a frequency distribution of each of the parental loyalty conflict behaviors. These data are presented in Table 1 as the number and proportion of participants who reported being exposed to these behaviors by either parent.

As can be seen, 19 of the 20 items were endorsed by at least 10 % of the sample. One item was endorsed by over 60 % of the sample (one or both parents made negative comments about the other parent); four items were endorsed by between 41 and 50 % of the sample (showed discomfort towards other parent, confided in child, required favoritism, and encouraged reliance on the parent); three items were endorsed by between 41 and 40 % of the sample (was upset when child affectionate with other parent, asked child to keep secrets, and tired to turn the child against the other parent) eight items were endorsed by between 21 and 30 % of the sample (limited contact, said other parent was unloving, made child choose, said other parent was unsafe, asked child to spy, encouraged disregard for other parent's rules, made it difficult for child to be with extended family of other parent), three items were endorsed between 11 and 20 % of the sample (made communication difficult, called other parent by first name, and withheld or blocked messages); and one item was endorsed by between 1 and 10 % of the sample (referred to new spouse as "Mom" or "Dad"). Examination of the total number of

**Table 1** Frequency distribution of endorsement of 20 specific loyalty conflict behaviors

Behavior	N	%
Made negative comments	449	67.5
Limited contact	213	28.8
Withheld or blocked messages	82	11.1
Made communication difficult	146	19.8
Discomfort at other parent	326	44.1
Upset at child's affection w other parent	288	39
Said parent was unloving	180	24.4
Made child choose	218	29.5
Said parent was unsafe	164	22.2
Confided in child	329	44.5
Required favoritism of child	300	40.6
Asked child to spy	197	26.7
Asked child to keep secrets	249	33.7
Called other parent by first name	103	13.9
Referred to new spouse mom/dad	58	7.8
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	330	44.7
Encouraged disregard of other parent	196	26.5
Hard to be with extended family	156	21.1
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	197	26.7
Tried to turn against other parent	247	33.4

behaviors endorsed revealed that 79.6 % of the sample endorsed at least one behavior.

### Internal Validity

In order to examine the internal validity of the measure, we examined whether rates of exposure were higher, as would be expected, among participants who endorsed the item, "one parent tried to turn me against the other parent." These data are presented in Table 2.

As expected, for each of the 20 variables, rates of reported exposure to loyalty conflict behaviors were statistically significantly greater for those who reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent than for those who had not.

### External Validity

With respect to external validity we asked whether rates were higher, as would be expected, for those whose parent were divorced or separated as compared to those whose parent were not. We also asked whether rates would be higher for those who reported that at its worst their parents' relationship was "very bad." These data are presented in Table 3.

As expected, for each variable the rates of endorsement were statistically significantly higher for those whose

**Table 2** Proportion of endorsers of “Tried to Turn” who endorsed each loyalty conflict behavior

Behavior	Did not try to turn	Did try to turn	X <sup>2</sup>	Sign.
Made negative comments	53.0	96.4	140.6	.001
Limited contact	10.8	64.8	233.8	.001
Withheld or blocked messages	2.4	28.3	111.8	.001
Made communication difficult	5.9	47.4	178.4	.001
Discomfort at other parent	25.2	81.8	213.5	.001
Upset at child’s affection w other parent	20.1	76.5	219.9	.001
Said parent was unloving	7.9	57.1	215.6	.001
Made child choose	9.8	68.8	275.9	.001
Said parent was unsafe	8.3	49.8	463.7	.001
Confided in child	26.4	80.6	195.2	.001
Required favoritism of child	20.3	81.0	250.8	.001
Asked child to spy	13.6	52.6	128.0	.001
Asked child to keep secrets	20.1	60.7	121.4	.001
Called other parent by first name	5.5	30.8	87.6	.001
Referred to new spouse mom/dad	2.8	17.8	50.9	.001
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	29.3	75.3	141.0	.004
Encouraged disregard of other parent	8.5	62.3	244.3	.001
Hard to be with extended family	10.2	42.9	105.9	.001
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	6.9	66.0	293.6	.001

**Table 3** Proportion who endorsed each loyalty conflict behavior by intact and non-intact families and by quality of parental relationship

Behavior	Intact	Not intact	Not very bad	Very bad
Made negative comments	43.0	80.7	55.3	89.4
Limited contact	6.2	41.0	17.7	48.7
Withheld or blocked messages	3.5	15.2	7.4	17.7
Made communication difficult	6.2	27.0	12.9	32.1
Discomfort at other parent	10.9	62.0	30.2	69.1
Upset at child’s affection w other parent	12.1	53.3	25.1	63.8
Said parent was unloving	7.8	33.3	12.9	44.9
Made child choose	7.8	41.2	19.0	48.3
Said parent was unsafe	7.8	29.9	12.2	40.0
Confided in child	16.3	59.7	31.9	64.2
Required favoritism of child	16.7	53.4	27.4	64.2
Asked child to spy	10.5	35.3	17.1	43.8
Asked child to keep secrets	13.2	49.7	23.0	52.8
Called other parent by first name	5.8	18.3	10.5	20.0
Referred to new spouse mom/dad	3.1	10.4	7.5	11.7
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	25.2	55.1	35.4	61.1
Encouraged disregard of other parent	8.9	36.0	16.2	44.9
Hard to be with extended family	5.0	29.7	13.7	34.3
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	8.9	36.2	16.9	44.2
Tried to turn against other parent	8.9	46.6	23.2	57.0

parents were divorced/separated. In each case the difference in rates was at least two times and in some cases was 10 times as great. We conducted an independent t-test comparing number of behaviors by whether or not the parents had been divorced/separated or the marriage remained intact. Results revealed that, as expected, those with divorced/separated parents reported exposure to over three times as many parental loyalty conflict behaviors (mean = 8.1, SD = 5.8) than those whose parents did not divorce/separate (mean = 2.3, SD = 3.9),  $t(703.9) = 16.3, p < .001$ .

With respect to the differences in endorsement rates by quality of parental relationship, for each variable the rates of endorsement were statistically significantly higher for those who reported that their parents’ relationship was at its worst “very bad” than those whose parents’ relationship was not rated at its worst as “very bad.” In most cases the difference in rates was at least three times as great. We conducted an independent *t* test comparing the number of

behaviors by quality of parental relationship. Results revealed that, as expected, those who rated their parents relationship at its worst as “very bad” reported exposure to over twice as many parental loyalty conflict behaviors (mean = 9.6, SD = 5.7) than those whose parents were not rated as “very bad” (mean = 4.1, SD = 5.0),  $t(493.7) = 13.0, p < .001$ .

Next, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in order to test the predictive strength of parental divorce/separation and quality of parental relationship on total loyalty conflict scores. Both predictor variables were statistically significant in the equation (parental separation/divorce beta = .35,  $p < .001, R^2 = .22$ ) and (quality of parental relationship beta =  $-.30, p < .001, R^2 = .07$ ) and the overall variance accounted for was .29 %.

The next research question examined the external validity of the measure by examining the association with two other measures of quality of parenting: psychological

maltreatment and parental bonding/Care. These data are presented in Table 4.

First, a multiple linear regression was conducted to test the association between loyalty conflicts and psychological maltreatment controlling for parental separation/divorce and for quality of the parental marital relationship at its worst. Results revealed that parental loyalty conflicts was statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the quality of parental relationship and parental divorce/remarriage ( $\beta = .57$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and accounted for 22.5 % of the variance.

Second, a multiple linear regression was conducted to test the association between loyalty conflict and the Care scale after controlling for parental separation/divorce and quality of the relationship at its worst. Results revealed that parental loyalty conflicts was statistically significantly associated with Care scores over and above the quality of the parental relationship and parental divorce/remarriage ( $\beta = -.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and accounted for 11 % of the variance.

The final analysis consisted of a path analysis to test the associations between loyalty conflict and measures of well-being as mediated through psychological maltreatment, parental caring, and self-esteem (after controlling for the effects of parental separation/divorce and the quality of the marital relationship) (Fig. 1).

In the final path, with all of the variables in the equation, the following betas were obtained, after controlling for the quality of the parental marital relationship and whether the parents were separated/divorced: loyalty conflict to psychological maltreatment ( $\beta = .57$ ), psychological maltreatment to parental caring ( $\beta = -.48$ ), parental caring to self-esteem ( $\beta = .21$ ) and from self-esteem to each of the four measures of well-being, self-direction ( $\beta = .56$ ), cooperation ( $\beta = .09$ ), attachment ( $\beta = .26$ ), and total symptoms ( $\beta = -.44$ ). All betas were

statistically significant at alpha  $p < .01$  or higher. The path analysis was rerun separately for the student and non-student participants within the sample and the beta weights and alpha levels were virtually identical. Likewise path analyses were conducted separately for the separated/divorced and non-separated/divorced samples and again as well as for males and females. Table 4 presents the beta weight for each of the steps in the path analysis by each of seven different samples (Table 5).

As can be seen, in all seven samples the beta weights for the first step (predicting psychological maltreatment from parental loyalty conflicts controlling for quality of marital relationship and prior separation/divorce) were between .51 and .58 across the samples. The beta weights for the second step which predicts caring scores from psychological maltreatment (controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship and parental loyalty conflicts) were between  $-.39$  and  $-.49$ . The beta weight for the third step which predicts self-esteem from parental caring (controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship, parental loyalty conflicts, and psychological maltreatment) were between .18 and .30. The beta weights for the fourth step (controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship, psychological maltreatment, and parental caring) when self-direction were the well-being measure ranged from .48 to .61, from .03 to .19 when cooperation was the well-being measure, .16 to .31 when attachment was the well-being measure, and  $-.39$  to  $-.47$  when total symptoms on the SCL-90R was the well-being measure.

## Discussion

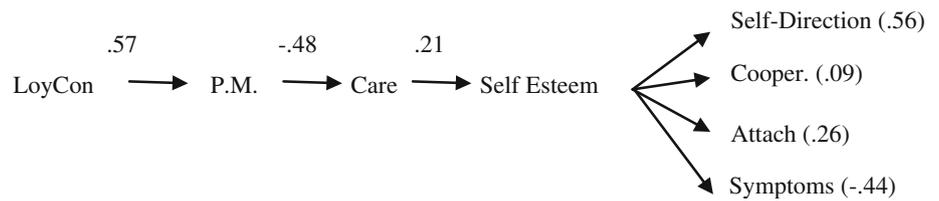
In this paper, we used retrospective data to examine the prevalence and correlates of childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors in an Italian adult population. Children's rejection of a parent in cases of parental separation and exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors has become more visible as an area of professional concern to Italians. Despite the increasing clinical and forensic interest in this topic for Italian children, little effort has been devoted to research and intervention on this area to date. The current study extends our empirical knowledge of the internal and external validity of a measure of these behaviors. The major findings and implications of the analysis are reviewed below.

A primary goal for the study was to determine the rates of exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors. Results revealed that about four fifths of the sample endorsed at least one behavior. Rates of endorsement for the specific types of parental behaviors assessed ranged from about 8 % (referring to a stepparent as "Mom" or "Dad") to

**Table 4** Multiple linear regressions on psychological maltreatment and on care, controlling for parental marital status and quality of marital relationship

	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	Sig.
<i>Psychological maltreatment</i>					
Constant	1.7	.47		3.6	.001
Marital status	-.95	.39	-.09	-2.4	.016
Quality of marriage	-.89	.39	-.08	-.23	.021
Loyalty conflicts	.51	.03	.57	15.6	.001
<i>Care scale</i>					
Constant	51.1	1.2		44.5	.001
Marital status	-.05	.97	-.00	-.06	.96
Quality of marriage	1.7	.95	.07	1.8	.08
Loyalty conflicts	.79	.08	-.39	-9.9	.001

**Fig. 1** Path analysis of predictors of well-being



**Table 5** Beta weights among steps of path analysis by sample

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4A	Step 4B	Step 4C	Step 4D
Whole sample (n = 739)	.57	-.48	.21	.56	.09	.26	-.44
Students (n = 301)	.54	-.47	.20	.54	.03	.31	-.43
Non-students (n = 438)	.55	-.48	.24	.58	.18	.22	-.43
Divorced/sep. (n = 481)	.51	-.39	.19	.61	.16	.31	-.47
Intact (n = 258)	.53	-.47	.26	.48	.06	.16	-.39
Males (n = 331)	.58	-.45	.30	.59	.19	.21	-.43
Females (n = 405)	.52	-.49	.18	.55	.04	.28	-.46

Step 1: Beta weights of parental loyalty conflict as IV and psychological maltreatment as DV, controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship

Step 2: Beta weights of psychological maltreatment as IV and CARE as DV, controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship and parental loyalty conflicts

Step 3: Beta weights of CARE as IV and self-esteem as DV, controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship, parental loyalty conflicts, and psychological maltreatment

Step 4A: Beta weights of self-esteem as IV and self-direction as DV, controlling for separation/divorce of parents and quality of parental relationship, psychological maltreatment, and CARE

Step 4B: Same as 4A except with cooperation as DV

Step 4C: Same as 4A except with secure attachment as DV

Step 4D: Same as 4A except with total symptoms as DV

about 65 % (made negative and untrue statements about the other parent to the child). About one third of the sample endorsed the item “tried to turn me against the other parent” a higher proportion than in Baker (2010) who found that 28 % endorsed that same item. Baker and Verrocchio (under review) report 15 % endorsement for that item in a sample of south-central Italy college students. It may be that the difference of these proportions is due to normal variation between samples. The current sample of over 700 participants is larger than the Baker and Ben Ami (2011) sample of 253 and Baker and Verrocchio (under review) sample of 257. Data of this study could be considered a more stable estimate due to the greater size of the sample. Also, there are differences in sample characteristics that might influence rates.

The second aim of this study was to analyze the internal validity of the measure by calculating whether rates of endorsement were higher in the subsample who reported that “one parent tried to turn me against the other.” This was found to be the case for all 19 loyalty conflict behaviors, as has been found in other studies as well (Baker and Chambers 2011; Baker and Elicher, in press; Baker and Verrocchio, under review), and increases confidence in the internal validity of the measure and the construct. Among

those who endorsed the “tried to turn” item, rates of endorsement of the other loyalty conflict behaviors were statistically significantly greater than in the sample who did not endorse that item: 96.4 versus 53 % endorsed the item “made negative comments,” 81.8 versus 25.2 % endorsed the item “indicated discomfort about other parent,” 81 versus 20.3 % “required me to show favoritism towards the other parent,” 80.6 versus 26.4 % endorsed “confided in me about adult matters related to the divorce and the other parent.” These results corroborate that parents who tried to turn their children against the other parent engaged in these behaviors (Baker and Ben Ami 2011; Baker and Darnall 2006).

Among those who did not endorse the “tried to turn me against the other parent” item there was some reported exposure to some of the behaviors: 53 % reported that one parent “made negative comments to me that fabricated the other parent’s negative qualities,” 29.3 % reported that one parent “encouraged me to be reliant on him or her above all else,” 26.4 % reported that one parent “confided in me about adult matters that I probably should not have been told about which led me to feel protective of him/her or angry at the other parent,” 25.2 % endorsed “indicated discomfort/displeasure when I spoke/asked about or had

pictures of the other parent.” Several interpretations of these data are possible. First, some parents did engage in some of these behaviors without the concerted effort or intention to damage the child’s relationship with the other parent. These parents have been identified as “naïve alienator” by Darnall (1998). Second, it could be that some participants identified the presence of specific behaviors without acknowledging or accepting the intention behind those behaviors (that one parent was trying to turn them against the other parent). That would be consistent with other data confirming that it is easier to endorse specific behaviors than general negative labels that reflect abusive or harmful parenting (Baker and Festinger 2011; M. Kaplan and Cassidy 1985) and indicate that it is crucial for assessment and treatment to address specific parental behaviors.

Another aim of this study was to assess the external validity of the measure by exploring associations with parental divorce/separation and the quality of the parental relationship. Parental divorce/separation and quality of parental relationship were found to be significant predictors of loyalty conflict behaviors. The rates of endorsement of each of the loyalty conflict behaviors were significantly higher in the sample whose parents divorced/separated than those whose parents remained married. Behaviors that were endorsed at a particularly high rate in the divorce/separation group were “made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other parent’s negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent,” “indicated discomfort/displeasure when I spoke/asked about or had pictures of the other parent,” “confided in me about ‘adult matters that I probably should not have been told about (such as marital concerns or financial disputes) which led me to feel protective of him/her or angry at the other parent,” and “encouraged me to rely on his/her opinion and approval above all else.” These findings are generally consistent with the prevalence of loyalty conflict within divorcing families (Baker and Chambers 2011; Clawar and Rivlin 1991; Gardner 1998).

The same pattern of higher rates of endorsement was found among those who rated their parents’ relationship at its worst as “very bad” regardless of the legal marital status of the parents. These results support a growing body of studies and clinical wisdom that recognize dysfunction of intact families regarding cross-generational alliances (Minuchin 1974; Minuchin and Nichols 1993). Structural family systems theorists have expressed concern that parents who engage in a pattern of intergenerational boundary breaches by enlisting their children as confidants place them at risk for adjustment problems (Bowen 1978; Minuchin 1974). Enlisting children as a confidant occurs when a parent regularly shares or discloses his/her personal worries, concerns, and/or complaints and this has been

found to be associated with negative outcomes. For example, Koerner et al. (2002) found that detailed mother-to-daughter disclosures regarding sensitive topics (for example financial concerns, negativity toward ex-husband, job-ups-and-downs, and personal concerns) were associated with greater daughter psychological distress. This association was mediated by daughters’ worrying about their mothers, at least for maternal disclosures pertaining to job ups-and-downs and personal concerns. When exposed to frequent maternal complaints and criticism about their fathers, it was the adolescent boys with low emotional autonomy and high emotional inter-reactivity who were most at risk, at least with respect to their perceptions of the father-adolescent relationship (Kenyon and Koerner 2008).

The other approach to external validity was to determine whether parental loyalty conflict behaviors were associated with measures of well-being mediated through psychological maltreatment, parental caring, and self-esteem. Results revealed that parental loyalty conflict was associated with psychological maltreatment and parental caring, over and above the quality of parental relationship and parental divorce/separation. In the literature, the correlation between parental separation/divorce in childhood and decreased adulthood well-being is robust (Amato 1994), although competing conceptual links and mediating variables have been offered. One model suggests that the negative environment prior to the divorce is a key mediating factor. It may be that the effective climate surrounding the separation/divorce, such as marital and parent-child conflict, or living arrangements and stresses that follow divorce, such as the entrance of a step-parent, may be more important than the divorce per se in explaining later maladjustment (O’Connor et al. 1999).

In this study the findings indicated that exposure to parental loyalty conflict was associated with psychological maltreatment which itself was associated with parental care which was associated with self-esteem which was associated with four measures of well-being: self-direction, cooperativeness, secure attachment style, and symptoms. Associations between these variables were strong even after controlling for parental separation/divorce and for the quality of the parental relationship at its worst. There was strong support for a link between crucial variables to the psychological climate of the families (e.g. parental loyalty conflict, low caring in terms of emotional coldness, indifference, and neglect), self-esteem and directly or indirectly, adulthood well-being across domains of functioning. This study joins the growing body of research that indicates that it is parenting behaviors, and not marital status per se, which determine children’s adjustment (Buehler et al. 1998; Cherlin et al. 1991; Ellwood and Stolberg 1993; Pruett et al. 2003; Ross and Whyne 2010; Schick 2002) and outcomes in adulthood (O’Connor et al. 1999).

Additionally, the same pattern of data was found in the path analysis for seven different samples (whole sample, students only, non-students only, divorced/separated only, intact families only, males only, and females only) contributing to increased confidence in the validity of the model. Future work in the area of exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors will contribute more to our understanding of the factors that may protect children against psychological maltreatment and negative outcomes in adulthood. Subsequent research focus needs to be turned to the process of family functioning in general. For example, perhaps good parenting skills can provide a healthy parent–child relationship and buffer children from many of the stressors inherent in divorce exposure to parental loyalty conflict (Ellwood and Stolberg 1993).

Prior to discussing the implications of the findings there are a number of limitations to the current study that should be considered. The first is that this was a retrospective rather than a prospective longitudinal study. Perception of childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors may be affected by the respondent's current state of mind (i.e. psychopathological symptoms may affect recollections from childhood). The design of the study does not allow us to infer the causal direction of influence of family conflict and parental caring on offspring outcomes. Other factors (not included in the present study) may also impact current well-being and functioning of the participants. These other factors may include the children's own personality characteristics, various stresses that co-occurred in their life span, and psychopathology in their parents (Verrocchio 2012). Thus, adult's psychological functioning in this study might be due to multiple factors, as well as exposure to a stressful family environment. Second, the data collected on exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors were only based on the awareness of the respondent and did not necessarily reflect the full complement of parental loyalty conflict behaviors to which the person had been exposed. However, adult's perceptions of childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict behaviors and of parental caring may be more important than whether a parent actually had engaged in those harmful behaviors. Third, the sampling was not probabilistic and stratified to be balanced by gender and age. There also may be class, cultural, or geographical differences that remain overlooked. The generalizability of our results to the general populations may be limited, although the data are in accordance with the literature.

That being said, this study also had several strengths. All of the measures have been used in prior research and most are standardized measures with established reliability and validity. There are methodological advantages of a large community sample used in this study, and the fact that we had such a strong pattern of hypothesized results suggests

that the findings are robust. Furthermore, this was the first study conducted on a general sample in Italy highlighting the importance of subsequent research examining the childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict and associated outcomes in adulthood.

Future research efforts could continue to explore the negative influences of parental loyalty conflict on children's wellbeing. For example, researchers could examine possible negative outcomes by specific types of poor parental bonding. Child development studies have documented that warmth/hostility and restrictiveness/permissiveness are reliably associated with child behavior, with a combination of high warmth/care and a moderate level of control providing the healthiest emotional and social outcomes (Burns and Dunlop 1998). Research could also examine the individual and combined influence of parental loyalty conflicts and psychological maltreatment by mothers and fathers. Another important question to address in the future is whether certain children are more or less vulnerable due to their own personal qualities and temperament. Literature has demonstrated that all children and adolescents vary as to their vulnerability to the effects of marital conflict (Heatherington and Stanley-Hagan 1999; Kenyon and Koerner 2008). The more that can be understood about how parental conflicts can influence their offspring's well-being the better prevention and intervention programs can be at mitigating these negative outcomes and disrupting the intergenerational cycle of dysfunctional relationships.

The results of our study have several implications for practitioners working with families and reflect the need for prevention programs that will be based on a recognition of the specific ways in which parents can involve children in their conflict. Clinicians and forensic psychologists should be aware of the association between childhood exposure to parental loyalty conflict and dysfunctional parenting and multiple negative effects of these on adult well-being. Prevention intervention can be implemented at various levels. Primary prevention efforts could involve greater public awareness about the negative impact of these parental loyalty conflicts on children. Programs aimed at high risks parents (those divorcing or involved in high conflict) serve as secondary preventive effort and could involve mandatory training for high conflict parents and the professionals who work with them. Educational programs should focus on interventions for enhancing parenting skills and appropriate child rearing and co-parenting practices. Another prevention effort could be aimed at strengthening social service agencies to assist divorcing and high conflict families. Psych-educational programs for children of divorce could also be designed to support children exposed to these behaviors in order to protect children from the long-term damage to their sense of self

and well-being (e.g., Baker and Andre 2012). The results of the current study contribute to the knowledge base about the negative impact of parental loyalty conflict on children and suggest the importance of using this knowledge to try to protect vulnerable children from negative outcomes.

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