



# Family communication patterns that predict perceptions of upheaval and psychological well-being for emerging adult children following late-life divorce

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of emerging adult children following their parents' divorce in later life. Drawing on family communication patterns theory, we examined each parent's conformity orientation and conversation orientation as predictors of young adult children's perceptions of family turbulence and feeling caught, which in turn predicted depressive symptoms and resilience. Young adult children ( $N = 171$ ) who were over the age of 18 at the time of their parents' divorce completed surveys about their family communication patterns and their perceptions of individual and family outcomes following the divorce. Our findings point to differing conformity and conversation orientations enacted by each parent. Mothers' and fathers' conformity orientations were associated with turbulence and feeling caught, but only fathers' conversation orientation was associated with feeling caught. Perceptions of turbulence were positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with resilience for emerging adult children, but feeling caught was only positively associated with depressive symptoms.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 May 2016  
Accepted 23 June 2017

## KEYWORDS

Divorce; emerging adulthood; family communication patterns; resilience; feeling caught

Divorce can be experienced differently by all members of the family. For some family members, divorce is seen as a solution that improves family functioning and provides relief from persistent interpersonal conflicts (Greene, Anderson, Hetherington, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2003; Hutchinson, Afifi, & Krause, 2007; Thomas & Woodside, 2011). For other family members, divorce can be seen as a tumultuous process, rife with aggressive communication (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007), relationship hedging (Afifi, 2003), and heightened intrafamily conflict (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Despite a wealth of knowledge on the adjustment and well-being of children and adolescents following divorce, less is known about the experience of parental divorce for emerging adult children (Greenwood, 2012). Emerging adulthood, or the transitional period in which young adults are still somewhat dependent on their parents but strive for increased autonomy and independence (Arnett, 2000), is characterized by a number of unique attributes that may be associated with divorce outcomes, including more established identities, pronounced attachment styles, distinct personalities, and an increase in cognitive complexity

(Arnett, 2014). Due to these attributes, some emerging adult children may be more involved or cognizant of the divorce conflict and more reactive to the interpersonal circumstances of the divorce. Existing research on emerging adult children's experiences of divorce suggests that there are a number of long-lasting negative outcomes associated with late-life divorce, including a decrease in relational closeness with parents (Hughes, 2007) and a long-term reduction in contact with family members (Jappens & Van Bavel, 2016; Westphal, Poortman, & Van der Lippe, 2015).

Some scholars have argued that the nature of family communication may be one factor that is associated with perceptions of divorce as either a positive or negative event within the family (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). Family communication patterns theory suggests that all families have a unique communication culture, which is determined primarily by the amount of openness and autonomy parents encourage in family interactions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Although the theory assumes that there is one dominant family communication pattern for the entire family unit, there may be specific contexts in which parents operate independently from one another and enact different patterns of communication with their children. Parents who divorce are likely to experience increased autonomy in their parental influence (e.g. Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2013), which may undermine the cohesive nature of family communication. Emerging adult children of divorce, unlike young children, enjoy greater latitude to define the nature of communication and degree of involvement with each parent, so they may be more affected by the shifting communication dynamics in their post-divorce family.

Following this logic, the goals of this study are twofold. First, drawing on family communication patterns theory, this study examines how the communication orientations of each parent in divorced families correspond with emerging adult children's perceptions of feeling caught and relational turbulence in the family. Children feel caught when their parents use them as a way to triangulate parental conflict (Amato & Afifi, 2006). Relational turbulence reflects heightened upheaval in family routines and reactivity to interpersonal circumstances (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004; Solomon & Theiss, 2008). To the extent that each parent communicates openly about the divorce and/or attempts to influence the child's perceptions of the event, emerging adult children may also feel trapped between their parents and increasingly unsettled about their family relationships. Second, this study aims to examine how young adult children's psychological well-being is associated with family dynamics in a post-divorce context. Significant life events that stimulate relational conflict and turbulence are associated with increased depressive symptoms and decreased resilience (Taylor & Andrews, 2009; Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). Thus, to the extent that emerging adult children feel caught and perceive turbulence in the aftermath of their parents' divorce, they are also likely to struggle to maintain their psychological well-being. In the sections that follow, we highlight family communication patterns theory as a foundation for theorizing emerging adult children's reactions to their parent's late-life divorce and report the results of a study designed to test our hypotheses.

### **Family communication patterns as predictors of feeling caught and turbulence**

Family communication patterns theory argues that families have behavioral tendencies that influence members' communication strategies (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006).

According to the theory, families experience the social cognitive process of coorientation, wherein family members are aware of the communication and cognition of other family members, which in turn influences their own behaviors and creates a shared social reality. Family communication patterns emerge from the coorientation process based on two dimensions of family behavior: a conformity orientation and a conversation orientation (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

The first dimension of family communication patterns is the *conformity orientation*, which accounts for the amount of homogeneity in family members' attitudes and beliefs (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). A high conformity orientation would imply that a family's beliefs and attitudes are highly salient and consistent among individual members and that children are obedient to parents and other authority figures. Conversely, a family with low conformity orientation would encourage individual expression and uniqueness among members, and children are given opportunities to be independent and equal. The second dimension, *conversation orientation*, explains the extent to which a family is encouraged to communicate openly with one another. Families with a high conversation orientation communicate with both breadth and depth, creating an environment where the open sharing of ideas and emotions is valued. Families low in conversation orientation communicate infrequently and discourage personal disclosures.

For divorced families, the coorientation process that solidifies communication patterns throughout the family may operate differently. For families that experience divorce, both interparental conflict and incongruent coparental communication can emerge between parents (e.g. Schrodts & Shimkowski, 2013). In addition, when parents are no longer able to effectively work together, the ambiguity of their communication and behavior becomes more apparent to their children (McManus & Donovan, 2012). Family communication patterns may operate as a cohesive social reality in intact families, yet research on the divorce process and post-divorce families suggests that cohesion between parents and family members is reduced in this environment (e.g. Afifi & McManus, 2006). The composition of a previously shared social reality within an intact family may become separate and autonomous during family dissolution. Consequently, post-divorce families may have a family communication climate that features limited coorientation between parents. Based on this reasoning, the following research question is proposed:

*RQ1:* In families that have experienced late-life divorce, to what extent are mothers' and fathers' conformity and conversation orientations similar or different?

### ***Parental communication orientations predict feeling caught***

Heightened interparental conflict can often spill over into the lives of other family members, especially children. During periods of heightened conflict, the parents may include their children in arguments and expect them to pick sides (Amato, 2001; Amato & Afifi, 2006). As children take a more prominent role in their parents' conflict, they become caught within the argument, feeling as though they are torn between their parents. This experience of feeling caught often occurs when there is aggressive communication (Schrodts & Afifi, 2007), interparental conflict (Afifi & Schrodts, 2003), or antagonistic coparental communication (Schrodts & Shimkowski, 2013). Children from divorced

families are more likely to feel caught between parents and often report feeling caught long after the divorce has taken place (e.g. McManus & Donovan, 2012).

Parents who endorse a high conformity orientation are also likely to have family environments in which children feel caught. Children from families with high conformity orientations have little say in their own attitudes and they are expected to conform to the beliefs of their parents (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Following late-life divorce, parents may attempt to convince their adult children that their perceptions of the divorce are more correct than the other parent's, that their behaviors in the divorce are more just than the other parent's, and that their feelings are more important than the other parent's (e.g. Amato & Afifi, 2006; Thorson, 2014). Moreover, parents may expect adult children to align with them in their thinking and actions during the divorce (Afifi, 2003). These expectations reflect a strong conformity orientation and they are the same expectations that are likely to put children in a position to feel caught between their parents. Thus, mothers' and fathers' conformity orientations following late-life divorce should be positively associated with emerging adult children's feeling caught.

Conversely, when parents promote a high conversation orientation, children may feel less caught between their parents. Families that have a high conversation orientation are more open and responsive to all family members and acknowledge the unique perspectives each individual brings into the family's social reality (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Having a high conversation orientation within a family is associated with increased relational maintenance and parental cooperation, which creates a climate where children are less likely to feel caught between their parents (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Parents who can communicate freely and are receptive to one another are more likely to engage in more effective coparental communication (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011), which contributes to children's emotional security and ability to communicate their feelings about the divorce (Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2013). Children also tend to feel less caught in their parents' divorce when topic avoidance is limited and openness is encouraged (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Given the link between open communication in a family and feelings of being caught, we expect a negative association between parents' conversation orientations and adult children's feeling caught. Accordingly, mothers' and fathers' conversation orientations following late-life divorce should be negatively associated with emerging adult children's feeling caught.

### ***Parental communication orientations predict perceived turbulence***

In addition to feeling caught, individuals from divorced families can also experience turbulence in their family relationships. Relational turbulence arises during relationship transitions that bring about changes to interpersonal roles and routines that can heighten relational uncertainty and introduce opportunities for goal interference (Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Although relational turbulence has typically been examined in romantic relationships, the conditions surrounding divorce should also make families susceptible to turbulence. Given that divorce is a relationship event that is likely to prompt changes to family members' roles and routines (e.g. Afifi & McManus, 2006; Amato, 2000), it is not surprising that adult children may perceive increased tumult and upheaval during this transition. This study considers how communication orientations between

parents and adult children may contribute to increased perceptions of turbulence following late-life divorce.

A parent's high conformity orientation is likely associated with perceptions of increased turbulence following divorce. Families with high conformity orientations seldom give attention to outlying opinions (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Instead, parents dictate the behaviors and beliefs of the family, creating a family worldview that has little input from children (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). To the extent that parents dictate how young adult children should think and feel about their family situation following divorce, adult children are likely to perceive that the parent is interfering with their ability to form their own opinions and choose their own reactions to the event (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Children are sensitive to their parents' efforts to influence their feelings about and responses to the divorce (Afifi, 2003). Children who feel that their parent is interfering with their ability to act independently (Sumner, 2013) or remain autonomous in their own opinions (Thomas & Woodside, 2011) are likely to be more reactive to interpersonal events and perceive a great deal of turbulence in the family. Accordingly, mothers' and fathers' high conformity orientations following late-life divorce should be positively associated with emerging adult children's perceived turbulence within the family.

In contrast, a high conversation orientation between parents and adult children may be associated with the conditions that mitigate experiences of turbulence following divorce. Families that have a high conversation orientation are typically open with one another and feel comfortable sharing their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings within the family (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). A high conversation orientation between parents and emerging adult children is associated with increased communication and disclosure, which may mitigate some of the uncertainty that emerging adult children have about the divorce (McManus & Nussbaum, 2011). Lower levels of uncertainty are associated with decreased perceptions of turbulence (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Parents who promote a high conversation orientation are likely to have adult children who perceive less turbulence following divorce. As such, mothers' and fathers' high conversation orientations following divorce should be negatively associated with emerging adult children's perceived turbulence within the family.

## **Family dynamics following divorce as predictors of depression and resilience**

As children begin to enter adulthood, they are more cognitively aware of their parents' relationship and their own role within the family (Arnett, 2000). A number of psychological issues can emerge for emerging adult children of divorce given their increased cognizance during the divorce process. One particular mental health issue that has seen prominence in the divorce literature is depression. Children of divorce are more susceptible to mental health problems (Strohschein, 2012) and have long-term issues with depressive symptoms (Uphold-Carrier & Utz, 2012). These depressive symptoms can extend beyond the family divorce and spread to other facets of the child's life, such as their own relationships in adulthood (Wauterickx, Gouwy, & Bracke, 2006). Additionally, children who have increased involvement in the divorce conflict, as adult children are prone to do, are at a higher risk

to emulate their parent's depressive symptoms following the divorce (Taylor & Andrews, 2009).

Despite the increased prevalence of depression in children of divorce, some characteristics of the divorce process can either bolster or undermine children's resilience to these circumstances in the family. Divorce presents a number of stressors that require all family members to adapt and cope with changes in family structure, relationships, and communication (Greene et al., 2003). Certain personal qualities and behaviors, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, can often lead to increased resilience for young adult children in post-divorce families (Thomas & Woodside, 2011). Children from families that regularly spend time together and communicate openly are also more effective at coping with the divorce and building resilience (Hutchinson et al., 2007). On the other hand, some factors can create barriers to resilience following divorce. When divorce is executed in a way that introduces excessive trauma, turmoil, and tension between family members, resilience may be more elusive (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Feeling caught between parents is one characteristic of family functioning following divorce that is likely to be associated with an increase in depressive symptoms and a decrease in resilience among adult children. Issues with mental health in children, such as mental well-being, chronic stress and anxiety, and adjustment issues are likely to manifest under conditions where children feel caught between their parents (e.g. Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buchanan et al., 1991; Shimkowski & Schrod, 2012). The variety of reported mental health issues associated with feeling caught during divorce may be similarly associated with depressive symptoms in emerging adult children who are caught between their parents. Moreover, feeling caught may be related to a child's ability to be resilient. Children who are caught between their parents may have difficulty remaining autonomous and maintaining positive relationships with each family member, which are major components of resilience for post-divorce children (Thomas & Woodside, 2011). For these children, the experience of triangulation between parents, being forced to pick sides, and inappropriate communication from parents, may be associated with a family environment that inhibits the ability to overcome the turmoil experienced within their parents' divorce (e.g. Afifi, 2003). Accordingly, adult children who are caught between their parents may experience more depressive symptoms and demonstrate less resilience. Thus, feeling caught should be positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with resilience for emerging adult children.

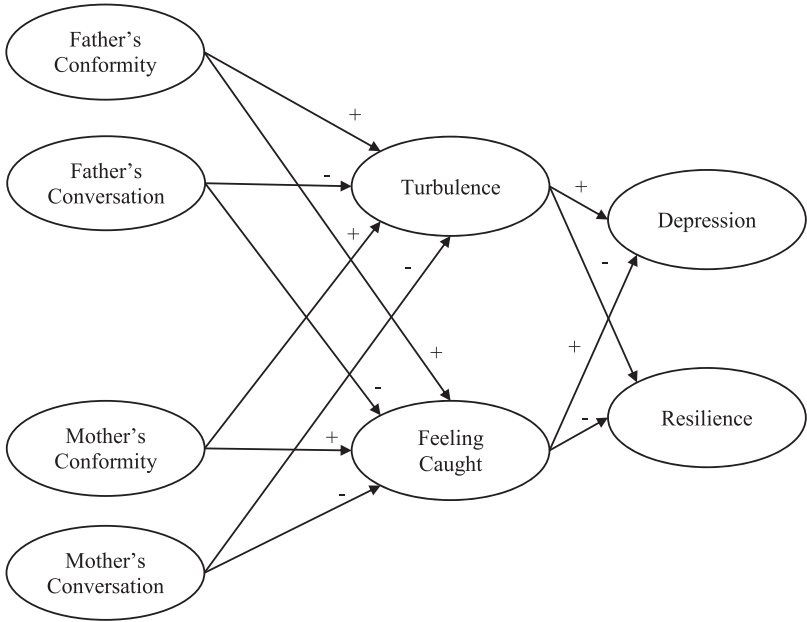
Another condition that is likely associated with emerging adult children's psychological well-being is the degree of family turbulence following divorce. Prior research has linked both relational uncertainty and partner interference, which are the conditions that define turbulence, to increased depressive symptoms (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Given that divorce is characterized by conditions of turbulence, this context is ripe for depressive symptoms among emerging adult children of divorce. In addition, the turbulence inherent in divorce may make it difficult for adult children to remain resilient following their parents' separation. A tumultuous family environment is associated with children's inability to effectively cope (Afifi & McManus, 2006), decreased self-confidence in their own relationships (Sumner, 2013), and difficulty maintaining relationships with family members (Hutchinson et al., 2007). All of these outcomes of turbulence may be associated with adult children's capacity for resilience. Accordingly, we predict that a family environment with heightened turbulence may be conducive to increased depressive symptoms

and diminished resilience among emerging adult children following late-life divorce. Accordingly, perceptions of turbulence should be positively associated with depressive symptoms and negatively associated with resilience for emerging adult children.

The model in Figure 1 summarizes our hypothesized associations. Both (a) mothers' and (b) fathers' conformity orientations are predicted to be positively associated with feeling caught (H1) and perceived turbulence within the family (H3). In addition, both (a) mothers' and (b) fathers' conversation orientations are predicted to be negatively associated with feeling caught (H2) and perceived turbulence within the family (H4). For emerging adult children, feeling caught (H5) and perceived turbulence (H6) are predicted to be positively associated with (a) depressive symptoms and negatively associated with (b) resilience. In addition, we examine perceived turbulence and feeling caught as potential mediators between family communication patterns and depressive symptoms and resilience.

### Method

Participants were recruited to complete an online survey about their family dynamics and their feelings about their family following their parents' late-life divorce. Participants were required to be over the age of 18 at the time of their parents' divorce. Two recruitment strategies were used for this study. First, the study was announced through several online social networking platforms. Second, participants were recruited from communication courses at a large university in the northeastern United States. Students received a small amount of extra credit in exchange for their participation in the study. Individuals who were recruited through social networking platforms did not receive any compensation for participating in the study.



**Figure 1.** Predicted model including all hypothesized associations.



## Sample

The study consisted of 171 participants (63 male, 108 female) that had met the eligibility requirements for the study. Participants varied in age, ranging from 18 to 28 years old ( $M = 20.20$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). The average age of participants at the time of their parents' divorce ranged from 18 to 25 years old ( $M = 18.61$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ). Additionally, participants varied in race, with individuals identifying as Caucasian (54.1%), Asian (22.1%), Hispanic (9.9%), African American (5.2%), Middle Eastern (1.7%), and Native American (0.6%). Participants also reported that their parents had been married between 10 and 37 years ( $M = 20.66$ ,  $SD = 5.51$ ) before initiating their divorce. Since the divorce, the reported length of time that had passed was 1 month to 88 months ( $M = 21.91$ ,  $SD = 24.92$ ). Finally, the majority of participants indicated that neither of their parents had remarried (86.5%), with relatively fewer indicating that only their mother remarried (7.6%), only their father remarried (4.1%), or both parents had remarried (1.7%).

## Procedures

Individuals were provided with a link to access an online survey. The online survey asked participants to first give their informed consent to participate in research, followed by screening questions to ensure they met the eligibility criteria for the study. Consenting participants who met the eligibility requirements were directed to a survey that included questions about each parent's conversation and conformity orientations, the adult children's perceptions of feeling caught and the degree of turbulence in the family, and their own depressive symptoms and resilience. Participants were asked to retrospectively reflect on each parent's general communication patterns and on their own experiences of feeling caught, turmoil, depressive symptoms, and resilience since the divorce.

## Measures

All scales in the survey were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis to verify that the scales met the criteria for convergent and discriminant validity. The threshold for a good fitting model was set at  $\chi^2/df < 3.0$ , CFI  $> .90$ , and RMSEA  $< .10$  (Kline, 2010). After confirming the unidimensionality of each scale, we created composite scores for each variable by averaging the responses to all items in the scale.

### Family communication patterns

Participants were asked about each parent's conformity orientation and conversation orientation using the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with a variety of statements on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree), with six items measuring *conformity orientation* (e.g. "In our home, my mother [father] usually had the last word"; "If my mother [father] didn't approve of it, she didn't want to know about it") and six items measuring *conversation orientation* (e.g. "I talked to my mother [father] about feelings and emotions"; "My mother [father] and I often talked about things we had done during the day"). Participants first completed all items with regard to their mother (conformity  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.15$ , CFI = .99, RMSEA



= .03,  $\alpha = .72$ ; conversation  $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.38$ ,  $CFI = .98$ ,  $RMSEA = .06$ ,  $\alpha = .86$ ) and then completed all items with regard to their father (conformity  $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.05$ ,  $CFI = .99$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ,  $\alpha = .82$ ; conversation  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.64$ ,  $CFI = .99$ ,  $RMSEA = .04$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### *Feeling caught*

Participants were asked to report the degree to which they felt caught between their parents following the divorce using Buchanan et al.'s (1991) Feeling Caught Scale. Respondents reported how often they felt caught using a 6-point scale (1 = never; 6 = very often). The scale consisted of 11 items that measured the extent to which emerging adult children felt caught between parents (e.g. "How often did you feel caught between your parents?"; "How often did your mother ask you to carry messages to your father?"; "How often did you hesitate to talk about your father in front of your mother?";  $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.92$ ,  $CFI = .99$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### *Turbulence*

The degree of turbulence in the family was measured using Knobloch's (2007) measure of perceived turmoil in relationships. Respondents were presented with the stem, "At the present time, my family is ...", followed by 11 descriptor terms that reflected turmoil (e.g. "hectic"; "chaotic"; "frenzied"; "tumultuous"). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each term as a characterization of their family on a 6-point scale (1 = never; 6 = very often;  $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .98$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.83$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $RMSEA = .10$ ,  $\alpha = .85$ ).

### *Depressive symptoms*

Depressive symptoms were measured using a modified version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). The respondents used a 6-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree) to indicate their agreement with 17 statements as a characterization of their feelings and behaviors in the last week (e.g. "I felt everything I did was an effort"; "My sleep was restless"; "I enjoyed life"; "I was happy with my appearance";  $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.56$ ,  $CFI = .96$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ,  $\alpha = .91$ ).

### *Resilience*

Resilience was measured using Wagnild and Young's (1993) Resilience Scale. Participants were asked to indicate their agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree) with 14 items (e.g. "I feel proud that I have accomplished things in life"; "I take things one day at a time"; "I have self-discipline"; "My belief in myself gets me through hard times"; "I have enough energy to do what I have to do";  $M = 4.48$ ,  $SD = .73$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.32$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $RMSEA = .05$ ,  $\alpha = .89$ ).

## **Results**

### *Preliminary analyses*

As a starting point, we assessed bivariate correlations among all variables (see Table 1). Results indicated that fathers' conformity orientation was positively correlated with

**Table 1.** Bivariate correlations.

	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8
V1: Father's conformity								
V2: Father's conversation	-.16*							
V3: Mother's conformity	-.13	.14						
V4: Mother's conversation	.29***	.05	-.15*					
V5: Feeling caught	.28***	.16*	.29***	.05				
V6: Turbulence	.31***	.05	.14	.04	.28***			
V7: Depression	.19*	.07	.06	.05	.37***	.43***		
V8: Resilience	.09	.16*	.02	.37**	.01	-.12	-.26**	

Note:  $N = 171$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

mothers' conversation orientation, feeling caught, perceptions of turbulence, and depressive symptoms. Fathers' conversation orientation was positively associated with feeling caught and resilience. Mothers' conformity orientation was positively associated with feeling caught and mothers' conversation orientation was positively associated with resilience. In addition, feeling caught and turbulence were positively associated and both were positively correlated with depressive symptoms.

We also conducted independent samples  $t$ -tests to evaluate all of our variables for potential sex differences. Results revealed a significant difference between males and females for depressive symptoms ( $t_{170} = -2.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ), such that females ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) reported more depressive symptoms than males ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ).<sup>1</sup>

Recall that *RQ1* inquired about the extent to which mothers and fathers enact similar or different conformity orientations and conversation orientations with their emerging adult children following late-life divorce. To investigate this research question, we conducted paired samples  $t$ -tests to compare respondents' perceptions of their mother's orientations to their father's orientations. Results indicated that respondents perceived different conformity orientations for each parent ( $t_{167} = 2.15$ ,  $p < .03$ ), such that fathers ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) had a higher conformity orientation than mothers ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). Conversely, adult children of late-life divorce reported higher conversation orientations for mothers ( $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than for fathers ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ;  $t_{167} = -6.68$ ,  $p < .00$ ). A review of the bivariate correlations also revealed that mothers and fathers were not significantly correlated on their conformity orientations or conversation orientations. The only significant association between parents' family communication patterns was that father's conformity orientation was positively associated with mother's conversation orientation. Taken together, the paired samples  $t$ -tests and the bivariate correlations reveal that mothers and fathers may create different communication climates with their children in the post-divorce environment.

### Test of hypotheses

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we conducted a power analysis using GPower. With a sample size of 171 and two-tailed alpha set at  $p < .05$ , in multivariate analyses power to detect small effects ( $f^2 = .10$ ) was .98, and power to detect medium ( $f^2 = .30$ ), and large ( $f^2 = .50$ ) effects exceeded .99 (Cohen, 1992). We used structural equation modeling to evaluate our hypotheses. Following procedures for a total aggregation model, we used

parcels as single-item indicators of the latent variables. We set the error variance for each parcel to  $(1 - \alpha)(\sigma)$  to account for measurement error in our data (Bollen, 1989). The threshold for a good fitting model was set at  $X^2/df < 3.0$ ,  $CFI > .90$ ,  $RMSEA < .10$  (Kline, 2010).

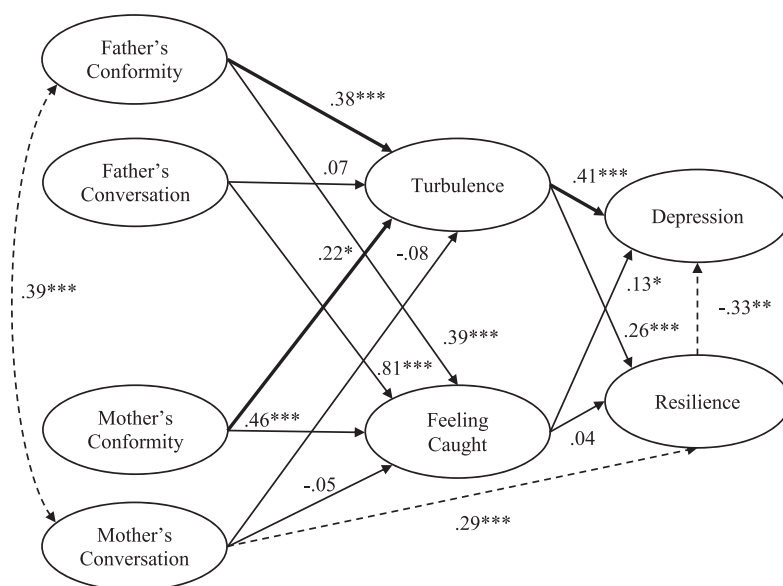
Results indicated that the predicted model did not adequately fit the data ( $X^2_{(15)} = 4.18$ ,  $p = .00$ ;  $X^2/df = 4.64$ ;  $CFI = .61$ ;  $RMSEA = .15$ ). To achieve a model that fit the data, we added paths to the model one at a time until we achieved a good fitting model. Paths were added to the model based on the magnitude of the modification indices and theoretical reasoning. First, the modification indices revealed that mother's conversation orientation and father's conformity orientation should be allowed to covary, so we added a path to correlate these variables in the model. Second, we added a path with resilience predicting depressive symptoms, based on modification indices. Finally, to achieve acceptable model fit, we added a path with mother's conformity orientations directly predicting resilience. After adding these three paths, the model met the criteria for a good fit ( $X^2_{(13)} = 26.41$ ,  $p = .02$ ;  $X^2/df = 2.03$ ;  $CFI = .91$ ;  $RMSEA = .08$ ).

Consistent with our hypotheses, mother's (*H1a*) and father's (*H1b*) conformity orientations were positively associated with feeling caught. *H2* was unsupported, because father's conversation orientation (*H2a*) was positively, not negatively, associated with feeling caught, and mother's conversation orientation (*H2b*) was not significantly associated with feeling caught. With regard to perceptions of turbulence, both mother's (*H3a*) and father's (*H3b*) conformity orientations were positively associated with perceived turbulence, but neither parent's conversation orientation (*H4*) was significantly associated with turbulence. Feeling caught was positively associated with depressive symptoms (*H5a*), but was not significantly associated with resilience (*H5b*). Finally, as predicted, perceptions of turbulence were positively associated with depressive symptoms (*H6a*) and negatively associated with resilience (*H6b*). In addition to these predicted paths, father's conformity orientation was positively correlated with mother's conversation orientation, resilience was negatively associated with depressive symptoms, and mother's conversation orientation was positively associated with resilience.

We also checked for mediation in the model using a bootstrap analysis with a 10,000 sample permutation. The results of our mediation analysis showed that mother's conformity orientation ( $\beta = .14$ , C.I. UB (confidence interval upper bound) = .39, C.I. LB (confidence interval lower bound) = .07,  $p < .01$ ) and father's conformity orientation ( $\beta = .16$ , C.I. UB = .51, C.I. LB = .18,  $p < .01$ ) had indirect effects on depressive symptoms that were mediated by relational turbulence. There were no significant indirect effects for either parent's conversation orientation, nor for resilience as an outcome. The final model is presented in [Figure 2](#).

## Discussion

Given that late-life divorce rates have been increasing in the United States (Kreider & Ellis, 2011), our goal was to understand how the features of late-life divorce are associated with adjustment and well-being for emerging adult children within these families. Using family communication patterns theory as a framework, we predicted that each parent's family communication patterns would be associated with adult children's feeling caught and perceptions of turmoil, which in turn were hypothesized to be associated with depressive



Note. Paths in bold show the results from the mediation analysis.

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

**Figure 2.** Fitted model.

Note: Paths in bold show the results from the mediation analysis. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

symptoms and resilience. Our results suggest that different climates of communication may exist around each parent in a post-divorce family and that these dynamics may have implications for young adult children's perceptions of the family and their own mental health and well-being.

### **Family communication patterns following late-life divorce**

As a starting point, our first goal was to examine whether mothers and fathers established different family communication patterns with their children following late-life divorce. Fathers were found to have a higher conformity orientation when compared to mothers, and mothers were found to have a higher conversation orientation when compared to fathers. In addition, scores for mothers and fathers were not significantly correlated on either dimension. Taken together, these results suggest that there are differences between each parent's conversation and conformity orientations.

Family communication patterns theory takes a social cognitive approach to understanding family communication that integrates conversation and conformity orientations in a holistic fashion (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). The communication behaviors of each parent are not considered separately, as their individual orientations have traditionally been combined to characterize communication in the family as a whole. Although this approach may be suitable for characterizing communication behaviors in intact families, the dissolution of a family can result in separate family systems that evolve from a once cohesive family unit (Schrodt, Baxter, McBride, Braithwaite, & Fine, 2006). Our findings suggest that, in families where parents are separated, each parent might enact different

behaviors and develop a culture of communication with their children that is distinct from the other parent's. The results of this study show the utility of considering the potential for different climates of communication around each parent in detached families.

Notably, the differences between mothers' and fathers' family communication orientations appear to conform to what might be considered traditional gender norms within the family. The fact that mothers had a higher conversation orientation may reflect norms that position women as the nurturers of the family who are likely to listen, console, and comfort their children more so than fathers might (McKinney & Renk, 2008). The higher conformity orientation for fathers may reflect gendered expectations that fathers act as the disciplinarian within the family (Baumrind, 1996). Thus, it is hard to discern whether our findings reflect true differences between mothers and fathers, or adult children's socially constructed expectations for each parent's behavior. To the extent that these gendered patterns in communication orientations are real, they suggest that the differences between mothers and fathers may not be unique to divorced families. Future research using family communication patterns theory may want to consider the possibility that different subsystems within the family may embrace different orientations toward communication, despite previous assumptions of a social cognitive coorientation within the family as a whole.

### **Family dynamics and emerging adult children's well-being following late-life divorce**

This study also examined associations between parents' communication patterns and emerging adult children's perceptions of family dynamics and personal well-being following late-life divorce. Both mothers' and fathers' conformity orientations were positively associated with adult children feeling caught. High conformity orientations are likely to place increased pressure on adult children who try to coordinate their relationships with each parent in a way that feels fair and balanced (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). If each parent expects the child to agree with their perspective on the divorce it places the child in a challenging position in which they are likely to upset one or both parents if they fail to conform with expectations.

Our prediction regarding the association between parents' conversation orientation and feeling caught was unsupported. Mothers' conversation orientation was not significantly associated with feeling caught and, counter to expectations, fathers' conversation orientation was positively associated with feeling caught. Why might fathers' conversation orientation be positively, rather than negatively, associated with feeling caught? One explanation for this unexpected finding might be that increased conversation and openness about the divorce makes adult children feel like they have too much information about the divorce (Afifi & McManus, 2006). In light of traditional gender roles for parents (McKinney & Renk, 2008), a father's openness about the divorce may be particularly unexpected and unsettling for adult children. Thus, adult children may find it particularly onerous to manage conversations with fathers about the divorce. In contrast to these findings, mother's conversation orientation was negatively, though non-significantly, associated with feeling caught. Given that mothers are more likely than fathers to encourage open conversation about a wide variety of topics (McKinney & Renk, 2008), adult children may consider openness to be a more normative aspect of their relationship with their

mother. To the extent that conversations cover a range of topics, young adult children are less likely to feel that the purpose of a mother's openness is to burden the child with information about the divorce. Another argument would be that mothers are more concerned about how their children are coping with the divorce, so they encourage open discussions about everyone's feelings and not just her own, which might help facilitate coping for children. Children tend to feel less caught between their parents when different types of communication and disclosure are encouraged in the family (Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007). Thus, the content of parents' conversations with their children, and not just the degree of openness, may be especially influential in making children feel caught. Additional research is needed to better understand these differences between mothers and fathers.

The conformity orientations for both parents were positively associated with adult children's perceptions of turbulence, whereas neither parent's conversation orientation was associated with turbulence. Consistent with family communication patterns theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002), being constrained by a parent's high conformity orientation may interfere with emerging adult children's ability to form their own opinions and make their own decisions about how they will respond to and cope with the divorce. Moreover, if both parents demand a high conformity orientation, emerging adult children are likely to experience increased turmoil in their family as they attempt to balance the wishes of each parent. Although we hypothesized that parents' high conversation orientations should be negatively associated with turbulence because they create opportunities to discuss the circumstances of the divorce and coordinate thoughts and actions, this logic did not bear out in the data.

As was hypothesized in the original model, turbulence and feeling caught were both associated with depressive symptoms. Prior research has documented a link between the mechanisms that contribute to turbulence and depressive symptoms in a variety of contexts (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Thus, our findings add to the literature documenting associations between turbulent family circumstances and depressive symptoms. Similarly, feeling caught has been repeatedly shown to be associated with a number of long-term and short-term mental health issues (Shimkowski & Schrod, 2012). Children who are caught between their parents are more likely to experience anxiety, sadness, hopelessness, and other depressive symptoms (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Schrod & Afifi, 2007). Our results corroborate these findings from prior research. For adult children coping with their parents' divorce, one recommendation might be to actively distance themselves from family relationships that make them feel caught. Although open communication in the family is generally associated with increased closeness and satisfaction within family relationships (Schrod, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008) and improved personal well-being for children (Schrod & Ledbetter, 2007), these outcomes may be dependent on the content of communication. Thus, when a parent's messages contribute to turbulence, encouraging more communication with that parent is unlikely to produce positive outcomes. In such cases, active distancing may be necessary to limit opportunities for parents to interfere with adult children's coping, which should help to mitigate perceptions of turbulence and depressive symptoms.

Contrary to expectations, only turbulence was negatively associated with resilience, whereas the effect of feeling caught on resilience was nonsignificant. One explanation for these findings may stem from the chronic nature of turbulence, versus the episodic

nature of feeling caught. In the context of divorce, turbulence can be a prolonged and diffuse experience that can last for several months or even years (e.g. Solomon & Theiss, 2008). Feeling caught, on the other hand, is typically experienced in response to a specific interaction or conflict (Afifi et al., 2007). Although it may be possible to avoid or eliminate interactions with parents that contribute to feeling caught for emerging adult children, experiences of turbulence are generally more endemic to the divorce process and more likely to impact adult children's resilience. In other words, the prolonged nature of turbulence in the process of divorce may have more of a lasting impact on a child's resilience than a particular conversation or conflict.

Notably, the strongest association with increased resilience was reflected in the added path from mothers' conversation orientation. These results suggest that perhaps the most important factor in promoting resilience following parental divorce is having a mother who communicates openly with her adult children and is responsive to their feelings. Indeed, maternal communication behavior can help children cope with undesirable circumstances and is associated with several indices of well-being for children and adolescents, including less risky social behaviors, greater relational competence, and increased emotional adjustment (McKinney & Renk, 2008; Zhou, Sandler, Millsap, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2008). The content of communication between mothers and their adult children is crucial, however, because our findings demonstrate that conversations invoking conflict or turmoil are likely to undermine resilience to the extent that they increase perceptions of turbulence in the family. Additional research is needed to evaluate the topics that mothers communicate about with their adult children and the differing outcomes that positively or negatively valenced communication may have on adult children's well-being.

### Limitations and future directions

This study was not without limitations. A few limitations stem from our sampling procedures. First, our goal was to examine the unique experiences of adult children following parental divorce in later life, but our sample consisted primarily of individuals who were in their late teens and early 20s at the time of the study, so the results of this study may not generalize to adults whose parents divorced even later in their adult lives. Furthermore, most participants would have experienced their parents' divorce fairly recently, so the full effect of the divorce may not yet be realized. Future research may want to consider how older adults cope with their parents' divorce after they have established marriages and families of their own, as well as the long-term effects that parental divorce can have into adulthood. Second, we did not limit participation to individuals whose *biological* parents divorced in later life, so some individuals were reporting on divorce between a biological parent and a stepparent, which may have different implications for family dynamics and individuals' responses to the separation. Moreover, remarriage and the subsequent introduction of step-parents into the family has the potential to influence a parent's communication orientation. Additional research is needed to explore the complex communication dynamics that emerge in step-family relationships.

There were also some limitations related to measurement. First, our measures were retrospective in nature, asking participants to reflect on their parents' communication patterns in general rather than their current behaviors since the divorce. Thus, it is



possible that some participants reported on parental communication patterns from before the divorce. Second, we did not ask participants about family functioning or their own well-being prior to the divorce, so we cannot surmise whether the communication patterns and individual outcomes reported in this study changed since the divorce, or if they have remained relatively stable over time. Future research may consider ways to capture changes to family functioning before and after divorce to better understand how families evolve through this transition.

Finally, our study had some conceptual limitations. Although our structural model was guided by theory in terms of positioning parental communication patterns as the exogenous predictors of children's outcomes, we acknowledge that our predicted associations may be bidirectional in nature. For example, there is evidence that depressive symptoms are predictive of maladaptive relationship perceptions (e.g. Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010); therefore, emerging adult children who are struggling with depression may be more likely to view family relationships as turbulent and parental expectations as constricting in the post-divorce climate. Similarly, a turbulent family environment may require parents to communicate with more of a conformity orientation in an effort to keep family members aligned. The cross-sectional nature of our data limits our ability to determine the causal direction of these associations. Future research should collect longitudinal data throughout the divorce experience to better explore the time-ordered nature of these effects.

## Conclusion

This study examined potential differences between mothers' and fathers' conformity and conversation orientations following divorce in later life and the effects of these communication patterns on emerging adult children's perceptions of family relations and personal well-being. Our results revealed differences between parents' communication, such that fathers had higher conformity orientations and mothers had higher conversation orientations, and that these unique orientations can be predictive of cognitive and communicative outcomes for emerging adult children following divorce. Our results point to important recommendations for both parents and adult children following divorce. Parents should be cognizant of how their approach in communicating about the divorce or their ex-spouse may be perceived by their young adult child. Although emerging adult children may have the maturity to participate in conversations about the divorce, our results suggest that they are nevertheless stressed when parents engage in inappropriate disclosures or expect agreement. Thus, parents should be mindful of the information they share with their adult children and their conscious or unconscious efforts to control adult children's perceptions of the event. For their part, emerging adult children should be aware of how actively involved they are with the conflict between their parents. Although adult children may desire increased information and involvement with regard to the divorce, they should be cognizant of the potential implications this may have for their well-being. Emerging adult children should strive for high-quality communication with parents that establishes and respects appropriate privacy boundaries. We recommend that adult children who feel overwhelmed or burdened by their parents' conflict in a post-divorce environment selectively choose how and when to communicate with their parents.

## Note

1. Based on the results of our independent samples *t*-test, we used the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2009) in SPSS to test whether gender moderated the relationship between perceived turbulence and depressive symptoms and feeling caught and depressive symptoms. We controlled for the age of the young adult child at the time of the divorce and whether or not parents were remarried. The results of this analysis suggest that gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between turbulence and depressive symptoms and feeling caught and depressive symptoms.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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