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Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Children's Contact Refusal of Parents Following Divorce

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the development of a self-report measure to assess children refusing contact with their parents following divorce or separation. Two samples of young adults were collected to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (N = 96) and a confirmatory factor analysis (N = 332). The fit of the CFA was found to be adequate. Comparison to qualitative descriptions of participants' families indicated good validity. The Contact Refusal Scale also correlated appropriately with related measures. The results suggest that the Contact Refusal Scale may be a useful measure in better understanding the complex relationships and actions that follow parental divorce or separation.

Parental divorce brings a variety of difficulties for both parents and children (Greif, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Weaver & Schofield, 2015; Wood, Goesling, & Avellar, 2007). Parents, in addition to losing a spouse through divorce, may experience a significant loss of time with their children. This may occur due to parental decisions, but may also stem from the child refusing contact with the parent (Anderson, Anderson, Palmer, Mutchler, & Baker, 2011; Baker & Darnell, 2007; Gardner, 2002; Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Children's contact refusal creates significant pain and distress for parents (Baker, 2006; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976) and has generated significant debate among researchers regarding its origin and treatment (Gardner, 1999; Meier, 2009; Kelly & Johnston 2001).

A central part of the discussion of contact refusal centers on its cause. Gardner (1991, 1999) popularized the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome, suggesting that extreme forms of contact refusal stem from a campaign by one parent to turn the child against the other parent. Unfortunately, Gardner's conclusions are largely supported by his own clinical data and personal observations. Commentaries on Gardner's work have often relied on qualitative methods (Baker, 2006; Vassiliou &

Cartwright, 2001) or have been based on theoretical arguments (Drozd & Olesen, 2004), without more generalizable quantitative support.

The quantitative empirical literature building on Gardner's conceptualization has often confounded the child's behavior (contact refusal) and the parent's behavior (alienating). Baker and Chambers (2011), for example, developed a self-report measure of exposure to parental alienating behaviors (Baker & Eichler, 2014; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013). Although the development of this scale is a valuable contribution to the literature and future efforts to categorize families, the Baker Strategies Questionnaire does not assess for contact refusal. Thus it is unclear if the alienating behavior actually resulted in contact refusal or other meaningful effects in childhood. Laughrea (2002) also developed a scale focused on alienating behavior over the child's response. Similarly, Moné and Biringen (2006; 2012) developed a self-report scale of feeling alienated that assessed contact refusal, but connected it closely with Gardner's description of parental alienation. Items may ask, for example, if the respondent avoided their father *because* of their mother's badmouthing. Thus, the scale is of limited use in more general studies of contact refusal, as it is geared exclusively toward contact refusal associated with alienation.

An alternative framework for understanding contact refusal following divorce and separation was proposed by Kelly and Johnston (2001) with modifications by Friedlander and Walters (2010). Their framework focuses on contact refusal as the central problem with a variety of possible sources influencing the child. Friedlander and Walter focused on parental alienating behaviors, abuse, parental deficits, and parent-child enmeshment as primary influences. Empirical work based on the model indeed shows that rejection of a parent may stem from a number of different behaviors (Johnston, Walters, and Olesen, 2005).

Johnston and colleagues' efforts to measure contact refusal separate from the behaviors that cause it relied on observational rating scales. Although standardized and validated, the transportability of these scales is limited. Other measures that have been used to assess aligned relationships in divorced families have similarly been cumbersome to administer (Lampel, 1996). This creates difficulty for future studies attempting to use Kelly and Johnston's (2001) framework, in that there are no easily administered measures of contact refusal that are not confounded with specific factors that may be causing the contact refusal. The development of such a scale would allow for validation of Johnston and colleagues (2005) findings and further exploration of the topic of contact refusal in additional contexts.

The current studies

The current studies describe the development and validation of a quantitative measure of contact refusal in children following their parents' divorce. Our goal was for the measure to categorize behaviors that are commonly associated with parental rejection, but to not connect the measure to a specific reason for parental rejection.

The measure is thus conceived as a way to test the impact of different parental behaviors and other factors on contact refusal. The first study describes an initial effort to develop items and to then trim them down to those that are most related to contact refusal. The second study follows up by readministering the measure developed in the first study to verify its reliability and compare it to other, related measures.

Study 1

Sample

Data come from 96 individuals. The average age of the sample was 24.9 (SD = 5.67). Participants were, on average, 12.2 years old (SD = 2.94) when their parents separated. The sample was predominantly female (79%) and identified racially as white (85%). The majority of participants identified as students (61%) with only 36% reporting being employed full time. Over half of the participants reported completing at least a Bachelor's degree and only 6% reported not having any college experience. A majority of participants spent 80% or more of their time with their mother (53%), whereas 35% reported being with one parent 70% of the time or less. The remainder (7%) were with their fathers 80% of the time or more.

Measures

Contact Refusal Scale

Twenty-five initial items were developed based on previous descriptions of children who refused contact and items from the observational scales described by Johnston and colleagues (2005) that were deemed amenable to self-report. Johnston and colleagues scale was chosen due to the strong psychometrics of its several scales ($\alpha = .75-.95$, ICC = .77-.83) and conceptual agreement with the given subject. Prior to testing, the proposed questions were reviewed by five experts in post-divorce coparenting and in therapy with divorced couples (Three were University-affiliated therapists with extensive background working with families of divorce and supervising therapist trainees in such work; two reviewers were University professors with significant publication and outreach experience in working with co-parenting families.). Each item was duplicated to ask about each parent separately. An error when setting up the online survey resulted in the item "Took your mother's side when your parents disagreed" appearing both in the father and mother surveys, without changing the wording. Respondents answered on a seven point Likert scale with the first point anchored as "Never" and the last anchored as "Always", without specific anchors for the remaining points.

Additional questions

Participants were also asked an open-ended question to qualitatively describe their relationships with each of their parents.

Procedures

Participants were recruited to complete the survey through online advertisements and a posting to a university listserv. The survey was completed online. Only participants that completed all items for both parents were included in the final sample resulting in a sample of 96 participants. All analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013). Factor analyses were completed using the *Psych* package for R (Revell, 2014).

Results

The primary analysis was to conduct three separate exploratory factor analyses: one using responses about both parents simultaneously and then a separate analysis for responses about each parent separately. This approach was chosen to help ensure that the measure was relevant for both mothers and fathers and differentiated between them. In preparation for the analyses, Velicer's minimum average partial (MAP) criterion (Velicer, 1976) was used to estimate the required number of factors. In the combined analysis, six factors were recommended. Three factors were recommended for the father-oriented questions and five for the mother-oriented questions. These numbers were supported by inspection of the scree plots. Each analysis was conducted as a principal axis analysis with Oblimin rotation.

The goal of our analysis was to reduce the number of items and make a conceptually consistent measure of contact refusal. To this end, factors that were conceptually consistent with contact refusal and had strong loadings from several of the items. Considering loadings greater than .4 to be strong, the majority of the strong loadings in the combined analysis were in the first and second factors. The remaining factors had less than five strong loadings each. In the separate analyses, the majority of strong loadings for fathers were in the first factor and in the first and fifth factors for mothers. The remaining factors had few strong loadings. These five factors were used to determine which items would be retained and are reproduced in Table 1.

To effectively reduce the number of items while retaining the most relevant questions, we established a criteria that for an item to be retained it needed to have a loading greater than .6 for at least one of the factors for both parents (i.e., either in the combined or separate analysis) and a loading of over .4 for the other factor. Factors 1 and 5 from the separate EFA for mothers were considered to be single factor—meaning a loading over .4 was only required in one of them. Ten items were retained. Neither version of the accidentally duplicated item met criteria, thus limiting the item's threat to the validity of the measure. We averaged these ten items to create a scale score for each participant. Cronbach's alpha for the father items was .94 and for the mother items was .95. The mean for fathers was 2.91 (SD = 1.69) and for mothers was 2.43 (SD = 1.51). A paired sample t-test revealed a significant difference between each parent's contact refusal score ($t = 1.99, p = .05$). The two subscales were not significantly correlated ($r = -.07, p = ns$).

Table 1. Loadings on conceptually relevant factors from three separate exploratory factor analyses with oblimin rotation.

Item	Fathers		Mothers			Explanation
	Combined factor 1 ^b	Separate factor 1 ^c	Combined factor 2 ^b	Separate factor 1 ^d	Separate factor 5 ^d	
Told do not like	0.48	0.58	0.17	-0.01	0.07	No strong loadings for mothers
Insulted or yelled	0.34	0.43	0.12	0.09	0.01	No strong loadings for mothers
Told others do not like	0.73	0.79	0.55	0.00	0.44	Both "strong" loadings for mothers were weaker.
Avoided extended family	0.63	0.75	0.64	0.18	0.49	Retained
Looked forward to seeing	-0.50	-0.60	-0.40	-0.17	0.00	No strong loadings for mothers
Refused to spend time	0.85	0.91	0.51	0.69	0.10	Retained
Refused to go to house	0.86	0.84	0.36	0.88	-0.12	Mothers combined loading was weak.
Complained about time	0.81	0.79	0.60	0.49	0.22	Retained
Ignored contact	0.90	0.97	0.61	0.79	0.17	Retained
Trivial answers	0.77	0.73	0.79	0.08	0.55	Retained
Told don't want to spend time	0.67	0.75	0.67	0.17	0.41	Retained
Excuse to not do something	0.94	0.86	0.72	0.53	0.25	Retained
Attacked or hit	-0.06	0.04	0.00	0.54	-0.26	No strong loadings for fathers
Found reasons to be away	0.75	0.64	0.75	0.06	0.42	Retained
Behaved worse	0.38	0.40	0.20	0.33	-0.08	No strong loadings
Hid, screamed, etc.	0.47	0.45	0.27	0.47	-0.05	Combined analysis loadings were weak.
Avoided in same place	0.80	0.75	0.78	0.36	0.44	Retained
Preferred over other parent	-0.32	-0.24	-0.24	0.04	0.17	No strong loadings
Enjoyed time	-0.54	-0.63	-0.46	-0.05	-0.05	No strong loadings for mothers
Told you love them	-0.53	-0.63	-0.23	0.09	0.02	No strong loadings for mothers
Wished not to see	0.69	0.74	0.80	0.27	0.43	Retained
Comforted other parent	0.18	0.03	0.63	0.19	0.19	No strong loadings for fathers
Took other parent's side ^a	0.00	0.00	-0.12	0.09	0.10	No strong loadings
Other parent's team mate	0.04	-0.05	0.68	0.10	0.29	No strong loadings for fathers
Complained to other parent	0.38	0.36	0.55	0.11	0.40	No strong loadings for fathers

Note. Bolded item descriptions were ultimately retained. Bolded loadings are greater than .4.

^aThis item was asked in reference to taking mother's side in both surveys due to an error in setting up the survey. ^bAn EFA with 6 factors was computed for all 50 items (mother and father scales combined). The first two factors, separated into mother and father headings and presented side by side, are included in this chart. ^cAn EFA with 3 factors was computed for just the father items. The first factor is presented here. ^dAn EFA with 5 factors was computed for just the mother items. The first and fifth factors are included here.

Qualitative descriptions were consistent with expectations. When participants rated their mothers as low on contact refusal (< 3), they spoke positively or ambivalently of their mother. Sample comments (with scores following) include "I lived with my mother. It was a standard mother-son teenage relationship. Probably

better after the divorce than before” (1.17), “We were very close. We did way more activities after the divorce” (2.33), and “The relationship [with] my mom was fine on my end. It was clear she took the divorce hard and was somewhat of a crazy person” (2.67). There were a few responses in the 2–3 range that suggested anger against mothers including “I was already becoming less close with my mom before the divorce and afterwards things became increasingly worse, I yelled at her a lot and told her I hated her occasionally” (2.42). Mid-range scores (3–5) described increasingly distant relationships. Sample comments include “I was devastated by their separation but did not blame my mother. I did, however, think she was immature and she was not someone I wanted to spend much time with” (3.67) and “Tried to avoid contact and didn’t enjoy spending time with her because I know she would try to say negative things about my father,” (4.5). The sole contrary example in this range only wrote “GOOD” (4) for a description. High scores (> 5) were consistently negative in their relationship. Examples include “It was horrible. I rarely talked to her, wouldn’t even be in the same room as her” (5.17) and “Oh geez. I hated my mom honestly,” (6.42).

Qualitative descriptions of fathers followed a similar pattern. However, throughout the descriptions there were many comments where fathers refused contact or contact was not allowed. Low score examples include “My dad and I were close, I remember missing him a lot when I wasn’t with him,” (1.42), “He stopped talking to my siblings and I. They contacted him on and off a few times, but he never seemed very interested in any of us,” (1), and “I had no relationship with my father and still do not. I was allowed to see him once with supervision of another adult,” (1.5). Mid-range scores were again associated with negative descriptions, such as “I could not help but blame him for the demise of my family structure. I abhorred going to see him on weekends and was at a point in my life where all I wanted to do was hang out with my friends. I still maintained a level of respect for him as my father, but I definitely held some resentment,” (3.67) and “I would spend time with my father and his new family, and while I didn’t really dislike them, I would bring stories to my friends to make fun of behind their backs (emotional distancing, right?). I spent as little time with them as possible,” (4.17). High scores were consistently negative, with additional descriptions of how fathers isolated themselves. Sample comments include “Didn’t like spending time or talking to him. I don’t think this was directly caused by the divorce but more so I just thought he was mean and didn’t want to get yelled at all the time,” (5.33), “Difficult because I blamed him for everything because he left the house. I felt abandoned” (5.58), and “I hate the dude....he was the best father growing up and had a life crisis one day and bam things changed..,” (7).

Study 2

Sample

The sample for Study 2 included 332 participants. On average, participants were 11.8 years old at the time of separation ($SD = 2.91$) and were 25.1 years old at the

time of the survey ($SD = 6.3$). Seventy-three percent of the sample was female. A majority of the participants were White (66%) with 13% reporting their race as “Other” or a combination of races, 11% reporting Hispanic, 6% as African American, and 4% as Asian. Half of the sample reported being students (51%) and 30% reported being employed full time. Twenty percent of the sample had not attended any college and 35% had completed a four-year degree or more. The sample was skewed towards spending most of their time with mom; 72% of the sample reported spending 70% or more of their time under their mother’s care in the average week.

Measures

Contact Refusal Scale

The Contact Refusal Scale was developed in Study 1. In this study, only the ten items that were retained were administered to participants. The responses were still on a seven-point scale anchored on each end with *Never* and *Always*. Participants completed the scale for each parent. Cronbach’s alpha for this sample was .96 for questions rating fathers and .95 for mothers.

Baker Strategies Questionnaire

In order to establish the convergent validity of the Contact Refusal Scale, a portion of the sample completed the Baker Strategy Questionnaire (Baker & Chambers, 2011). The Baker Strategy Questionnaire is modeled around theoretical and qualitative descriptions of Parental Alienation Syndrome and has demonstrated connections with outcomes in theoretically consistent directions. The 20-item measure asks participants to rate the degree to which a parent tried to turn the respondent against the other parent. Cronbach’s alpha for responses about fathers was .95 and was .95 for responses about mothers.

Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire – Warmth Subscale

The Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire was also administered to participants to establish the Contact Refusal Scale’s convergent validity. The full scale includes 86 items, spread across 12 subscales (Schum & Stolberg, 2007). A series of articles details its development and validate its usefulness in studies of coparenting (e.g., Gasper, Stolberg, Macie, & Williams, 2008; Mullett & Stolberg, 1999; Schum & Stolberg, 2007). It is focused on measuring children’s perceptions of their divorced parents parenting and coparenting. Only the *Warmth* subscale was used in this study. It includes 7 items for each parent, such as “I felt that my mom cared about me.” Cronbach’s alpha for fathers was .95 and for mothers was .94.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through several online advertising platforms and a university listserv. All surveys were completed online. Participants completed the study measures as part of a broader study. Participants were offered a chance to

win a \$20 gift card for participation. To be eligible for the study, participants had to confirm that they were between 8 and 17 years old at the time of their parents' separation and that they were currently between 18 and 35 years old. The broader study used a planned missing data design (Graham, 2009). Because of this, only a randomized subset of the participants completed the Baker Strategy Questionnaire ($N = 102$) and the warmth scale ($N = 151$), reducing the sample size for correlations between them and the Contact Refusal Scale, though the sample size was still adequate for the analysis. Analyses were conducted with R 3.0.2 (R Core Team, 2013), the *Lavaan* package for R (Rosseel, 2012), the *psych* package for R (Revelle, 2014), and the *Hmisc* package for R (Harrell, 2014).

Results

Two separate confirmatory factor analyses were conducted for each parent. We did not attempt to compare mothers and fathers in this analysis nor to find factors within the scale. In both cases the 10 items were loaded as factors of a common latent variable. Standardized and unstandardized loadings for both models are displayed in Table 2. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$). The fit indices for the model of contact refusal of fathers the model suggested adequate fit ($\chi^2(35) = 123.32$, $p < .001$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .09). The fit indices for the model of contact refusal of mothers were similar, though somewhat improved ($\chi^2(35) = 87.03$, $p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .07). We concluded that although the RMSEA was higher than desired, the fit of the models was adequate, though future work on measurement invariance between ratings of mothers and fathers is warranted.

As a test of convergent validity, we computed correlations between the Contact Refusal Scale, Baker Strategy Questionnaire, and the Warmth Subscale from the Coparenting Behaviors Questionnaire (Table 3). These measures were selected due to their conceptual connection with Friedlander and Walters' (2010) model of contact refusal. The given measures are tightly focused on the given construct and should therefore be correlated but not collinear with the Contact Refusal Scale. All

Table 2. Standardized and unstandardized loadings for two separate confirmatory factor analyses.

	Fathers			Mothers		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Avoided extended family	1.00		.65	1.00		.62
Refused to spend time	1.35	.10	.91	1.30	.11	.87
Complained about time	1.28	.10	.82	1.41	.11	.85
Ignored contact	1.27	.09	.87	1.33	.11	.84
Trivial answers	1.07	.09	.73	1.16	.11	.71
Told don't want to spend time	1.37	.10	.90	1.53	.12	.90
Excuse to not do something	1.30	.09	.88	1.41	.11	.88
Found reasons to be away	1.23	.10	.80	1.30	.12	.72
Avoided in same place	1.30	.10	.88	1.50	.11	.90
Wished not to see	1.45	.10	.90	1.47	.11	.88

Note. Father and Mother analyses were run separately. All loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Contact refusal of father						
2. Contact refusal of mother	.10 [†]					
3. Father's alienating behavior	.34***	.52***				
4. Mother's alienating behavior	.19 [†]	.46***	.44***			
5. Father warmth	-.55***	.05	-.19	.15		
6. Mother warmth	.13	-.49***	.05	-.26	.09	

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

correlations were in the expected directions. Contact refusal of fathers was correlated to father's alienating behaviors ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) and father's warmth ($r = -.55$, $p < .001$). Contact refusal of mothers had a correlation with mother's alienating behavior ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) and mother's warmth ($r = -.49$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

This project described the development of the Contact Refusal Scale, a self-report measure of contact refusal following divorce that can be completed by young adults (Available in Appendix). The measure shows good reliability and adequate fit. The measure also demonstrated excellent validity. Convergent validity was demonstrated with measures of parental alienation and parental warmth. Additionally, scores on the measure match well with young adults' qualitative descriptions of their relationship with their parents at the time of divorce. The availability of this measure can help expand understanding of the causes and experience of contact refusal. By exploring these topics, parents and children experiencing contact refusal can be aided in improving their relationships and avoid any potential lasting effects of disrupted parent-child relationships. The qualitative portions of the study also provide a reminder of the complexity that may be present in post-divorce families.

Limitations

The greatest limitation and the most important next step in the validation of the Contact Refusal Scale revolves around the samples used in the studies described in this article. In both studies, convenience samples of young adults were used resulting in samples skewed towards female participants and participants living with their mothers. A critical next step in the development of this measure will be to validate it against more representative samples, preferable drawn from divorce records to increase the quality of the sample. Testing for measurement invariance between mothers and fathers will also be critical in a better sample to validate that the measure performs equally for both parents. Because the methods focused on young adults' retrospective accounts of their parents' divorce or separation, there remain questions about the viability of administering the measure to children and adolescents. Again, additional work will be required to further validate the measure. Another limitation is that our sample in Study 1 was smaller than some rules

of thumb suggest for an EFA. We recognize this limitation, but also suggest that the qualitative descriptions balance the deficiency.

Implications for family therapy

Although this study did not test the Contact Refusal Scale as a clinical measure, there are several implications for practitioners from its development. This research corroborates the view of post-divorce families being complex and the reasoning behind having reduced time with one parent to be multifaceted. It is imperative that a family therapist develop an adequate understanding of the dynamics within a family, since treating one parent as an alienator, where the other parent has disengaged or the child is refusing contact independently is likely to produce frustration and result in little therapeutic movement. Future research with the Contact Refusal Scale may confirm its viability as a clinical measure for both assessment and outcomes.

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Appendix: Contact Refusal Scale

Thank you for completing this survey. We are interested in understanding your relationship with your parents following their separation. Separation refers to when your parents no longer lived together, even if they were not yet officially divorced. Please mark how often you experienced or did the following things **during the first year following your parents' separation**.

Relationship with Father

	Never							Always
Told friends or others that you do not like your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Avoided activities with your father's extended family.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Refused to spend time with your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Refused to go your father's house.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Complained about spending time with your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Ignored your father's attempts to contact you (by phone, email, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Gave no answer or a trivial answer to your father's questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Told someone that you do not want to spend time with your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Made up an excuse to not do something with your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Found reasons to be away (like friends, school activities, etc.) when you were at your father's house.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Avoided your father when you were in the same place.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Wished you wouldn't have to see or talk to your father.	<input type="checkbox"/>							

Relationship with Mother

	Never							Always
Told friends or others that you do not like your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Avoided activities with your mother's extended family.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Refused to spend time with your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Refused to go your mother's house.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Complained about spending time with your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Ignored your mother's attempts to contact you (by phone, email, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Gave no answer or a trivial answer to your mother's questions.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Told someone that you do not want to spend time with your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Made up an excuse to not do something with your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Found reasons to be away (like friends, school activities, etc.) when you were at your mother's house.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Avoided your mother when you were in the same place.	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Wished you wouldn't have to see or talk to your mother.	<input type="checkbox"/>							

Scoring

- Count the number of selected boxes in each column for each parent and write it on the appropriate line to the right.

Father Count:	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
Mother Count:	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
- For each box, multiply the number of checked boxes by the number below it and write the total on this line.

Father Product:	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
Mother Product:	___	___	___	___	___	___	___
- Sum all 7 products you calculated in step one for each parent and divide the total by 10 to find the final score.

Father Final:	___	Mother Final:	___
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