The Relationship Between Psychological Functioning in a College Sample and Retrospective Reports of Parental Loyalty Conflicts and Psychological Maltreatment

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ABSTRACT
Two-hundred forty participants completed questionnaires that explored parental unions, experiences of parental loyalty conflict behaviors, psychological functioning, and frequency of exposure to maltreatment. Significant relationships were found between nonintact parental union status and experiences of parental loyalty conflict, parental loyalty conflict and psychological abuse, and parental loyalty conflict and anxiety and depression symptoms. Relatively low frequencies of experiencing parental loyalty conflict can negatively affect psychological functioning. Implications for psychological, social, and legal service providers are presented.

KEYWORDS
adjustment; anxiety; college-age sample; depression; intact parental union; interparental conflicts; nonintact parental union; parental loyalty conflicts; psychological maltreatment

The way parents behave with each other and toward a child has been shown to affect the psychological adjustment of the child (e.g., Miranda, Affuso, Esposito, & Bacchini, 2016). Psychological dysfunction has been observed in children from high interparental conflict environments (e.g., Elam, Sandler, Wolchik, & Tein, 2016; Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007; Minuchin, 1974; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Stallman and Ohan (2016) explored parenting style, parental conflicts, and adjustment issues. In this Australian study, 109 divorced parents with school-age children were surveyed. The study showed that lax parenting, coparent conflicts, and parent distress were all significant predictors of children’s adjustment. Davies, Martin, Sturje-Apple, Ripple, and Cicchetti (2016) examined emotional security theory and how this relates to adjustment outcomes with preschool-age children and their parents in a mixed priority design. This study showed that high levels of exposure to interparental conflicts generally predicted children with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms as well as lower social competence (i.e., adjustment problems).

Interparental conflict that triangulates a child is particularly harmful to a child’s emotional adjustment (Verrocchio, Baker, & Bernet, 2016). Parental loyalty conflicts (PLCs) involve one parent interfering with the child(ren)’s perception of, relationship with, or access to the other parent. Examples include
denigrating the other parent in the presence of the child(ren), asking the child (ren) to keep secrets from the other parent, or interfering with the child(ren)’s communication or visits with the other parent (Baker & Brassard, 2013). These alienating behaviors create disorder in the family system, diminishing the opportunity for cooperative and effective coparenting (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Minuchin, 1993). Although parents from intact families engage in PLCs, these are more often found between parents in nonintact unions (separated, divorced, no longer cohabiting, not in an intimate relationship; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker & Eichler, 2016). The same pattern is found for families with parental alienating behaviors (Baker & Chambers, 2011). PLCs have been found to be associated with psychological dysfunction in minor-age children and in young adults (Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker & Chambers, 2011; Baker & Eichler, 2014; Verrocchio et al., 2016).

Further evidence for the impact of triangulation-based psychological abuse on adjustment in preadolescents can be found in the research of Gagné, Drapeau, Melançon, Saint-Jacques, and Lepine (2007). They found that nonintact parental union status was predictive of more severe parental conflicts, higher frequency of triangulation of the child in interparental conflicts, and greater likelihood of a stronger alliance of the child with one parent over the other. Psychological abuse was the best predictor of externalized behavior problems, whereas internalized behavior problems were associated more so with parental conflict intensity and child’s gender (Gagné et al., 2007). Psychological abuse and psychological dysfunction in adolescent and preadolescent children are correlated when there is dysfunctional parental behavior (Behere, Basnet, & Campbell, 2017; Teicher & Samson, 2016).

In society today, there are a variety of family structures that are now the norm. Adults engaged in committed intimate relationships are increasingly in the nonmarried category and these couples are having children at greater rates than in past decades in the United States (Arias, Heron, & Xu, 2016). Arias et al. (2016) cited the annual birth rate of unmarried parents at 40.3% of all births in 2012. For the 2000 to 2010 period, the National Vital Statistics System (2017) for the United States reports a 0.4% per 1,000 decrease in divorce rates and a 1.4% drop in marriage rates (from 8.4% to 6.8%). Parental union dissolution has evolved from being typified by divorce; subsequently, children are experiencing diversity in types of transitions in family household composition (Brown, Stykes, and Manning, 2016). This study broadens the traditional focus on divorce as the sole mechanism for dissolution by including participants whose parents took more contemporary paths to parental union dissolution.

Autonomy from a family system often begins when one starts college. Many opportunities for independence and responsibility are tested during this time of one’s life. Retrospection of one’s childhood is engaged, and emotional tools are tested. Adult well-being is shown to be detrimentally
affected if these young adults were exposed to parental conflicts in the past (Baker & Verrocchio, 2015). Wintre et al. (2011) explored depressive symptoms with a population of both males and females in their first year of university attendance and found that females were more vulnerable to the effects of parental union dissolution than males when having to adjust to emerging adulthood.

If one had experienced a parent’s alienating behaviors and had felt compelled to engage in loyalty conflicts, this retrospection and damage from past experiences can cause current day distress and dysfunction. Baker and Eichler (2014) explored this issue with 157 college students who reflected on PLCs and psychological maltreatment with the use of the Baker Strategies Questionnaire (BSQ) and the Psychological Maltreatment Measure (PMM), respectively. There was a significant association between PLCs and psychological maltreatment. This supports the idea that PLC is abusive to children. The ramifications of this abuse can emerge in varied ways during this challenging young adult stage when the child has some emotional and physical distance from the high-stress, conflictual situation. Some of these ramifications include feelings of having been terrorized, corrupted, and isolated, and these are presented through anxiety, depression, and relationship issues (Baker & Eichler, 2014). In an earlier study, Baker and Chambers (2011) showed a high amount of endorsements of PLC behaviors in a survey of 106 women (M age = 28.23), over 90% of whom were attending a graduate school of social work. Interestingly, this research did not show associations with parental alienating behaviors and current depression and self-esteem. It is important to note that these researchers acknowledged the lack of association with these factors was possibly due to the nature of the population (female social work students) and assessment limitations.

In the college-age population, parental divorce, quality of parental relations, and loyalty conflict behaviors combined are strong predictors of psychological maltreatment (Baker & Eichler, 2014). Verrocchio et al. (2016) studied 509 adults (M age = 33.4 years) in southern Italy who were asked to complete measures of depression, anxiety, psychological maltreatment, and the BSQ. Even after controlling for parental union status (non-intactness), PLC behaviors were associated directly with reports of psychological maltreatment and directly as well as indirectly (via childhood experience of psychological maltreatment) with adult anxiety symptoms in this group. These studies validate that PLC, psychological abuse, and psychological dysfunction are connected.

Other forms of child abuse and maltreatment have been found to accompany interparental conflict (Gagné et al., 2007). Shaffer, Huston, and Egeland (2008) suggested that a retrospective view of childhood maltreatment is often minimized. Assessments of childhood maltreatment that center on recollected events
as opposed to feelings and attitudes about abuse seem to provide a better history of the abusive experiences and context for those feelings and attitudes. Additionally, children might experience abuse that has been enacted by any of a number of caregivers in the home. Given both divorce rates and recent birth rates for nonmarried parents, it is important to capture the roles of stepparents, romantic partners, and mother and father figures (Teicher & Parigger, 2015).

Baker and Brassard (2013) studied private high school male students’ exposure to parents’ uses of loyalty conflict behaviors, abuse, and the student’s well-being. There were 220 participants who completed the BSQ and measurements for psychological maltreatment, physical abuse, sexual abuse, depression, anxiety and rule-breaking. In their findings, Baker and Brassard reported high exposure to some aspects of PLCs, even with participants whose parents were in intact unions. Participants with nonintact parental unions reported rates of PLC that were significantly higher than participants with parents in intact unions. The data also showed that exposure to PLC was associated with all forms of child abuse, especially psychological maltreatment. Findings from Baker and Brassard suggest that PLC behaviors function as a form of psychological maltreatment. The study reflected the consistent finding in literature that experiencing PLCs is linked to depression in young adulthood. There was not any significant connection between rule-breaking and PLC.

Baker and Eichler (2016) used the BSQ, the Baker Child Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ), and the PMM. This study surveyed 109 college students about alienation strategies used by parents and the participant’s actions toward and attitudes about each parent. Baker and Eichler did find significant associations between the participant’s alienation behaviors toward a target parent and their exposure to their parents’ conflicts. These findings demonstrate the detrimental effect on parent–child relationships when parents are in conflict with each other and embolden the child to disfavor a parent. Parents’ actions can influence the child’s actions. If conflictual behavior is initially engaged in during the dissolution of the union, these behaviors could become a systemic pattern spawning relational dysfunction between parents and child(ren).

This study is an extension of research studies with varied samples; Northeastern Catholic-school male adolescents (Baker & Brassard, 2013), Northeastern female social work graduate and undergraduate students (Baker & Chambers, 2011), and primarily female college students from a small Southwestern university (Baker & Eichler, 2014). This study seeks to ascertain whether results can be replicated with our primarily female college student sample at a midsized public Southern university. The specific questions in this study included the following:

H1. Participants from nonintact families will report experiencing higher rates of parentally-mediated loyalty conflict behaviors.
H2. Participants who report experiencing PLC behaviors are more likely to experience other types of psychological maltreatment.

H3. Participants who report higher levels of PLC behaviors will report higher levels of depression and anxiety.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 240 college students enrolled in psychology courses at a moderate-sized southern U.S. university. The sample was made up of 173 females, 63 males, and 4 other or blank, and their ages ranged from 18 to 27. The history and current status of the participants’ parents’ relationships were measured by a series of questions to determine whether the parental unions were intact or noninact. Intact unions include parents or parent figures who are currently married or currently living together. Nonintact unions involve parents who are not currently married or not currently living together (e.g., divorced, separated, formerly cohabiting relationship, and never in a committed relationship). Questions used to determine parental union status had to be responsive to the many forms of parental union and disunion that a participant might have experienced. Participants answered the items “Parents or parental figures (are, were, were never) married or living together” and “Did one or both parents remarry?” Interestingly, some participants interpreted the first question as “Is either of your parents married to someone?” Thus, those who answered “are married/currently living together” were cross-verified against questions such as “Did one or both of your parents remarry?” to determine more definitively current parental union status. Parental union status included 135 participants reporting having parents in intact unions and 100 reporting parents in nonintact unions (5 gave conflicting information across parental union items).

**Measures**

**Parental loyalty conflict**

The BSQ (Baker & Chambers, 2011) is a 20-item scale measuring the types and frequency of PLC engendering behaviors experienced by the participant. Types of PLC behavior included in this assessment range from “Made it difficult for me and the other parent to reach and communicate with each other” to “Confided in me about ‘adult matters’ ... which led me to feel protective of him/her or angry at the other parent.” The items are rated on a 0 (never) to 4 (always) frequency scale. Participants mark how frequently each parent engaged in each of the 20 behaviors, making the range of possible scores from 0 to 160 for any given participant.
**Child abuse and maltreatment**

The Maltreatment and Abuse Chronology of Exposure (MACE; Teicher & Parigger, 2015) is a 52-item assessment of the experience of abuse from 0 to 18 enacted by any caretaker. Caretakers include parents, stepparents, parent’s girlfriend or boyfriend, and mother figure or father figure. This study used 21 items that comprise the physical abuse and psychological maltreatment domains; namely, parental verbal abuse, parental nonverbal abuse, emotional neglect, and physical abuse. Participants were asked to report these abuse experiences in 3-year intervals from ages 1 to 18. Additionally, one item to measure the occurrence of sexual abuse was used, based on a sexual abuse item from the Conflict Tactics Strategies Parent–Child assessment (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). This sexual abuse item was formatted identically to the MACE items for consistency.

**Anxiety and depression**

The Anxious/Depressed Scale is a 17-item scale measuring symptoms of depression and anxiety that was excerpted from the Adult Self Report Scale (ASR; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003). Each item on this scale can be marked *not true*, *sometimes or somewhat true*, and *often or very true*, and asks the respondent to consider the past 6 months. The ASR has very good reliability and validity (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2003).

For all assessments, missing data or unknown responses were omitted from analyses. These decisions were upheld even if loss of a participant’s data was warranted. This allowed the most conservative view of the results to be attained.

**Procedure**

The research protocol was approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board. Participants were recruited through the Psychology Department research pool and given credit for their involvement. Participants reported to a computer lab and were administered a verbal overview of the informed consent and then given the entire informed consent electronically. The consent procedure was conducted by trained research assistants or one of the three principal investigators. Those who agreed completed the assessments online through Survey Monkey. They were given a physical copy of the informed consent and debriefing form after completion of the study. Participants were encouraged to bring any concerns or emotional distress to the attention of the researchers or to access free counseling services if the experience of completing these assessments brought awareness of issues needing therapeutic attention.
Results

Statistical analyses were completed with JMP 13 and IBM SPSS 24. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1 and descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 2.

The BSQ provided information on the frequency with which each parent participated in each of 20 loyalty conflict behaviors. Table 3 provides the percentage of participants who reported parents engaging in each item. Also provided in Table 3 is the mean frequency for each item, which was rated on a 0–120 scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Demographics of Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<th>Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Variables</th>
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<tr>
<td>BSQ</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSYC MAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>A/D</td>
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<th>Table 3: Rates of Endorsement of 20 Baker Strategies Questionnaire Items</th>
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<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fabricated or exaggerated the other parent’s negative qualities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraged me to rely on his or her opinion and approval above all else</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confided in me about “adult matters” that engendered anger or protectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Created situations in which I felt obligated to show favoritism to him or her</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asked me to keep secrets about things the other parent should know</td>
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<tr>
<td>Created situations in which I would choose him or her and reject the other parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraged to think less of the other parent’s rules, values, and authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acted negatively when I showed affection for or spoke positively about the other parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tried to turn me against the other parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicated discomfort or displeasure when I demonstrated interest in other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said things that indicated that the other parent was dangerous or unsafe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made it stressful to spend time with the other parent’s extended family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited my contact with the other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created situations that engendered hurt or anger with other parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked me to spy on other parent and report back to him or her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made it difficult to communicate with other parent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Referred to his or her new spouse or partner as Mom or Dad and encouraged me to do the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to the other parent by his or her first name and encouraged me to do the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said or implied that the other parent did not really love me</td>
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<tr>
<td>Withheld or blocked communication and items from the other parent meant for me</td>
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Note: Percentage reflects an averaging of mother and father engagement (at any level) in behavior.
to 4 scale. Five items were endorsed by one quarter to one half of the sample, with the remaining 15 items endorsed by less than 20% of the sample.

**Hypothesis 1:** BSQ scores of participants with intact versus nonintact parental unions were compared using a *t* test. Participants with nonintact parental unions reported significantly higher BSQ scores than participants with intact parental unions (*t* = −2.86, *p* < .005; Cohen’s *d* = .37).

**Hypothesis 2:** A Pearson’s correlation was done to assess whether BSQ scores were associated with psychological maltreatment scores. There was a strongly positive and significant relationship between the two (*r* = .61, *p* < .0001).

**Hypothesis 3:** A Pearson’s correlation assessed whether a positive relationship existed between BSQ scores and ASR anxiety/depression subscale scores. There was a moderate correlation between the two scores (*r* = .354, *p* < .001). Table 4 provides intercorrelations for all study variables.

A series of post hoc regression analyses examined whether gender moderated the impact of parental union status on psychological maltreatment, PLCs, and anxiety and depression, respectively. The results of moderation analyses revealed that the impact of parental union status on psychological maltreatment did not depend on gender (*b* = −0.24, *SE* = 1.49, *t* = −0.16, *p* = .87). Likewise, gender did not moderate the impact of parental union status on PLCs (*b* = 0.72, *SE* = 1.65, *t* = 0.44, *p* = .66) or anxiety and depression (*b* = −0.21, *SE* = 0.60, *t* = −0.35, *p* = .73).

**Discussion**

PLC experiences in this sample were similar in multiple respects to Baker and Eichler (2014). For example, the six most frequently endorsed items and the four least frequently endorsed items on the BSQ were the same in this study as in Baker and Eichler (2014). Compared to Baker and Eichler, nearly every

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**Table 4. Intercorrelations of Study Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BSQ</th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>TA</th>
<th>A/D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSQ</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PM</td>
<td>.611**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>.204**</td>
<td>.093</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA</td>
<td>.602**</td>
<td>.135*</td>
<td>.486**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/D</td>
<td>.338**</td>
<td>.106</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.338**</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Intercorrelations based on 214 participants who completed all assessments. BSQ = Baker Strategies Questionnaire; PM = psychological maltreatment; PA = physical abuse; TA = total abuse; A/D = anxiety and depression.

*p* < .05. **p** < .01.
item in this study was endorsed by a lower percentage of the sample. However, no significant differences were found with chi-square analyses. This indicates considerable consistency in findings on the BSQ in both a Southwestern and Southern sample of U.S. college students.

Baker (2010) found that age was a significant predictor of reporting experiencing parental alienation. Younger adults were more likely to experience reporting parental alienation than older adults. It is interesting to note that both this study and Baker and Eichler (2014) had similar percentages reporting the varied types of PLCs and that both studies with college-age students had higher rates on the seven items of the BSQ than the high school boys sample reported (Baker & Brassard, 2013).

Participants with parents in nonintact unions reported experiencing significantly more PLCs than their peers with parents in intact unions, a finding reconfirmed in this study (e.g., Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker & Eichler, 2014; Baker & Verrocchio, 2015; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). This confirmation is important because all types of parental unions were included, suggesting that intact and nonintact unions other than married and divorced types show similar patterns of PLCs. Another issue of import emerges with this data; namely, that the significant difference in PLCs between groups should not obscure the fact that some participants with intact parental unions reported high levels of PLCs. The implication is that whereas clinicians with clients whose parents have nonintact unions should consider screening for PLC experiences, clients whose parental unions are intact should also be considered for screening for PLC experiences, particularly if other forms of interparental conflicts are present (Brock & Kochanska, 2016).

The strong relationship between BSQ score and psychological maltreatment found in this research and the research of others (Baker, 2010; Baker & Brassard, 2013; Baker & Eichler, 2014) has indications for clinicians. The direction and strength of this relationship strongly suggests a high level of risk for psychological maltreatment among those who have experienced greater levels of PLCs. Consequently, a screening for psychological maltreatment appears to be relevant for clients with histories of experiencing PLCs. Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) found that those with divorced parents reported experiencing higher levels of psychological maltreatment than their peers with intact parental marriages. Thus, clinicians should particularly screen for psychological maltreatment when clients report a history of PLCs and divorce of parents.

Depression and anxiety ASR scores were greater for participants who reported experiencing higher levels of PLCs. Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) found that adults who had experienced parental alienation were more likely to experience major depressive disorder. The current finding is important in that it supports the idea that experiencing PLCs is associated with experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, such as has been found for
broader interparental conflicts and child mental health disorder symptoms (Elam et al., 2016; Rowe, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Hood, 2016; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). Clients who report growing up witnessing significant interparental conflicts should be screened for experiences of PLCs. This is pertinent because PLCs involve triangulation of the child and child guilt as a source of conflicts. These are both risk factors for psychological maladjustment.

As comparisons of these results are drawn to the existing research, it is critical to consider gender. This study has a larger number of female participants than the index studies conducted by Baker and colleagues. The findings of this study reinforce the unified message across studies that females experience psychological adjustment problems when they report experiencing PLCs. The PLC literature to date has marginalized gender differences, likely due to the reality of total or primarily female samples of young adults. This study seeks to partially address this deficit with a post hoc analysis of gender. Regression analyses confirm that gender, at least in this sample, does not moderate the relationship between parental union status and psychological maltreatment or parental union status and PLCs or parental union status and anxiety or depressive symptoms. In contrast, Wintre et al. (2011) noted that females were generally more vulnerable than males to depressive symptoms and psychological maladjustment when their parents were divorced.

Forensic implications are numerous from this body of research. This study specifically supports the importance of court-mandated parent training in those cases where significant PLCs are being experienced by children. The risks for future depression and anxiety problems, as well as relationship problems, is quite clear from multiple converging lines of research: emotional security theory-based approaches (Rowe et al., 2016), PLCs (e.g., Baker & Eichler, 2014), and parent-training programming for separating parents (Wolchik, Schenck, & Sandler, 2009). Salem, Sandler, and Wolchik (2013) indicated that 46 states in the nation offer parent education of some sort to separating and divorcing parents. The research results suggest that a commitment to parent intervention is imperative in improving mental health outcomes for children entangled in PLCs.

This study has a few notable limitations that could affect the implications. The convenience sample of college students reduces confidence in the generalizability of these results to a broader population. Psychological maltreatment was measured with a relatively new clinical research assessment that was modified for the purposes of this study. The relatively low base rate of experience of PLCs might attenuate relationships that a sample with higher levels of experience of PLCs would demonstrate. Finally, a limitation shared with many of Baker’s studies is the primarily female composition of the sample. With what is known about gender differences in anxiety and depression, these results might overestimate the mental health symptoms experienced in conjunction with PLCs when applied to males.
Future research should include broader community samples to allow determination of whether these findings extend past the more homogeneous groups that have typified PLC studies. Gender balance in the samples should be a goal of future research, to prevent further potential feminization of the projected outcomes of PLCs.

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