

## Age Differences in Effects of Family Structure and Quality on Attachment to Family and Romantic Partners

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### Abstract

The aim of this research was to examine the differences in attachment to romantic partners and family members between individuals whose parents had divorced, those whose parents had high quality marriages and those whose parents had low quality marriages, as well as to find out whether the effects of family structure and the quality of relationship between parents vary with age and gender. A total of 1478 participants (433 high-school students, 621 undergraduate students and 424 adults) were included in the research. Data about family structure and the quality of parental relationship were obtained and modifications of the Experiences in Close Relationship Inventory were applied in order to assess attachment to family and romantic partners. Significant effect of relationship between parents was found on anxiety in attachment to romantic partners. Specifically, individuals whose parents had low marital quality while they were teenagers appear to be more anxious in their romantic relationships in comparison to those from well-functioning families as well as those whose parents divorced. However, when it comes to attachment to family, we found main effects of age, gender and the type of family, as well as interaction effect of gender and age on avoidance dimension. Both high-school boys and girls scored higher on avoidance of closeness with family members than all other subsamples, but men generally scored higher on avoidance to family than women. Overall, the quality of relationship between parents proved to be more important than family structure, with effects on avoidant attachment to family and anxious attachment to romantic partners for both genders and across the age groups.

**Keywords:** attachment to romantic partners, attachment to family, family structure, quality of relationship between parents, age differences, gender differences

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### Introduction

From 1960s to the present time the divorce rate has risen in Western countries from 10% to 30-50%. Croatia follows that trend and nowadays almost every third marriage in Croatia ends in divorce (DZS, 2013). Therefore, many researchers are investigating the effects of divorce on the well-being of children. Contradictory

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findings suggest that there is a lot to be considered when discussing the short-term and long-term consequences of divorce and more research in this field is needed. Additionally, results of some recent studies emphasize the importance of looking into age and gender differences in the effects of family structure and family quality on the outcomes in children. In this article we aim to contribute to the ongoing debate about whether children suffer from parental divorce per se or from interparental conflict (even when parents remain married). Specifically, we shall look into age and gender differences in the effects of parental divorce and malfunctioning parental relationship on children's attachment to family members and to romantic partners.

Research on the effects of divorce has already established many short-term and long-term negative consequences of divorce for children. Firstly, children of divorced parents have greater risk for various behavior disorders, anxiety, depression, as well as aggressive behavior (Kasen, Cohen, Brook, & Hartmark, 1996). They also exhibit higher social anxiety (Farndale, Burton-Smith, Montgomery, & Shute, 2003) as well as anxiety in romantic relationships and fear of commitment in adulthood (Wallerstein, 2005). In other words, children of divorced parents have lower quality of attachment to their parents as well as certain difficulties in forming romantic relationships later in life. Research conducted on various national studies (Booth, Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Owen, & Vandell, 2000) showed that parental divorce is associated with a child's poorer school performance, lower self-esteem, more behavior problems, and more distress and adjustment difficulties. Same authors also confirmed that adolescents from divorced families show more instances of delinquent behavior and early sex activity. Finally, findings from a longitudinal 3-wave study of 1274 adolescents and young adults that compared children from intact versus post-divorce families showed long-term differences in internalized and externalized problems with children of divorced parents showing a higher tendency to both internalized and externalized problems (VanderValk, Spruijt, de Goede, Maas, & Meeus, 2005).

However, some studies suggest that divorce per se is not the key determinant of those negative consequences but rather that some consequences might be due to some other factors associated with divorce. One such factor to be considered is the social stigma associated with a divorce in a specific society. Although this was a plausible explanation for the earlier findings in this field, or for non-Western societies, with increasing divorce rate the social stigma that was once tied to divorce seized to be a major contributing factor to the outcomes of divorce on children. This might explain some contradictory findings on the outcomes of parental divorce on children in recent studies and it also emphasizes the importance of considering the wider context when it comes to the effects of divorce. Furthermore, a study that took into account other socio-demographic variables showed that children's psychological development was not affected by parental separation per se, but rather by mothers' income, education, ethnicity, child-rearing

beliefs, depressive symptoms and behavior (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000). Finally, some studies directly comparing children from intact families and those from divorced parents found no unusual behavior or emotional distress occurring from divorce (Armistead, Forehand, Summers, & Tannenbaum, 1998).

Therefore, some researchers argue that the consequences of parental divorce on children are mostly due to quarrels and fights between parents (chronic family conflict) that children are witnessing prior to and after the divorce, and not the divorce itself. Spruijt, DeGoede, and VanderValk (2001) showed that, although children of divorced parents show more adjustment problems than children from complete and well-functioning families, they almost equal children from malfunctioning families. Additionally, Turner and Kopiec (2006) showed that exposure to interparental conflict in childhood or adolescence is associated with current levels of depressive symptoms in young adults. Moreover, they showed that exposure to interparental conflict significantly increases the odds of experiencing a subsequent episode of major depressive disorder and alcohol abuse or dependency disorder, even after controlling for demographic factors, parental divorce, and physical assault. Research conducted in Croatia, although scarce, corroborates these findings. One study showed that the quality of parental relationship is a better predictor of antisocial and delinquent behaviors than family structure itself (Raboteg-Šarić, Brajša-Žganec, & Šakić, 2006). Čudina and Obradović (2001) conducted research on 770 couples and their children, who were divided into three groups regarding their family status: intact ( $N=234$ ), impaired or distressed ( $N=266$ ) and divorced ( $N=261$ ). Their results suggest that children coming from intact families showed the highest emotional well-being. Nevertheless, no difference was found in emotional well-being between children coming from impaired/distressed and divorced families.

Therefore, the focus in this field has shifted to quality of parental relationship, and especially to its effects on attachment styles of children, since parental behaviors shape models of self and others in children. Namely, the impact of parental behavior on a child's attachment style is a well-known and documented fact, but the impact of divorce is less conclusive. Research on divorce and separation of attachment figures has yielded contradictory results. On the one hand, some researchers in this field argue that children of divorce experienced broken or detached attachment bonds and therefore have no accurate template for successful relationships. Some findings corroborate this presumption by showing that children of divorce have trouble adapting to different stages of their lives. On the other hand, other research boasted results that children of divorce adapt to life's situations and relationships within normal ranges when compared to their peers (Armistead et al., 1998). The attachment theory itself (Bowlby, 1969) emphasizes the importance of attachment bonds between parents and a child and parental behaviors, but is not very direct regarding the issues of divorce. Hayashi and Strickland (1998) argue

that, according to the attachment theory, parental divorce in itself may not cause poor romantic relationships, but rather, growing up with poor parent-child relationship and prolonged interparental conflict may be what is most destructive to the child's romantic relationships later in life. In addition to this, Amato and Keith (1991) concluded that children of highly conflicted families who are not divorced fare worse over time than children with divorced parents. In other words, it is possible, or indeed even probable, that distance from an attachment figure may be better than living in a troubled environment. Another confirmation came from research that focused on the association between interparental conflict and late adolescents' attachment in romantic relationships and showed that higher levels of conflict are associated with significantly higher levels of anxious attachment in romantic relationships (Rodrigues & Kitzmann, 2007).

To sum up, divorce as a disruption of the attachment structure can undoubtedly affect children's behaviors throughout life. Nevertheless, research on this topic gave contradictory and somewhat inconclusive results depending on whether the researcher focused exclusively on the family structure or also on the quality of parental relationship and wider context. It seems that children of divorced families have a disposition to certain maladaptive behaviors, but whether this disposition will indeed influence a child depends on the individual and the external factors that are present. In a study conducted on students from both non-divorced and divorced households Hayashi and Strickland (1998) showed that students who reported growing up with accepting parent-substitutes were also likely to report feeling secure in their romantic love relationships. Another important and often neglected factor is parenting style that also influences a child's attachment style. Murray (2005) studied 58 mother-child dyads from divorced and intact families and concluded that the relationship of parental divorce to the child's attachment security was mediated by parenting style.

Finally, when considering the effects of parental disputes or divorce on a child's attachment style short-term and long-term effects have to be considered. More concretely, it is possible that the effects of interparental conflict as well as parental divorce are only temporary and decrease with the time passed. Conversely, it is also possible that there are some delayed reactions that can only manifest once the child reaches adolescence or even adulthood. The so-called *sleeping effect* was found in young women whose parents divorced while they were young children (Blakeslee & Wallerstein, 1989). Thus many researchers focused on age differences in reactions to parental divorce. Blakeslee and Wallerstein (1989) showed that there are many short-term consequences for children from divorced families, but that in the long run the differences decrease and the outcome becomes increasingly optimistic as the children age and mature. Booth and colleagues (2000) concluded that during the early stages of life it is more important to the outcome of the child that the available parent has good parenting skills than the family

structure. They argue that parenting practices might have a greater effect on children than marital status.

Research indicates that there are also certain gender differences in reaction to a parental divorce. Specifically, boys seem to have an especially difficult time with divorce, causing them to have trouble at school, deficit in social adjustment, or to start fights with peers (Amato & Keith, 1991; Blakeslee & Wallerstein, 1989). However, Amato's (2001) follow-up study also goes to great lengths to show that current trends in gender differences are not as severe as they were once thought to be. Even though all researchers agree that gender differences in reaction to parental divorce do exist, they often emphasize that the stress on the children of both sexes is equal although they may show it in differing ways.

Obviously more research is needed to shed light on contradictory findings in this field. The present study expands on the previous literature in several ways. Firstly, we take into account both the structure and the quality of parental relationship in order to examine short-term and long-term effects on their children's close relationships. Our focus is on attachment bonds – both attachments to family members as well as to romantic partners. Secondly, we included a large sample of adolescents, young adults and adults from various backgrounds in order to simultaneously examine the age and gender differences in the aforementioned effects. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the effects of age, gender and the type of family (divorced parents, complete family with low quality relationship between parents, complete family with high quality relationship between parents) on attachment to romantic partners and family members.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of 1478 participants. There were 818 women (55.3%) and 660 men (44.7%) whose age ranged from 16 to 70 years, with a mean of 26 years ( $M=25.79$ ,  $SD=10.5$ ). Most of the participants live in urban settings and are heterogeneous with respect to social class and parental educational background.

The sample is a combination of three subsamples: high-school students ( $N=433$ ;  $M_{age}=17$ ), undergraduate students of University of Zagreb ( $N=621$ ;  $M_{age}=22$ ) and adults ( $N=424$ ;  $M_{age}=41$ ). The ratio of female and male participants was similar in all three subsamples (a percentage of women ranged from 51% to 59%).

Participants came from three types of family of origin: divorced parents ( $N=328$ ), complete family with low quality relationship between parents ( $N=237$ ) and complete family with high quality relationship between parents ( $N=913$ ).

### *Procedure and Measures*

Participants completed a set of questionnaires and provided information about themselves and information related to their family of origin. After completing the background questions, they assessed the quality of the relationship between their parents and responded on two scales measuring their attachment to family members and romantic partners.

High-school and university students were contacted during their classes/courses and completed the set of questionnaires in groups. Adults were contacted via psychology students, using the snow-balling method, and completed the set of questionnaires individually.

*The Experiences in Close Relationship Scale* (Kamenov & Jelić, 2003) is a shortened version of the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998), retaining the same psychometric characteristics as the original scale (see Kamenov & Jelić, 2003 for details). The scale consists of 18 statements describing one's feelings, thoughts and behavior in close relationships. There are three versions of the scale, each referring to a different type of close relationships – romantic relationship, friendship and family. In the Family version, which was administered in this study together with the Romantic partners version, participants assess the extent to which each item represents their own feelings, thoughts and behavior in relation to the members of their family of origin (parents and siblings). Their assessments are given on a 7-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The scale consists of two subscales, measuring two attachment dimensions – anxiety and avoidance. Each subscale consists of 9 items, strongly correlating with the underlying factor. The two subscales are highly reliable (Cronbach alphas are shown in Table 1). A linear combination of answers on each dimension yielded four results for each participant: the level of anxiety and the level of avoidance towards family members, as well as the level of anxiety and the level of avoidance towards romantic partners.

Participants noted whether their parents are *divorced or not*. Those whose parents are not divorced answered a set of 10 questions assessing their perception of the quality of their parents' relationship and the level of positive interactions between their parents as well as a set of four questions about the level of conflicts between their parents. All the participants had to refer on their parents' relationship while they were going to high school.

In order to assess the participants' perception of their parents' relationship quality more complexly, we combined items from two measures. *The Quality of Marriage Index* (Norton, 1983) and four items from *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976), concerning the frequency of parents' shared activities, were administered. In the first of these two measures answers are given on a 7-point scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and in the second one on a

5-point scale, ranging from *never* to *very often*. A linear combination of answers to these 10 items formed a measure named the *Positive Interactions Index*, which proved to be highly reliable (see Table 1).

In order to assess the participants' perception of their parents negative interactions, we asked them four questions about the frequency and the intensity of quarrels between their parents, the frequency of communication breakdowns as well as parents' intentions to file up for divorce. Answers are given on a 4-point scale, ranging from *never* to *very often*. A weighted linear combination of answers to these 4 items formed a measure named the *Conflict Index*, with satisfying internal consistency (shown in Table 1).

Based on their answers about their family of origin, participants were divided into three categories: Divorced parents, Complete well-functioning families, and Complete malfunctioning families. The category named Well-functioning family consisted of participants who assessed the relationship between their parents as both above the average in positive interactions and below the average in conflicts. A category named Malfunctioning family was a combination of all the other possibilities: above the average in conflicts no matter the results on positive interactions, as well as below the average on positive interactions no matter the results on conflicts.

## Results

Results suggest that the average scores for attachment dimensions for both family members as well as romantic partners are below the midpoint of the scale, indicating that most of participants in our study are securely attached (Table 1) regardless of their age, gender and type of family they originate from (Table 2). Additional analysis showed that 70.1% of our participants have secure attachment style to their families and 62.4% are securely attached to their romantic partners. This is in line with results obtained in other studies (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Kamenov & Jelić, 2005).

Contrary to theoretical assumptions, but corroborating findings in recent studies (Kamenov & Jelić, 2005; Mosko & Pistole, 2010; Tsagarakis, Kafetsios, & Stalikas, 2007) two attachment dimensions are in low but significant positive correlations ( $r_{\text{family}}=.16, p<.01$ ;  $r_{\text{partner}}=.19, p<.01$ ).

Table 1. *Descriptives and Reliability for Attachment Dimensions, Parental Positive Interaction Index and Conflict Index for the Whole Sample*

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach $\alpha$
Anxiety – Family	1461	22.81	8.84	.77
Avoidance – Family	1463	26.23	10.58	.85
Anxiety – Partner	1383	27.46	10.70	.83
Avoidance – Partner	1383	24.62	10.01	.83
Parental Positive Interaction Index	1142	48.32	10.89	.94
Parental Conflict Index	1150	9.58	9.67	.80

*Note.* Differences in *N*s for attachment to family and partners are due to a number of participants who have never been in a romantic relationship

Table 2. *Descriptives for Attachment Dimensions of the Whole Sample, as Well as With Respect to Age, Gender and the Type of Family Participants Originate From*

		Attachment to Family				Attachment to Partner			
		Anxiety		Avoidance		Anxiety		Avoidance	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Age</i>	High School	23.60	8.72	28.74	10.72	27.99	10.39	25.33	9.73
	Students	21.91	7.79	25.60	10.40	27.24	10.56	24.48	10.37
	Adults	23.29	10.18	24.49	9.92	27.32	11.17	24.01	9.69
<i>Gender</i>	Male	22.30	8.68	27.98	9.76	27.16	10.59	25.22	9.96
	Female	23.21	8.95	24.95	10.88	27.71	10.79	24.08	9.99
<i>Type of Family</i>	Divorced	22.86	9.44	26.54	10.93	27.02	11.06	25.20	9.98
	Low Quality Relationship	23.94	9.54	29.34	11.53	30.55	11.59	24.79	10.83
	High Quality Relationship	22.50	8.41	25.38	9.94	26.80	10.18	24.38	9.74

Our main objective was to determine the effect of gender, age and family structure on two attachment dimensions – anxiety and avoidance in close relationships (with family members and a romantic partner). We conducted separate ANOVAs for each attachment dimension and the results for attachment to family and to romantic partners are presented in Table 3.



Table 3. *Results of the ANOVAs Showing Effects of Gender, Age and Type of Family on Anxiety and Avoidance in Attachment to Romantic Partners and Family Members*

	Attachment to Family		Attachment to Partner	
	Anxiety	Avoidance	Anxiety	Avoidance
	<i>F</i>			
Gender	3.33	10.13**	3.00	0.74
Age	2.95	10.40**	0.80	0.87
Type of Family	1.65	19.24**	8.14**	0.86
Gender x Age	0.95	4.88**	0.44	1.73
Gender x Type of Family	1.38	1.77	2.95	0.73
Age x Type of Family	0.26	1.99	0.20	0.89
Gender x Age x Type of Family	2.26	2.17	0.86	0.18

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

Results show that none of the independent variables yielded a significant effect on the anxiety dimension when it comes to attachment to family members. In line with expectations, participants show relatively low levels of anxious attachment to family members ( $M=22.81$ ) regardless of their age, gender or the type of family they originate from. This finding shows that people are generally not afraid of being abandoned by their families.

On the other hand, ANOVA yielded main effects of gender, age and type of family as well as significant interaction of gender and age on avoidance dimension when it comes to attachment to family members. Post-hoc analyses (Scheffe's test) show that participants from malfunctioning families avoid closeness to family members to a much greater extent than participants from well-functioning families or even from participants whose parents had divorced (see Figure 1). Interestingly, no differences in avoidant attachment were found between the two latter groups suggesting that parental divorce might reduce conflicts between parents and thus lead to less avoidance of contact and closeness between children and parents. Results also show that high-school students avoid closeness to family members more than either university students or adults. Also, men in general avoid closeness to family members more than women. However, while in the high-school sample no gender differences were found (both genders score relatively high), avoidance lowers significantly in the female sample of university students and is equally low in the sample of adult women, but remains high in male sample of university students and slowly reduces in the sample of adult men (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. *Average Results of Participants From Different Types of Family on Avoidance Dimension of Attachment to Family Members*

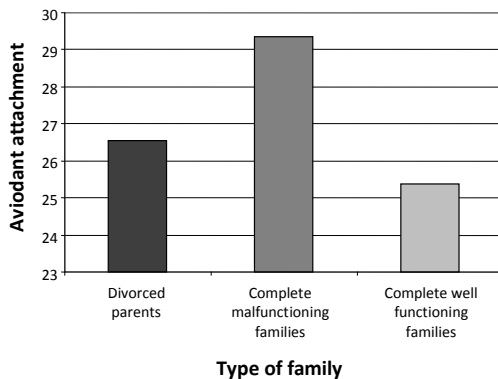
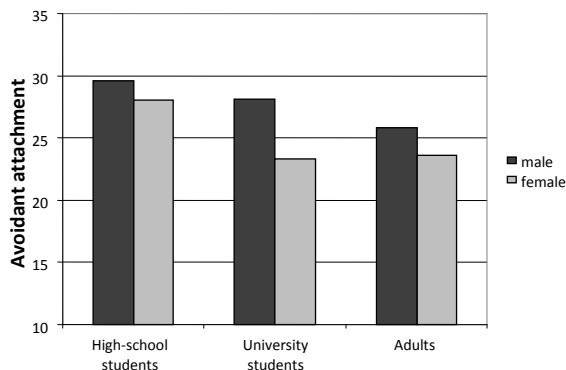
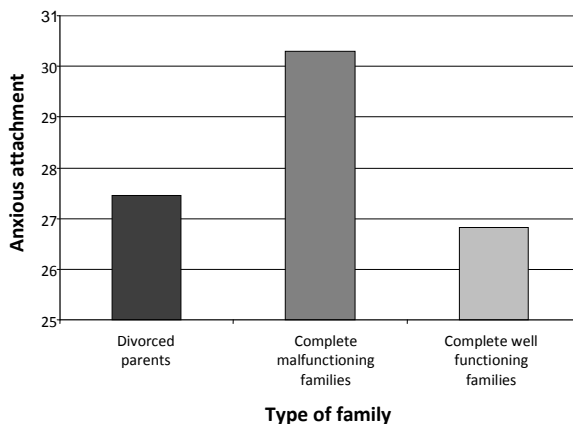


Figure 2. *Average Results of Male and Female Participants From Different Age Groups on Avoidance Dimension of Attachment to Family Members*



Results for attachment to romantic partners show a different pattern, as can be seen in Table 3. When it comes to anxiety in attachment to romantic partners, the analysis yielded significant main effect of the type of family participants originate from. In other words, women and men regardless of their age are more anxiously attached to their romantic partners if they come from complete families with a low quality relationship between parents in comparison to those coming from well-functioning families or those whose parents have divorced (see Figure 3). For avoidant attachment none of the independent variables yielded significant effect.

Figure 3. *Average Results of Participants From Different Types of Family on Anxiety Dimension of Attachment to Romantic Partners*



## Discussion

The main goal of this study was to examine the effect of the type of family individuals grew up in on their attachment to romantic partners and family members and to determine whether these effects vary with the age and gender of the participants. Participants in our study originate from three types of families: complete families with high quality relationship between parents, complete families with low quality relationship between parents, and from family of divorced parents.

The type of family that participants originate from proved to be important for anxiety in attachment to romantic partners as well as for avoidance in attachment to family members. Individuals coming from complete families with low quality relationship between parents are more anxiously attached to their romantic partners and avoid closeness to their family more than individuals from the other two groups. The significance of only the main effect of the type of family, and no significant interaction with age or gender, confirms the robustness of this effect and shows that it affects both men and women regardless of their age.

When it comes to anxiety dimension in attachment to family members, the results show that neither type of family nor other independent variables have a significant impact. This is in line with expectations as people generally do not have the reason to be afraid of being abandoned by their families. Also, no significant effects were found on avoidance of closeness to romantic partners. From the gender role perspective, we could expect men to show higher avoidance than women (Del Giudice, 2011; Pietromonaco & Carnelley, 1994), but there are many studies that do not confirm this expectation (e.g. Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013). We could also expect the effect of age on avoidance of closeness in romantic relationships. High school is generally the period when adolescents want to enter romantic

relationships and experience closeness and intimacy with someone and not to avoid it. Later in adulthood, when intimate relationships are expected to be more stable and committed, individual differences in avoidance of closeness are bigger and they raise the average score on this attachment dimension (e.g. Del Giudice, 2011). On the other hand, some studies have shown that, with age, closeness, support and mutual care become more salient as provisions from romantic relationships (Furman & Schaffer, 2003; Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). Therefore, the expressed attachment style in a romantic relationship could vary with age, but in the other direction: adolescents and students could be interested in having casual relationships and therefore showing more avoidance of closeness, while adults could be more willing to commit and therefore forming more securely attached romantic relationships. Considering both these possibilities, and having in mind that they work in opposite directions, no age differences on avoidance of closeness in romantic relationships could be explained easily.

The results connected to the main goal of this research show a long-term impact of the relationship between parents on children's anxiety in romantic relationships as well as their avoidance of family. Having in mind that the results on anxiety dimension reflect the model of self while the results on avoidance dimension reflect the model of others, it seems that the low quality of the relationship between parents correlates with a less positive model of self in romantic relationships and a less positive model of others in family relations. Or, looking from another angle, it seems that the low quality of relationship between parents has no significant effect on the model of others in romantic relationships and the model of self in family relations. Concerning the fact that one's model of self is related to the person's self-esteem (Colins & Read, 1990) and that one's model of others reflects the person's trust in other people and willingness to rely on them (Alfasi, Gramzov, & Carnelley, 2010), our results show that the quality of relationship between parents affects one's self-esteem in a romantic relationship but not in family relations, as well as it affects one's trust to family members but not the trust in romantic partners.

This finding raises the question about the stability of internal working models across different close relationships in adulthood and calls for further attention in future research. However, it is not entirely unexpected, because some previous studies (Cokarić, 2005; Cozzarelli, Hoekstra, & Bylsma, 2000; Crowell, Treboux, & Waters, 1999; Kamenov & Jelić, 2005; Ross & Spinner, 2001) show that the attachment style significantly differs depending on the kind of close relationship. The correspondence between the attachment styles in different relationships is low, showing that the only relatively consistent style is the secure attachment, while all other styles (preoccupied, dismissive and fearful) are not. These results indicate that there is less correspondence in adult attachment across different types of close relationships than one would predict according to the attachment theory.

If we take a look at the effects of other predictor variables, gender and age have no effect on anxious attachment, but are relevant factors when it comes to avoidance of closeness. Gender seems to play a role in interaction with age and only for avoidant attachment to family members. Namely, avoidance of closeness with family members decreases with age, but those age differences are bigger for women while men generally scored higher on avoidance to family. The finding that both high-school boys and girls score higher on avoidance in attachment to family members is not surprising if we take into account that detachment from parents is a developmental process that usually takes place during adolescence. The significant gender differences in student and adult samples suggest that men show higher avoidance of closeness to family members than women. This could be explained by the fact that women tend to have more relationship awareness than men do and that they define themselves more interdependently (e.g. Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004; Maddux, 2005). Therefore, in line with gender role, women are expected to be less avoidant to their family of origin.

Overall, this research shows that the quality of relationship between parents proves to be more important than family structure, with effects on avoidant attachment to family and anxious attachment to romantic partners for both genders and across the age groups. Both men and women coming from complete malfunctioning families, regardless of their age, seem to be more anxious about their romantic relationships and avoid closeness to their family members more than those coming from divorced parents or from complete well-functioning families.

### *Methodological Issues*

A majority of the participants are securely attached both to their family members and to their partners. Although this finding is consistent with other studies in the field of adult attachment, it raises the question about whether these findings/conclusions can be generalized on the general population or if the results might be different if we had participants with insecure attachment. However, as it is well established that in most Western cultures, a great majority of people indeed have secure attachment style (e.g. Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2004), we believe that this fact does not represent a major shortcoming of this study and that generalization of the findings would be possible if this was the only concern. Another thing is that our sample is not representative for general population. Although we included a similar number of men and women, and the age of the participants varied from 16-70 years, it should be noted that the average age of participants in this study was 26 years. In other words, our aim was to target specific age groups that are of interest when it comes to age differences effects of parental divorce or quality of parental relationships. Thus we used convenient samples that consisted of high-school and university students – primarily young participants - and one subsample of adults.

Future studies should consider taking into account more information that could have an impact on children whose parents divorced, such as the time passed since the parental divorce, the age of the child at the moment of the divorce, as well as whether parents found new partners. Additionally, we have not considered differences in the process of the divorce - some marriages might have ended peacefully with consensual divorce and good relationships between former spouses (parents) while other might have been a long, tedious and painful process for all parties involved (including children). Quality of the relationship between parents after the divorce should also be considered in future studies.

Another possible shortcoming of this research could be the way we operationalized the Type of family variable. As explained in the Method section, the category named Well-functioning family consisted of participants who assessed the relationship between their parents as both above the average in quality and below the average in conflicts, so these are clearly well-functioning families according to both criteria. On the other hand, a category named Malfunctioning family was a combination of all the other possibilities: above the average in conflicts no matter the results on quality, as well as below the average on quality no matter the results on conflicts. This category is a mixture of clearly malfunctioning families with bland families and highly temperamental families, who could actually function quite well. Therefore, the results of the participants assigned to this category could not be the true representation of the effects of malfunctioning families on the adult attachment. Saying this, we could only assume that the results of people coming from truly malfunctioning families could be even higher on anxiety and avoidance dimensions, showing an even larger effect of the type of the family. Of course, this assumption remains to be tested.

Finally, it should be noticed that we assessed participants' attachment to family members, not specifically attachment to mother and attachment to father. Ross and Fuertes (2010) showed that parental attachment is better conceived as a two-factor construct of mother and father attachment and that although attachment to both mothers and fathers directly predicts emotional adjustment, the mechanisms that mediate these relationships differ. Attachment to fathers was found to be predictive of better social skills, which in turn promoted greater relational competence, and better emotional adjustment. Attachment to mothers was found to be predictive of better conflict resolution behavior, which in turn promoted greater relational competence, and better emotional adjustment.

### *Conclusion*

In this study we wanted to examine the effects of age, gender and the type of family (divorced parents, complete family with low quality relationship between parents, complete family with high quality relationship between parents) on attachment to romantic partners and family members. Overall, the results obtained

on a large sample of adolescents, young adults and adults from various backgrounds showed that the quality of relationship between parents is more important than family structure, with effects on avoidant attachment to family and anxious attachment to romantic partners for both genders and across the age groups.

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## Diferencias de edad en los efectos de la estructura y calidad familiares sobre el apego hacia la familia y la pareja

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### Resumen

El objetivo de esta investigación fue investigar las diferencias del apego hacia la pareja y los miembros de la familia entre los individuos cuyos padres están divorciados, aquellos cuyos padres tienen matrimonio de alta calidad y aquellos cuyos padres tienen matrimonio de baja calidad, tanto como averiguar si los efectos de la estructura familiar y la calidad de relación entre los padres cambian con años y género. En la investigación fueron incluidos 1478 participantes (433 alumnos de secundaria, 621 estudiantes universitarios y 424 adultos). Los datos sobre la estructura familiar y la calidad de la relación entre los padres fueron obtenidos y las modificaciones del Inventario de Experiencias en Relaciones Cercanas fueron aplicadas con el fin de evaluar el apego hacia la familia y la pareja. Se descubrió un efecto significativo de la relación entre los padres sobre la ansiedad en el apego hacia la pareja. Específicamente, individuos cuyos padres tuvieron matrimonio de baja calidad durante su adolescencia parecen más ansiosos en sus relaciones románticas en comparación con los que tienen familia de buen funcionamiento, tanto como aquellos cuyos padres están divorciados. Sin embargo, cuando se trata del apego hacia la familia, hemos encontrado efectos principales de la edad, género y tipo de familia, tanto como efecto interactivo del género y edad sobre la dimensión evitativa. Tanto chicos como chicas que frecuentan la escuela secundaria puntuaron mejor en la evitación de la intimidad con la familia que todas las demás submuestras, pero en general los hombres puntuaron mejor que las mujeres en la evitación de la familia. En conjunto, la calidad de relación entre los padres se demostró más importante que la estructura familiar, con efectos sobre apego evitativo hacia la familia y apego ansioso hacia la pareja para los dos géneros y grupos de edad.

**Palabras claves:** apego hacia la pareja, apego hacia la familia, estructura familiar, calidad de relación entre la pareja, diferencias de edad, diferencias de género

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