

**PARENTAL DIVORCE, EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS, AND  
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG YOUNG ADULTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Previous research has shown parental divorce to be associated with lower academic achievement. Most research has focused on educational outcomes among children and adolescents. There are few studies of young adults, and most focus on undergraduate education. Yet, education beyond a bachelor's degree has become increasingly important in ensuring one's future economic success. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, this study investigated whether and how parental divorce affects young adults' educational attainment, measured by attainment of a bachelor's degree, a graduate/professional degree, or enrollment in a graduate/professional program. A secondary goal of the study was to assess the role of parental educational expectations with respect to these outcomes. Results indicate that parental divorce and lower educational expectations among parents were associated with lower baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate educational attainment among young adults. However, lower parental educational expectations among youth whose parents divorced did not explain their lower likelihood of obtaining a four-year or graduate degree. Future research should continue to investigate the processes underlying the negative effect of parental divorce on young adults' educational attainment.

About half of American children will experience their parents' divorce by age 18 (Amato, 2010; Copen et al., 2012). Research has consistently shown a negative relationship between parental divorce and children's well-being. For example, children from divorced families have been found to have higher rates of depression (Strohschein, 2005) and antisocial behaviors (Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). A great deal of research has also been dedicated to understanding the effects of parental divorce on children's educational outcomes (Amato, 2000; Frisco et al., 2007; Lansford, 2009; Potter, 2010; Sun & Li, 2001; Sun & Li, 2011). For example, children from divorced families have been found to have lower math and reading scores, lower grade point averages, lower school engagement, and higher drop-out rates than children from children from married, original two-parent families (Brown, 2010; Chatterji, 2005; Gennetian, 2005; Heard, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Potter, 2010; Shriner et al., 2009; Tillman, 2007).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the divorce rate reached a historic high of 22.6 divorces per 1,000 married women (United States Census Bureau, 2013) and many young adults today have divorced parents. At the same time, a college degree has become increasingly important to their economic success. The percentage of men and women with a four-year college degree increased by an average of 73% between 2000 and 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Yet, few studies have examined how parental divorce affects children's educational outcomes after high school. Those that have been conducted have generally find worse educational outcomes, such as entry into college and bachelor's degree completion, among young adults with divorced parents (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007; Conley, 2001; Ginther & Pollack, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005, Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004 but see Björklund, Ginther, & Sundström, 2007). However, few studies are longitudinal, use nationally representative data, or are based on recent cohorts of young adults.

To our knowledge no studies have specifically examined how parental divorce affects adult children's post-baccalaureate educational attainment, such as graduate/professional school enrollment and completion of a graduate/professional degree. Studies have examined the effect of other factors aside from divorce, including race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender (Black & Sufi, 2002; Mullen et al., 2003; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Perna, 2000, 2004; Qian & Blair, 1999), as well unemployment rate fluctuations, economic recessions, the business cycle (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Dellas & Koubi, 2003; Sakellaris & Spilimbergo, 2000), and parent's educational background (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003; Perna, 2004; St. John & Wooden, 2005). For example, Mullen et al. (2003) found parent's education had a positive impact on children's graduate school attainment: 76% of children with parents who had only high school diploma or below did not pursue a graduate degree compared to 62% of children with parents with a graduate degree.

However, the effect of parental divorce has yet to be examined. This is problematic because master's, professional, and/or doctoral degree have become a requirement for entry into many professions and is strongly related to income (Thomas & Zhang, 2005). Jobs requiring a graduate degree are expected to grow by an average of 18% between 2008 and 2018 in the United States, "due to the growing shift towards a knowledge-based economy" (Crosby & Moncarz, 2006, p. 46). Post-baccalaureate enrollment had been steady at 1.6 million in the late 1970s and early 1980s but rose 78% between 1985 and 2010, with a majority of the increase due to enrollment during 2008-2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In particular, master's, professional (M.D., D.D.S., J.D.) and doctoral degrees increased by an average of 70% between 2000 and 2013 with each degree increasing by 68%, 83%, and 75%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

The mechanisms underlying the effect of parental divorce on children's baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate education are also not well understood. An important variable associated with children's educational success, at least in terms of primary and secondary education, is parental educational expectations (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dika & Singh, 2002; Englund et al., 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim & Schnieder, 2005; Perna & Titus, 2005; Reynolds & Burge, 2008). The role of parental educational expectations with respect to young adults' baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate educational attainment has yet to be examined. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth of 1997, the present study investigates whether and how parental divorce and parental educational expectations affect children's post-baccalaureate educational attainment.

## **BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

### **What is Post-Baccalaureate Educational Attainment?**

In the present study, post-baccalaureate educational attainment is measured in terms of graduate/professional school enrollment and completion. Common measures used to assess educational success among children and adolescents, such as standardized test scores and grade point average, are not appropriate for post-baccalaureate educational success for several reasons. Although standardized test scores (e.g., the Graduate Record Examination [GRE], the Medical College Admission Test [MCAT], and the Law School Admission Test [LSAT]) are important for entrance into graduate and professional school, there is little evidence of a correlation between these measures and actual degree completion (Adelman, 1999; Astin & Osequera, 2002; Burton & Ramist, 2001; Hezelett et al., 2001; Sackett et al., 2009; Zwick, 2007). In addition, a high grade point average is not necessary for completion of a post-secondary and post-baccalaureate degree.

Instead, a person completes a number of credits established by the institution in order to obtain a degree. Second, in terms of hiring decisions, GPAs and test scores are not a major factor for employers (McKinney et al. 2003), except when deciding between two equally qualified candidates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2009). Finally, overall success in today's competitive job market often determined by is whether or not a candidate has a degree. Because a bachelor's degree has become a basic prerequisite for getting a job candidate's resume read, a post-baccalaureate degree provides an advantage over the basic job applicant (Crosby & Moncarz, 2006; Fischer, 2013). Due to these reasons, the current study uses educational attainment, both enrollment and completion, an indicator of post-baccalaureate educational success.

### **Theoretical Approach and Hypotheses**

A decade of research shows a strong and consistent positive relationship between parents' educational background and children's educational outcomes (Parcel, Dufur, & Zito, 2010). Parent's educational background also has a positive relationship with the educational attainment of young adults (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004; St. John & Wooden, 2005). Parents' education is considered a primary measure of human capital (Coleman, 1988). However, parent's educational background provides an incomplete picture of what's driving children's educational success. Another type of capital in families is social capital. Social capital refers to the social relationships in children's lives which helps them access the benefits of their parent's human capital, as well as parental investment of resources in their children (Coleman, 1988). "As a family maintains its stability, the more developed the group norms, expectations, and obligations, and thus, the higher level of social capital...as such, families must cultivate their stability and subsequently, their social capital, to flourish and maintain their

existence” (Shriner, Mullis, and Schlee, 2009, p. 447). For example, Dika and Singh (2002) meta-analysis of the educational literature from three time periods (1990-1995, 1996-1998, and 1999-2001) found that social capital, measured in terms of traditional family structure, parent’s expectations and encouragement, and parent-child interactions was positively associated with high school and college enrollment.

Parental divorce is thought to be associated with lower social capital through several mechanisms, including a reduction parental monitoring (parents’ knowledge of their children’s whereabouts and who children spend time with; Anguiano, 2004), lower parent-child relationship quality (warmth, closeness and interest; Dika & Singh, 2002; Turley, Desmond & Bruch, 2010), and lower parental involvement (visitation and communication; Amato, 2010; Fan & Chen, 2001; Furstenberg, 2005; Hill et al., 2004; Zhan, 2006), all of which have been shown to be strongly associated with children’s educational success. Another form of social capital is parents’ educational expectations for their children, which has been found to be positively associated with children’s educational success, at least with respect to elementary and secondary education (Davis-Kean, 2005; Dika & Singh, 2002; Englund et al., 2004; Fan & Chen, 2001; Kim & Schnieder).

In this study, we examine the relationship between parental divorce, parental educational expectations, and young adults’ educational attainment. In particular, we examine whether and how parental educational expectations might explain the relationship between parental divorce and young adults’ educational attainment. In other words, do differences in parental educational expectations between divorced and non-divorced parents help explain differences in their children’s educational attainment? Specifically, we tested the following four hypotheses. All hypotheses were tested controlling for characteristics of children (gender, race, and ethnicity),

characteristics of parents (maternal and paternal education), and characteristics of household (family income) previously shown to be associated with these processes.

*Hypothesis 1:* Young adults whose parents have divorced will have lower educational attainment than young adults with continuously married parents.

*Hypothesis 2:* Parent's educational expectations will be lower for young adults with divorced parents than young adults with continuously married parents.

*Hypothesis 3:* Parental educational expectations will be positively related to young adults' educational attainment.

*Hypothesis 4:* Parental educational expectations will fully or partly mediate the relationship between parental divorce and young adults' educational attainment.

## **METHODS**

### **Data**

This study is based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97). Produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, this survey provides data on demographic characteristics, labor market activity, event life history and schooling history features. Although similar to the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, the NLSY97 provides corresponding data on a newer cohort of adolescents. The NLSY97 also includes an oversample of African American and Latino persons (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), important given higher divorce rates among minorities (Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006) and a recent increase in college enrollment

among these groups (Perna, 2000, 2004). When weighted to reflect the demographic characteristics of the U.S. population, the NLSY97 provides a representative sample of young adults.

The NLSY97 respondents were born between 1980 and 1984. At the time of the first interview, respondent's ages ranged from 12 to 18. Round 1 of the survey took place in 1997. In that round, both eligible youth and one of that youth's parents received an hour-long personal interview. In addition, an extensive two-part questionnaire was administered to both the youth and his or her parent, which gathered demographic information on every member of the youth's household and on immediate family members living elsewhere. The youth, but not their parent, continue to be interviewed on an annual basis. This study is based on youth who completed the most recent round fielded in 2011-2012 (Round 15 of the survey). At Round 15, the youth were between the ages of 26 to 32, and number 8,984 individuals. The retention rate of the survey has been excellent. Eighty-three percent of the Round 1 sample was interviewed in the most recent round (National Longitudinal Surveys, 2014).

The NLSY97 is well-suited for the present study in that its main goal was to document the transition from school to work in young adulthood. Therefore, extensive information was collected about youths' educational experiences over time. Educational data include schooling history, performance on standardized tests, course of study, the timing and types of degrees, and a detailed account of progression through post-secondary schooling. The parent questionnaire, conducted at Round 1, gathered information about the youth's family background, family transitions, and history. The youth's biological mother was the parent who most often provided the information. Information in the parent questionnaire includes parents' marital and employment histories, relationship with spouses/partners, household income, youth's early child-care arrangements, and custody arrangements (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). For the purpose of this study, the

parent questionnaire was important because it provided the parent's educational expectations for their child.

### **Analytic Sample**

The analytic sample used in this study was comprised of respondents who completed Round 15 of the survey, at which point respondents were between the ages of 26 to 32 (N=8,984). The sample was limited to youth whose parent questionnaire was filled out by a biological parent, either the biological mother or the biological father, but were mostly mothers (N=8,300); youth whose parent questionnaire was filled-out by an adoptive, step, foster, guardian or non-relative parent were removed from the sample (8%). The sample was further limited to youth who were born within a marriage (N=5,856). Thus, youth born outside of marriage were removed from the sample (27%). The assumption was made that if a child born within a marriage, that youth was the product of that marriage.

The analytic sample was further limited to include (a) youth whose biological parents' marriage ended in legal divorce, and (b) youth whose biological parents' marriage remained intact. Parents whose marriage ended in either physical separation, legal separation (but not divorced) or death were removed from the sample (11%). From this, two analytical samples were created. The first analytic sample was comprised of 4,855 youth between the ages 26 to 32 at Round 15 of the survey, conducted in 2011-2012 henceforth referred to as "Sample 1." Because only parents of youth between the ages of 15 and 18 at Round 1 asked about their expectations for their child's education (parents of children age 12-14 were not), analyses of parental educational expectations was limited to a subsample of 1,853 older youth, referred to henceforth as "Sample 2."

### **Variables**

***Educational Attainment.*** Young adults' educational attainment was measured through (a) attainment of a bachelor's degree, (b) graduate or professional school enrollment, and (c) attainment of a graduate or professional degree. At each round, the youth was asked "current college enrollment status as of the survey year." The NLSY97 categories included (1) not enrolled, no high school degree, no GED (2) not enrolled, GED (3) not enrolled, high school degree (4) not enrolled, some college (5) not enrolled, 2-year college graduate (6) not enrolled, 4-year college graduate (7) not enrolled, graduate degree (8) enrolled in grades 1-12, not a high school graduate (9) enrolled in a 2-year college (10) enrolled in a 4-year college and (11) enrolled in a graduate program. Attainment of a post-baccalaureate degree assessed at Round 15 of the survey, the most recent survey year. At Round 15, youth was asked "what is the highest degree respondent has received ever?" The response categories included (0) none (1) GED (2) high school diploma (3) associate/junior college (AA) (4) bachelor's degree (BA, BS) (5) master's degree (MA, MS) (6) Ph.D., and (7) professional degree (DDS, JD, MD).

This information was combined into three different measures of educational attainment. The first is a dichotomous measure of post-baccalaureate educational attainment, coded as 1 if the youth obtained a graduate degree or was ever enrolled in a graduate program (Masters, Ph.D., DDS, MD, JD) and 0 if they obtained a bachelor's degree or less. A second dichotomous measure was created to measure whether the youth actually obtained a graduate/professional degree. Not having obtained a graduate/professional degree served as the reference group. For comparative purposes, a third variable was constructed which measured whether the youth obtained a bachelor's degree or greater. Less than a bachelor's degree served as the reference group.

***Parental Divorce.*** Parental divorce was assessed through a combination of several variables. For children whose parents divorced prior to Round 1, parental divorce was gleaned from the parent's

Round 1 questionnaire. At Round 1, the responding parent was asked, “[are you] currently married, separated, divorced or widowed?” If the parent responded "married," he or she was asked, “in what month and year did you marry [this spouse/partner]?” These questions were asked for up to six spouses. Second, the responding parent was asked, “[are you] currently separated, divorced, or widowed from this spouse?” If this was the case, the parent was asked, “how did the marriage to this spouse(s) end?” Possible responses included (a) legal separation only, (b) physical separation but no legal separation, (c) divorce, and (4) death. If the parent reported they were divorced, they were asked what month and year the divorce occurred, for up to six spouses.

For divorces occurring prior to Round 1, whether or not it was the youth's biological parents who divorced (as opposed to a parent's divorce from stepparent or previous spouse), was determined by whether or not the youth's birth date fell within a particular marriage start date and end date. If there was no indication that the marriage ended in legal divorce (including the end date) then it was assumed that marriage remained intact, at least until Round 1 of the survey (divorces post-Round 1 were assessed differently, as described below). Sometimes a child was a product of their parents' second or (or third) marriage, as opposed to the first marriage, and this was determined by cycling through the marriage start and end dates that correspond to the child's birth date.

After Round 1, youth were asked whether their biological parents had divorced in the last five years (assessed at Rounds 6, 11, and 13). However, the last round this question was asked at Round 13. Thus, some youth who were coded as having continuously married parents at Round 15 may have had parents who divorced in the previous two years. However, this is likely to be a very small group because the majority of parental divorces happen before the child reaches age 25 (Fraleigh & Heffernan, 2013). Information from the parent Round 1 questionnaire and youth

questionnaires were combined to create a dichotomous variable in which 1=parents had divorced, and 0=parents have been continuously married. Because the age of the child at the time of their parents' divorce may have an effect on educational attainment, we ran supplemental analysis testing this, limiting our sample to children with divorced parents. These results are discussed later.

***Parental Educational Expectations.*** Parental expectations of their child's educational attainment was reported by parents at Round 1. Recall that this question was only asked of parents with youth age 15 to 18. Parents were asked, "what is the percent chance that [your child] will have a four-year college degree by the time [he/she] turns 30?" This variable is not specific to post-baccalaureate educational attainment and pertains to baccalaureate educational attainment only. Responses ranged from 0% chance to 100% chance. Because the distribution on this variable was skewed toward higher expectations, a dichotomous variable was used which categorizes parental expectations as "low" (0 to 70% chance) versus "high" (71 to 100% chance).

***Characteristics of Youth.*** Characteristics of the youth were reported at Round 1 by the youth themselves. Gender was coded as male and female, with male as the reference category. The youth's race and ethnicity was coded as Black, Hispanic, Other (non-Hispanic), and White (Non-Black/Non-Hispanic). White served as the reference category.

***Characteristics of Parents.*** The educational background (maternal and paternal) of parents was based on information about the highest grade completed by respondent's biological mother and biological father at Round 1. Responses range from first grade (1) to eighth year of college or more (20). Based on this, parental education was recoded as (a) high school or less (K-12<sup>th</sup> grade/Diploma or GED) (b) some college (1<sup>st</sup> -2<sup>nd</sup> year of college/associate's degree), (c) four-year college degree (3<sup>rd</sup> -4<sup>th</sup> year of college/bachelor's degree), and (d) graduate/professional degree (5<sup>th</sup>

year of college or more). A set of dummy variables was created for education for both mothers and fathers, with graduate degree serving as the reference category.

***Characteristics of the Household.*** Household income in the previous year was reported by the child's parents at Round 1. The NLSY97 defined income as gross wage/salary for respondent, and included all income sources (rental property, small business investments, inheritance, child support, annuities, etc.; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015b). To reduce the proportion of missing data, respondents who do not provide exact dollar answers were asked to select the applicable category from a predefined list of ranges. Based on these the dollar amounts or these predefined ranges, a variable was created that puts income in quartiles from (a) low (less than or equal to \$23,100) (b) medium (less than or equal to \$51,400), and (c) high (less than or equal to \$246,500), with high income serving as the reference category.

### **Analytic Strategy**

First, we ran descriptive statistics pertaining to the two analytic samples used in the analysis. Second, bivariate relationships were assessed (for both samples) to determine whether a statistically significant relationship was present between parental divorce, parental educational expectations, control variables, and young adults' educational attainment (for both samples). Third, multivariate relationships were assessed using OLS or logistic regression, depending upon the level of measurement of the dependent variable (DeMaris, 1995). In our multivariate models, using the full sample of young adults (Sample 1), we first tested whether adult children with divorced parents would have lower educational attainment (all three measures) compared children with two continuously married parents (Hypothesis 1). We next examined the effect of parental divorce on educational attainment (all three measures), limiting the sample to young adults ages 15 to 18 at

Round 1 (Sample 2), whose parents were asked about their educational expectations for their child (Hypothesis 2). We next tested Hypothesis 3, whether parental educational expectations would be positively related to children's educational attainment (all three measures), again limiting the sample to young adults who were older at Round 1 (Sample 2).

Finally, we examined whether parental educational expectations mediated the relationship between parental divorce and educational attainment (Hypothesis 4). Limiting the sample to young adults who were older at Round 1, whose parents were asked about their educational expectations for their children (Sample 2), we first regressed children's educational attainment (all three measures) on parental divorce. Then, we regressed educational attainment on parental expectations. Then, we included both parental divorce and parental educational expectations in the same model. To determine whether parental educational expectations had a mediating effect, we compared the coefficient for parental divorce from the first model (without educational expectations) to the coefficient for parental divorce from the second model (with educational expectations). A sizable reduction in the coefficient for parental divorce between models would be indicative of a mediating effect. In other words, this would indicate that parental educational expectations either partially or fully explained the relationship between parental divorce and children's educational attainment.

## **RESULTS**

### **Description of the Sample**

Table 1 presents the distribution of the variables used in the analysis for both Sample 1 (young adults age 12 to 18 Round 1) and Sample 2 (young adults age 15 to 18 at Round 1). Both samples are shown because the analysis of parents' educational expectations pertains to young adults who

were older at the first round of the survey. About 17% of the full sample had either attained a graduate degree or were enrolled at some point in a graduate program (Sample 1). This figure is slightly higher (19%) when limited to young adults who were older at Round 1 (Sample 2). A smaller percentage of both samples obtained a graduate degree, at 10% and 12% respectively. A larger percentage of young adults obtained a bachelor's degree or higher than did a graduate degree: 41% of Sample 1 and 43% of Sample 2. Only the parents of young adults who were older at Round 1 (Sample 2) were asked about their educational expectations for their children. Approximately 66% of parents had "high" expectations in that they predicted a 71 to 100% chance that their child would obtain a college degree by the time the child turned 30. About 33% of parents had "low" expectations and predicted that their child had a 0 to 70% chance of obtaining a college degree by age 30.

Among young adults age 12 to 18 at Round 1 (Sample 1), 41% had divorced parents. A slightly larger percentage of young adults who were older at Round 1 (43%) had divorced parents (Sample 2). Both samples contained approximately equal numbers of men and women, and the majority (80%) were White. Approximately 12% of young adults were Hispanic, 8% were Black, and less than 1% were some other race. In both samples, the slightly less than half of young adults had mothers with a high school education or less. About a quarter had some college and another quarter had a bachelor's degree or higher. The young adults' fathers' level of education was similar to that of mothers, except that a slightly lower percentage of fathers had attended college. The household income of the young adults' families were similar across samples: 14% had incomes in the lower third, 44% had incomes in the middle third, and 42% had incomes in the highest third of the distribution.

## **Bivariate Analysis**

Table 2 shows the relationship between parental divorce and children's educational attainment based on the full sample of youth age 12-18 at Round 1 (Sample 1). There were many significant differences in the social and demographic characteristics of youth with divorced versus continuously married parents. First, a significantly higher proportion of youth with continuously married parents had enrolled in graduate school (at some point or currently) or had obtained a graduate degree (20%) compared to youth with divorced parents (12%). These percentages are lower for youth who actually obtained a graduate or professional degree, at 12% and 7% respectively. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of youth with continuously married parents had a obtained a bachelor's degree (50%) than youth with divorced parents (27%).

Regarding other social and demographic characteristics, a slightly higher percentage of youth with divorced parents were female than male (47% versus 46%). Whereas the percentage of young adults who were White was similar across groups (about 80%), the percentage who were Black (10%) was higher among young adults with divorced parents than those with continuously married parents (6%). However, a lower percentage of young adults with divorced parents were Hispanic (10%) than those with continuously married parents (13%). Parental education was lower among adults with divorced parents, for children's mothers and fathers. For example, the percentage of mothers with a bachelor's or a graduate degree (32%) was significantly higher among young adults with continuously married parents than young adults with divorced parents (23%). The results for paternal education are similar. The household incomes of young adults with divorced versus continuously married parents also differed, with lower incomes among those with divorced parents.

Table 3 shows the bivariate relationship between parental divorce, educational attainment, and parental educational expectations for young adults age 15 to 18 at Round 1 (Sample 2). These

results for the most part mirror those presented in Table 2, with a higher percentage of young adults with continuously married parents having obtained advanced degrees or having enrolled in a graduate or professional program. In this sample of young adults, parents were asked about their educational expectations for their children. Among young adults with continuously married parents, 70% of parents reported "high" expectations that their children would get a college degree. This is significantly higher than young adults with divorced parents in which only 61% reported high expectations. Other demographic differences between young adults with divorced and continuously parents were similar to the results presented in Table 2.

### **Multivariate Analysis**

The models presented in Table 4 test Hypothesis 1 which states that young adults with divorced parents would have lower educational attainment than young adults with two continuously married parents. Three variations of the dependent variable were tested: (1) graduate degree or ever enrolled in graduate school (or currently enrolled), (b) graduate degree, and (c) bachelor's degree or higher. This analysis is based on the full sample of youth age 12 to 18 at Round 1. As expected, results showed that there was a significant negative relationship between parental divorce and youth's educational attainment (all three measures), net of controls. The odds of young adults with divorced parents obtaining a graduate degree and/or having ever enrolled in a graduate program were 32% lower than those with continuously married parents. The odds of young adults with divorced parents having obtained a graduate degree were 34% lower than those with continuously married parents, and the odds of their obtaining a bachelor's degree were 58% lower than those with continuously married parents. Several social and demographic characteristics of the youth and their families also had a statistically significant relationship with educational attainment. Variables negatively associated with young adults' educational attainment

included Hispanic ethnicity, lower maternal and paternal educational attainment, and lower household income. Female youth had higher odds of obtaining bachelor's and advanced degrees, and ever having enrolled in graduate school.<sup>1</sup>

Hypothesis 2 stated that parental educational expectations would be positively related to young adults' educational attainment. This analysis, shown in Table 5, was based on the sample of children age 15 to 18 whose parents (primarily mothers) were asked about educational expectations for their child at Round 1 of the survey (Sample 2). Parents' educational expectations were regressed on parental divorce, controlling for the social and demographic characteristics of the youth. Although the effect of divorce on parents' educational expectations was negative, the effect was not statistically significant. However, several control variables were associated with parents' educational expectations, including the race/ethnicity and gender of the youth, mothers' and fathers' education, and household income. Interestingly, the parents of female and Black or Hispanic youth had higher expectations that their child would attend college than the parents of White youth and boys, as did parents in families in which fathers had a high school education as opposed to a graduate degree. Youth in the lowest household income bracket also had parents with higher educational expectations than youth in the highest bracket. On the other hand, parents had lower educational expectations when the child's mother had a high school education or less and when the father had some college as opposed to an advanced degree. Educational expectations were also significantly lower when household income was in the middle as opposed to the highest income bracket.

Hypothesis 3 stated that parental educational expectations would be positively related to young adults' educational attainment (Table 6). Again, this analysis was conducted on the smaller sample of youth whose parents were asked about their educational expectations for their child at Round 1.

There was a significant positive relationship between parental educational expectations and young adults' educational attainment (all three measures), net of controls. The odds that young adults with a parent who had high parental educational expectations (71% or more) would attain a graduate degree or would have ever enrolled in a graduate program were 92% higher than those with a parent who had low educational expectations (under 70%). Moreover, young adults with a parent who had high parental educational expectations had higher odds of actually obtaining a graduate degree: they were 52% higher than those with a parent who had had low parental educational expectations. Furthermore, young adults with a parent who had high educational expectations had odds of obtaining a bachelor's degree that was 93% higher than those with a parent who had low educational expectations. Other variables associated with educational attainment included the child's gender, race, and mothers' and fathers' education. Young adults' educational attainment was significantly higher among female youth (graduate degree or ever enrolled) than males and among young adults with mothers and fathers with a graduate or professional degree compared to less education. The effect of household income was not statistically significant in these models.

The last set of models tests Hypothesis 4, that parental educational expectations will mediate the relationship between parental divorce and young adults' educational attainment (Table 7). These models include controls for the social and demographic characteristics of the child (not shown). Again using the sample of older youth (Sample 2), we first regressed all three measures of youths' educational attainment on parental divorce, not including parents' educational expectations in the model (Panel 1). Results showed that, in this sample of young adults who was older at Round 1, parental divorce had a negative effect (odds were 63% lower) on obtaining a bachelor's degree, but not on enrolling in or obtaining a graduate or professional degree. Note that this stands

in contrast to the results using the full sample of young adults, which showed a negative effect of parental divorce on all three measures (see Table 4)

Panel 2 of Table 7 shows the effect of parental educational expectations on educational attainment, not including parental divorce in the model. Similar to Table 6 (which presents the same analysis), the effect of parental educational expectations on educational attainment was significant and positive. Panel 3 shows the effect of parental divorce and educational expectations on young adults' educational attainment in the same model. Here, the size and significance of parental divorce on educational attainment is similar to the effect of parental divorce without parents' educational expectations in the model. This suggests that the effect of parental divorce on young adults' educational attainment was not explained by lower parental educational expectations among youth with divorced parents. Hypothesis 4 is therefore not supported.

## **DISCUSSION**

Having a four-year college degree has become an increasingly important determinant of one's future economic success, and a graduate or professional degree has become a requirement for a growing number of occupations. Although previous research has consistently shown that parental divorce negatively affects children's educational outcomes (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004; St. John & Wooden, 2005), few studies have examined the effect of divorce on the educational outcomes of young adults, particularly the effect of parental divorce on post-baccalaureate educational attainment. A unique contribution of this study was its focus on young adults, the examination of multiple measures of educational attainment, and consideration of the role of parental educational expectations.

Results showed that compared to young adults with continuously married parents, young adults whose parents had divorced had lower educational attainment (attainment of a bachelor's or graduate/professional degree, and enrollment in graduate school). The effect of parental divorce on parents' educational expectations for their child, while negative, was not statistically significant. However, young adults whose parent's had higher, as opposed to lower, educational expectations for them were significantly more likely to attain a four-year college degree, enroll in graduate school, or obtain an advanced degree.

Divorce has negative consequences for children that extend well into adulthood (Amato, 2010). This study indicates that children's attainment of higher levels of education, specifically the attainment of bachelor's and graduate degrees, is also negatively affected. Social capital is built through the stability and resilience of family relationships, and young adults with divorced parents, for various reasons (lower parent-child involvement in school or extracurricular activities, lower relationship quality, etc.) may have less social capital on which to draw to help them further their educations (Furstenberg, 2005). These potential reasons have not been specifically tested, however. This study tested whether lower academic expectations among divorced than continuously married parents was one of the explanations for this relationship. However, there was no support for this hypothesis.

This study has several limitations however. One is that this study focuses exclusively on the effect of parental divorce, as opposed to the full range of family patterns in contemporary society including cohabitation and remarriage. This is problematic because nontraditional family structures are continuing to grow (Dorius, 2015). Another limitation of this study is that parental educational expectations were only assessed for older youth (those who were age 15 to 18 at Round 1) and only applied to expectations for a four-year college degree, as opposed to a graduate degree.

Therefore, it is unknown whether results would apply to broader age range of children or their chances of obtaining an advanced degree. Moreover, the cohort of young adults in this study is age 26 to 32, and many of these children may go on to attend graduate school or obtain a graduate degree later on. Future work should continue to follow the educational trajectories of these young adults as they age.

The necessity for a college degree, especially a graduate degree, is increasing, but the costs associated with earning a college or graduate degree are also increasing. Many students apply for federal aid assistance through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) program, established by the Higher Education Act of 1965 under Title IV (United States Department of Education, 2014). However, FAFSA awards depend on a student's prior and current family situation. If a student's parents are divorced, for example, the custodial parent is responsible for filling out the FAFSA, and the government may or may not, depending on the state, consider the income of the noncustodial parent in determining a student's financial aid needs (FinAid, 2014). Even with federal financial assistance, the costs of higher education can become a hindrance for children with divorced parents, who tend to have lower incomes than continuously married parents. States are divided on whether courts can order child support after the child reaches age 18 to cover college costs. Some states (e.g., Alabama, California, Mississippi and South Carolina) do not require a noncustodial parent to pay for child support after age 18 while others (e.g., Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Utah and Washington) have passed laws to allow child support to cover at least some higher education costs (United States Department of Justice, 2014 ). However, rules regarding child support are highly variable and are subject to change over time.

Because children with divorced parents are less likely to complete a college degree, among those who live in a state where the court does not legally require the noncustodial parent to pay for college costs, future policy might consider implementing a divorce contract regulation stipulating that parents w prepare a written college support agreement in addition to the general child support agreement. This agreement might outline what type and what amount each parent is responsible for their child's college expenses, including, but not limited to tuition, housing, books, and basic living expenses. This policy may help make a college degree more accessible to children of divorce.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In a supplemental analysis limited to young adults with divorced parents (N=1,763), we examined whether the age of the child at the time of the parents' divorce had an influence on his or her educational attainment (available upon request). We regressed young adults' educational attainment on a variable indicating those whose parents' divorce occurred prior to Round 1 (when young adults were between the ages 12 to 18) versus young adults whose parents' divorce occurred after Round 1 (when the young adults were age 18 and older). Results showed that educational attainment was significantly lower for young adult whose parents were divorce prior to Round 1 (when the children were under 18) than young adults whose parents divorced post-Round 1, when the young adults were 18 and older. However, once control variables were included in the analysis, the effect of the young adults' age was only significant for young adults obtaining a bachelor's degree and higher. The odds of children obtaining a bachelor's degree and higher were 35% lower for children whose parents divorced pre-Round 1 than post-Round 1. These results suggest that the effect of the age of the child at the time of divorce on educational attainment applies to bachelor's degrees but not advanced degrees.

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Table 1. Description of the Samples

<i>Variables</i>	Sample 1 (N=4,855)		Sample 2 <sup>a</sup> (N=1,853)	
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>SD</i>
Educational attainment				
Graduate degree or ever enrolled	16.9	0.92	18.5	0.84
Bachelor's degree or less	83.1	0.76	81.5	0.72
Education attainment				
Graduate degree	10.1	1.15	11.9	1.00
No graduate degree	89.9	0.83	88.1	0.78
Educational attainment				
Bachelor's degree and higher	41.4	0.68	42.8	0.64
Less than a bachelor's degree	58.6	0.69	57.2	0.65
Parental Expectations <sup>b</sup>				
Low (0 – 70%)	-	-	33.4	3.69
High (71 – 100%)	-	-	66.6	0.64
Parents Ever Divorced				
Yes	36.0	0.71	39.0	0.66
No	64.0	0.69	61.0	0.64
Gender of Youth				
Male	51.3	0.66	50.2	0.62
Female	48.7	0.70	49.8	0.66
Race/Ethnicity of Youth				
White	79.5	0.64	80.6	0.62
Black	7.9	1.82	7.19	1.76
Hispanic	11.8	1.42	11.2	1.33
Other	0.83	3.74	0.93	3.38
Mother's Education				
High School or Less	46.3	0.70	46.8	0.66
Some College	25.5	0.80	25.2	0.75
Bachelor's degree	17.0	0.93	17.4	0.86
Graduate degree	11.2	1.11	10.6	1.06
Father's Education				
High School or Less	52.6	0.69	52.7	0.66
Some College	19.1	0.89	19.8	0.83
Bachelor's degree	14.7	0.99	14.8	0.92
Graduate degree	13.6	1.01	12.7	0.97
Household Income				
Low ( $\leq$ \$23,100)	13.9	1.11	13.7	1.04
Medium ( $\leq$ \$51,400)	44.3	0.69	44.6	0.66
High ( $\leq$ \$246,500)	41.8	0.68	41.7	0.63

<sup>a</sup> Limited to youth ages 15 to 18 at Round 1.

<sup>b</sup> Percent chance that child will earn a college degree by age 30.

Table 2. Bivariate Relationship Between Parental Divorce and Young Adult Educational Attainment (N=4,855)<sup>a</sup>

<i>Variables</i>	Parents ever divorced <i>Percent</i>	Parents continuously married <i>Percent</i>	<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Educational attainment			25.9	<.001
Graduate degree or ever enrolled	12.2	19.6		
Bachelor's degree or less	87.8	80.4		
Educational attainment			21.9	<.001
Graduate degree	6.6	12.0		
No graduate degree	93.4	88.0		
Educational attainment			144.1	<.001
Bachelor's degree and higher	26.9	49.6		
Less than a bachelor's degree	73.1	50.4		
Gender of youth			10.4	<.001
Male	52.6	53.6		
Female	47.4	46.4		
Race/ethnicity of youth			18.0	<.001
White	79.2	79.6		
Black	10.3	6.5		
Hispanic	9.8	13.0		
Other	0.7	0.9		
Mother's education			29.2	<.001
High school or less	47.6	45.6		
Some college	29.6	23.2		
Bachelor's degree	14.1	18.6		
Graduate degree	8.7	12.6		
Father's education			141.6	<.001
High school or less	65.8	45.1		
Some college	17.9	19.8		
Bachelor's degree	8.3	18.3		
Graduate degree	8.0	16.8		
Household income			196.2	<.001
Low ( $\leq$ \$23,100)	24.0	8.2		
Medium ( $\leq$ \$51,400)	47.0	42.9		
High ( $\leq$ \$246,500)	29.0	48.9		

<sup>a</sup> Weighted results.

Table 3. Bivariate Relationship Between Parental Divorce and Young Adult Educational Attainment (N=1,853)<sup>a,b</sup>

<i>Variables</i>	Parents ever divorced	Parents continuously married	<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>p-value</i>
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Percent</i>		
Educational attainment			8.69	<.05
Graduate degree/ever enrolled	14.1	21.4		
Bachelor's degree or less	85.9	78.6		
Education Attainment			6.76	<.05
Graduate degree	8.6	14.0		
No graduate degree	91.4	86.0		
Educational Attainment			62.6	<.001
Bachelor's degree or higher	27.6	52.6		
Less than a bachelor's degree	72.4	47.4		
Parental expectations <sup>c,d</sup>			9.34	<.05
Low (0 – 70%)	38.9	29.8		
High (71 – 100%)	61.1	70.2		
Gender of youth			3.38	0.0842
Male	46.7	52.5		
Female	53.3	47.5		
Race/Ethnicity of youth			8.78	<.05
White	82.2	79.6		
Black	8.9	6.1		
Hispanic	8.3	13.1		
Other	0.6	1.2		
Mother's education			5.01	0.2290
High school or less	48.7	45.6		
Some college	27.2	24.0		
Bachelor's degree	14.7	19.0		
Graduate degree	9.4	11.4		
Father's education			56.6	<.001
High school or less	65.4	44.6		
Some college	19.2	20.1		
Bachelor's degree	7.5	19.6		
Graduate degree	7.9	15.7		
Household income			65.1	<.001
Low ( $\leq$ \$23,100)	22.7	7.9		
Medium ( $\leq$ \$51,400)	47.2	42.9		
High ( $\leq$ \$246,500)	30.1	49.2		

<sup>a</sup> Weighted results.

<sup>b</sup> Limited to youth ages 15 to 18 at Round 1.

<sup>c</sup> Only asked of parents whose child was age 15 to 18 at Round 1.

<sup>d</sup> Percent chance that child will earn a college degree by age 30.

Table 4. Relationship Between Parental Divorce and Young Adult Educational Attainment (N=4,855)

Variables	Graduate degree or ever enrolled				Graduate degree				Bachelor's or Higher			
	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI
Intercept	-0.579***	0.140	-	-	-1.336***	0.171	-	-	1.054***	0.137	-	-
Parental divorce	-0.216**	0.107	0.805	0.65-0.99	-0.340**	0.140	0.712	0.54-0.94	-0.579***	0.079	0.561	0.48-0.65
Gender of youth <sup>a</sup>												
Female	0.585***	0.094	1.795	1.49-2.16	0.559***	0.118	1.749	1.39-2.21	0.680***	0.071	1.974	1.72-2.27
Race/ethnicity of youth <sup>b</sup>												
Black	0.188	0.138	1.207	0.92-1.58	0.032	0.179	1.033	0.73-1.47	-0.106	0.108	0.900	0.73-1.11
Hispanic	-0.306*	0.156	0.737	0.54-1.00	-0.485*	0.216	0.616	0.40-0.94	-0.419***	0.104	0.658	0.54-0.81
Other	-0.635	0.647	0.530	0.15-1.88	-1.195	1.058	0.303	0.04-2.41	-0.116	0.420	0.891	0.39-2.03
Mother's education <sup>c</sup>												
High school or less	-1.375***	0.161	0.253	0.19-0.35	-1.382***	0.209	0.251	0.17-0.38	-1.280***	0.134	0.278	0.21-0.36
Some college	-0.887***	0.148	0.412	0.31-0.55	-0.724***	0.181	0.485	0.34-0.69	-0.781***	0.133	0.458	0.35-0.59
Bachelor's degree	-0.466***	0.145	0.627	0.47-0.83	-0.299	0.170	0.742	0.53-1.04	-0.168	0.141	0.845	0.64-1.11
Father's education <sup>c</sup>												
High school or less	-0.938***	0.152	0.392	0.29-0.53	-0.777***	0.188	0.460	0.32-0.66	-1.185***	0.123	0.306	0.24-0.39
Some college	-0.576***	0.153	0.562	0.42-0.76	-0.449*	0.187	0.638	0.44-0.92	-0.684***	0.128	0.504	0.39-0.65
Bachelor's degree	-0.144	0.145	0.866	0.65-1.15	-0.166	0.172	0.847	0.61-1.19	-0.269*	0.134	0.764	0.59-0.99
Household income <sup>d</sup>												
Low	-0.868***	0.212	0.420	0.28-0.64	-0.888***	0.295	0.412	0.23-0.73	-0.908***	0.131	0.403	0.31-0.52
Medium	-0.127	0.104	0.881	0.72-1.08	-0.118	0.130	0.889	0.69-1.15	-0.321***	0.077	0.725	0.62-0.84

<sup>a</sup> The reference category for youth's gender is male.

<sup>b</sup> The reference category for youth's ethnicity is white.

<sup>c</sup> The reference category is graduate degree.

<sup>d</sup> The reference category for household income is high ( $\leq$  \$249,500).

\* $p$ -value <0.05; \*\* $p$ -value <0.01; \*\*\* $p$ -value <0.001.

Table 5. Relationship Between Parental Divorce and Parental Educational Expectations (N=1,853)

<i>Variables</i>	<i><math>\beta</math></i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	87.780***	2.267
Parental Divorce	-2.219	1.505
Gender of youth <sup>a</sup>		
Female	6.217***	1.325
Race/ethnicity of youth <sup>a</sup>		
Black	8.928***	1.896
Hispanic	5.821***	1.907
Other	-6.378	2.409
Mother's education <sup>b</sup>		
High school or less	-8.312***	2.409
Some college	-2.271	2.361
Bachelor's degree	1.446	2.410
Father's education		
High school or less	14.659***	2.199
Some college	-4.911*	2.229
Bachelor's degree	-0.836	2.160
Household Income <sup>c</sup>		
Low	15.049***	2.455
Medium	-4.777***	1.452

<sup>a</sup> The reference category for youth's gender is male.

<sup>b</sup> The reference category for youth's ethnicity is white.

<sup>c</sup> The reference category is graduate degree.

<sup>d</sup> The reference category for household income is high ( $\leq$  \$249,500).

\* $p$ -value  $<0.05$ ; \*\* $p$ -value  $<0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p$ -value  $<0.001$ .

Table 6. Relationship Between Parental Educational Expectations and Young Adult Educational Attainment (N=1,853)

<i>Variables</i>	Graduate degree or ever enrolled				Graduate degree				Bachelor's degree or higher			
	<i>β</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
Intercept	-2.162***	0.368	-	-	-2.353***	0.428	-	-	-0.662***	0.275	-	-
Parental expectations <sup>a</sup>												
High	1.918***	0.284	6.808	3.90-11.89	1.517***	0.328	4.560	2.40-8.67	1.927***	0.163	6.868	4.99-9.46
Gender of youth <sup>b</sup>												
Female	0.361*	0.151	1.434	1.07-1.93	0.348	0.184	1.417	0.99-2.03	0.338	0.118	1.402	1.11-1.77
Race/ethnicity of youth <sup>c</sup>												
Black	0.112	0.207	1.119	0.75-1.68	-0.230	0.271	0.794	0.47-1.35	0.010	0.167	1.010	0.73-1.39
Hispanic	-0.598*	0.261	0.550	0.33-0.92	-0.705*	0.336	0.494	0.25-0.95	-0.654***	0.179	0.520	0.36-0.73
Other	-0.506	0.975	0.603	0.09-4.07	-12.523***	0.415	<0.001	<0.001	-0.386	0.798	0.680	0.14-2.99
Mother's education <sup>d</sup>												
High school or less	-1.442***	0.254	0.236	0.14-0.39	-1.563***	0.297	0.209	0.12-0.37	-1.071***	0.222	0.343	0.22-0.53
Some college	-1.026***	0.246	0.358	0.22-0.57	-1.037***	0.282	0.355	0.20-0.61	-0.809***	0.227	0.445	0.28-0.68
Bachelor's degree	-0.472*	0.240	0.624	0.39-0.99	-0.610*	0.269	0.543	0.32-0.92	-0.305	0.238	0.737	0.46-1.17
Father's education <sup>d</sup>												
High school or less	-0.548*	0.239	0.578	0.36-0.91	-0.318	0.282	0.727	0.41-1.24	-0.935***	0.206	0.393	0.25-0.58
Some college	-0.458	0.245	0.633	0.39-1.01	-0.251	0.286	0.778	0.44-1.34	-0.485*	0.213	0.615	0.39-0.91
Bachelor's degree	-0.211	0.239	0.810	0.50-1.29	-0.259	0.281	0.772	0.44-1.33	0.024	0.225	1.024	0.65-1.56
Household income <sup>e</sup>												
Low	-0.342	0.300	0.710	0.40-1.31	-0.709	0.492	0.492	0.22-1.16	-0.647	0.213	0.524	0.36-0.82
Medium	-0.061	0.163	0.941	0.68-1.29	-0.092	0.912	0.912	0.62-1.33	-0.361	0.127	0.699	0.54-0.89

<sup>a</sup> The reference category is low expectations.

<sup>b</sup> The reference category for youth's gender is male.

<sup>c</sup> The reference category for youth's ethnicity is white.

<sup>d</sup> The reference category is graduate degree.

<sup>e</sup> The reference category for household income is high (≤ \$249,500).

\**p*-value <0.05; \*\**p*-value <0.01; \*\*\**p*-value <0.001.

Table 7. Relationship between Parental Divorce, Parental Educational Expectations, and Young Adult Educational Attainment (N=1,853)<sup>a</sup>

	Graduate degree or enrolled				Graduate degree				Bachelor's degree or higher			
	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI	$\beta$	SE	OR	95% CI
<b>Panel 1</b>												
Parental divorce	-0.234	0.163	0.792	0.58-1.09	-0.324	0.209	0.723	0.48-1.09	-0.629***	0.126	0.533	0.42-0.68
<b>Panel 2</b>												
High expectations <sup>b,c</sup>	1.918***	0.284	6.808	3.90-11.89	1.517***	0.328	4.560	2.40-8.67	1.927***	0.163	6.868	4.99-9.46
<b>Panel 3</b>												
Parental divorce	-0.214	0.167	0.807	0.58-1.12	-0.313	0.212	0.732	0.48-1.11	-0.675***	0.133	0.509	0.39-0.66
High expectations <sup>b,c</sup>	1.915***	0.285	6.786	3.88-11.86	1.515***	0.328	4.549	2.39-8.66	1.944***	0.165	6.986	5.06-9.65

<sup>a</sup> Effects of control variables not shown.

<sup>b</sup> Percent chance that child will earn a college degree by age 30.

<sup>c</sup> Reference group is "low" expectations.

\* $p$ -value <0.05; \*\* $p$ -value <0.01; \*\*\* $p$ -value <0.001.