



Trajectories of Adjustment to Couple Relationship Separation

W. KIM HALFORD*
SUSIE SWEEPER†

To test a stress-diathesis model of adjustment to separation, the current study describes the trajectories of different aspects of separation adjustment in people formerly married or cohabiting, and moderators of those trajectories. A convenience sample of 303 recently separated individuals (169 women; 134 men) completed assessments of their emotional attachment to the former partner, loneliness, psychological distress, and coparenting conflict at two time points 6 months apart. Multilevel modeling of the overlapping multicohort design was used to estimate the trajectories of these different aspects of adjustment as a function of time since separation, marital status, gender, presence of children from the relationship, who initiated separation, social support, and anxious attachment. Attachment to the former partner, loneliness, and psychological distress were initially high but improved markedly across the 2 years after separation, but coparenting conflict was high and stable. Adjustment problems were similar in men and women, and in those formerly married or cohabiting, except that reported coparenting conflict was higher in men than women. Low social support and high anxious attachment predicted persistent attachment to the former partner, loneliness, and psychological distress. Coparenting conflict is a common, chronic problem for many separated individuals, and individuals with certain psychological vulnerabilities also experience chronic personal distress.

Keywords: Cohabitation; Conflict; Divorce; Separation; Attachment Anxiety; Social Support; Coparenting

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Why do some individuals show long-term adjustment problems to separation, while others show only transient adjustment problems? The current study describes the trajectories of adults' separation adjustment and the prediction of those trajectories by a stress-diathesis model incorporating stresses of separation and individual's psychological vulnerabilities.

The Significance of Separation Adjustment

In the United States, the divorce rate increased more or less linearly across the first 80 years of the 20th century, reached a plateau in the early 1990s, and then declined gradually in the first decade of the 21st century (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Western, Qu, & Hayes, 2012). Similarly, timed patterns of increasing divorce rates followed by a plateau and modest decline also occurred in Canada and Australia (Statistics Canada, 2010;

*School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Lucia QLD, Australia.

†Griffith University, Brisbane QLD, Australia.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to W. Kim Halford, School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, QLD 4072, Australia. E-mail: K.Halford@psy.uq.edu.au.

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Western et al., 2012). However, the modest recent decline of divorce has been counterbalanced by rising rates of separation from cohabitating relationships. About 15% of all couple households in Australia and Canada, and 12% in the United States, are cohabitating relationships (Statistics Canada, 2010; Western et al., 2012). The rates of relationship separation are much higher in cohabiting than married couples (Western et al., 2012). Thus, there continue to be large numbers of adults experiencing separation from a committed relationship, with an increasing proportion of those adults separating from cohabiting rather than married relationships.

There is a substantive body of research on the psychological sequelae of divorce, but very little research on separation from cohabiting relationships (Amato, 2010). Cohabitation has some important differences from marriage. For example, cohabiting couples report less relationship commitment than married couples (e.g., Kline et al., 2004), which might suggest that separating cohabiting couples would show less distress than separating married couples. Consistent with this possibility, Blekesaune (2008) found in a large representative sample of British adults that psychological distress after cohabitation separation was less severe than for separated formerly married individuals. However, Rhoades, Dush, Atkins, Stanley, and Markman (2011) reported that psychological distress was severe after break of a cohabiting relationship, and this was independent of whether the person reported there had been plans to marry. One aim of the current study was to assess separation adjustment from cohabiting relationships and establish if the patterns were similar to marital separation.

There is a well-replicated finding showing that, on average, divorced men and women have poorer physical and mental health than their married counterparts (e.g., Bleksaune, 2008; Hughes & Waite, 2009). In addition, relative to children of married parents, children of divorced parents on average have somewhat poorer emotional, behavioral, and educational outcomes (Amato, 2010; Frisco, Muller, & Frank, 2007). Although the average adjustment of divorced persons is poorer than that of married persons, there is considerable variability around these averages. For some people, divorce can improve psychological adjustment. For example, leaving a seriously distressed marriage is associated with increased life happiness (Amato & Hohmann-Marriot, 2007). Thus, research needs to assess the predictors of separation adjustment.

The Trajectory of Separation Adjustment

Some researchers argue that divorce leads to sustained adjustment problems resulting from persistent separation-related stresses (e.g., economic difficulties, sole parenting) (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Other researchers assert that divorce is a socially normative transition, which typically leads to only mild, transient distress (e.g., Pinsof, 2002). Research findings show that, on global measures of psychological distress, most people report substantial distress in the time leading up to and immediately after separation that attenuates in the next 2 years (e.g., Amato, 2010; Blekesaune, 2008). However, other studies find a high prevalence of chronic psychological distress some years after separation (e.g., Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Johnson & Wu, 2002), as well as reduced life satisfaction (Lucas, 2005), and increased mental health problems (Wade & Pevalin, 2004). Moreover, these chronic problems are evident even after controlling for pre-separation psychological adjustment (Lucas, 2005; Wade & Pevalin, 2004).

The inconsistencies in the research on the trajectory of separation adjustment likely reflect limitations in the studies' methodologies. Some large-scale studies have used very brief measures with unknown psychometric properties. For example, in Lucas's (2005) study of 30,000 German divorcees, he assessed life satisfaction on a single 10-point rating, whereas Johnson and Wu (2002) used a 5-item scale assessing distress, health, and life satisfaction.

Other studies used well-established measures, but only assessed general psychological adjustment indices like mental health (e.g., Blekesaune, 2008; Wade & Pevalin, 2004), or depression (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993). There are specific psychological challenges after separation (Amato, 2010), such as emotional attachment to the former partner; loneliness due to loss of social networks; and coparenting conflict. Measures of global psychological adjustment show only moderate cross-sectional association with these separation-specific aspects of adjustment (Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

Different aspects of separation adjustment might have different trajectories. In the limited number of longitudinal studies of specific aspects of separation adjustment, attachment to the former partner and loneliness reduced substantially in the first few years after separation (Mastekaasa, 1994), while coparenting conflict was chronic and unremitting (Buchanan & Heiges, 2001; Sbarra & Emery, 2008). However, no study has assessed all of these adjustment indices in the same sample, and the different observed trajectories might reflect sample differences.

Predictors of Separation Adjustment

Amato (2010) proposed a stress-diathesis model of separation adjustment in which the stresses of the separation experience interact with individual vulnerabilities to determine separation adjustment. One important difference in divorce stress is who initiated the separation. Women initiate more divorces than men (Hewitt, Western, & Baxter, 2006). Several cross-sectional studies found that men report more attachment to the former partner (e.g., Waggener & Gallassi, 1993) and psychological distress (e.g., Lucas, 2005) than women after divorce, which might be attributable to the separation being unwanted by many men. However, other cross-sectional studies found no gender differences in attachment to the former partner or psychological distress (Amato, 2010; Mastekaasa, 1994), whereas two studies found women were more psychologically distressed than men (Aseltine & Kessler, 1993; Simon & Marcussen, 1999). Two studies of divorced couples seeking mediation for coparenting conflict found high attachment to the former spouse (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000) or the related construct of low acceptance of the separation by one partner (Sbarra & Emery, 2008) predicted more anger and conflict between the separated parents.

A second divorce-related stress is relationship investment. Rusbolt (1980) argues that individuals invest in committed relationships in a variety of ways, such as shared property, development of mutual friends and activities, and having children together. As time passes, the level of investment typically grows. Getting married is a social and religious ritual that is widely used by couples to symbolize their investment and commitment to the couple relationship (Coontz, 2005). Thus, duration of the relationship and getting married might be seen as indices of relationship investment.

In addition to the presence of children representing a high level of investment in the couple relationship, if the couple separate, children necessitate ongoing contact between the separated partners. Postseparation contact exacerbates ongoing adjustment problems (Rhoades et al., 2011), particularly resolving high attachment to the former partner. Children often reside with their mother more than their father after separation, and many separated women experience ongoing stress as a single parent balancing work and family tasks. These stresses likely explain why separated mothers report more psychological distress than separated women without children (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). Men often have reduced contact with their children after separation, which is associated with psychological distress in men (Bokker, Farley & Bailey, 2006). Furthermore, conflict about coparenting is a major source of concern of separated partners (Sbarra & Emery, 2008; Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

There is a substantial drop in disposable income that often accompanies divorce, which particularly impacts on low-income households (McLanahan, 2009). The economic stress

of divorce for low-income individuals might explain why those individuals show poorer postseparation adjustment than individuals with high income (Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006).

An important vulnerability that influences the effects of the stress of separation is social support. High perceived support is associated with psychological adjustment after separation in men and women (DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008). Attachment anxiety is conceptualized as a relatively stable individual characteristic reflecting fear of abandonment in intimate relationships (Collins, 1996), and seems likely to predict poor adjustment to relationship dissolution. Therefore, low social support and high attachment anxiety are vulnerabilities likely to predict poor separation adjustment.

Research Aims and Hypotheses

In summary, the trajectories of various aspects of adjustment after separation are not well established. Based on a stress-diathesis conceptualization, we predicted that the stresses of separation (who initiated the separation; investment reflected in duration of relationship and being married rather than cohabiting; and low income) and individual vulnerabilities (lack of social support, high attachment anxiety) would be associated with adjustment trajectories. Although there have been mixed findings in previous research, based on the majority of studies we predicted that former partner attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress would decrease over time (Hypothesis 1), but that coparenting conflict would be stable across the early years after separation (Hypothesis 2). Given the lack of clear previous findings, we examined but did not make specific predictions about the effects of gender, children, or marital status on adjustment trajectory. We did predict that a low and declining adjustment problem trajectory would be evident in those who had initiated separation, and cohabited rather than married; had brief relationship duration before separation; and had high income, high social support, and low attachment anxiety (Hypothesis 3).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 303 (169 women and 134 men) recently separated individuals (not couples) who were recruited for a study investigating “how people cope after a relationship separation”. No money was offered for participation. The inclusion criteria were that the person was over 21 years of age, had separated from a marriage or cohabiting couple relationship in the last 18 months, and in the case of a cohabiting relationship that the couple had lived together for at least 12 months. Participants were recruited through media outreach via newspapers and radio (64%), distribution of brochures to clients of relationship and separation support services (24%), and 10% ($n = 33$) were undergraduate students who participated in return for course credit. Like the rest of the sample, the students were all 21 years of age or older, although they were younger ($M = 29$ years, $SD = 6$) than the rest of the sample ($M = 40$ years, $SD = 8$), and had shorter duration relationships ($M = 4$ years, $SD = 2.5$) than the rest of the sample ($M = 12$ years, $SD = 8$).

The demographics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. The mean ages for the current sample were similar to the mean ages for divorcing Australian men and women of 41 and 39 years, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Formerly cohabiting participants were younger than formerly married participants. The incomes of the divorcing men and women are similar to the average annual income for employed Australian men and women of AUS 42,000 (approximately US 45,000) and 27,800 (approximately US 30,000), respectively, at the time of initiating data collection (Australian Bureau of

TABLE 1
Sample Demographic Characteristics

Prior Relationship Gender	Cohabiting		Married	
	Men (n = 29)	Women (n = 56)	Men (n = 104)	Women (n = 114)
Age in years _a	35.2 (6.8) _a	31.1 (10.1) _b	42.2 (9.2) _c	39.6 (8.5) _d
Annual Salary (AUS \$1,000) _a	29.8 (18.0) _a	22.3 (15.0) _b	40.0 (22.3) _c	28.1 (15.0) _d
Relationship duration in years _a	5.1 (3.9) _a	3.5 (2.5) _a	12.3 (8.6) _b	14.3 (9.2) _b
Months since separation _a	10.8 (5.8) _a	8.8 (5.4) _a	10.7 (5.7) _a	9.7 (5.3) _a
University education	21 (72%)	44 (79%)	72 (69%)	73 (64%)
Children under 18 years of age _b	17 (59%)	12 (21%)	79 (76%)	67 (59%)
Separation was self initiated _b	8 (28%)	36 (64%)	33 (32%)	63 (55%)

^aMeans (and standard deviations in parentheses) for interval data, means on the same line that share a subscript are not reliably different.

^bNumber (and % in parentheses) for categorical data.

Statistics, 2006). Formerly cohabiting participants earned less than formerly married participants. Divorcing men and women had been married for a similar period to the median duration of marriage prior to divorce in Australia of 12 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The duration of cohabiting relationships before separation was significantly shorter, about half the length of that of the marriages. The sample was more highly educated than the Australian population; 210 participants (69%) had completed university education. There was no difference in education between cohabiting and married couples. The observed differences between married and cohabiting couples in mean age, income, and relationship duration reflect similar differences in the general population of married versus cohabiting couples (Western et al., 2012).

The mean time since relationship separation was very similar for men and women from either marriages or cohabiting relationships. More people from former marriages had children from that relationship than people from former cohabiting relationships, $\chi^2(N = 303, df = 1) = 26.56; p < .05$, and the sample of formerly cohabiting parents is small. About half of the sample reported having children, which is similar to 51% of all divorces that involve children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Ninety-nine of the 169 female (59%) participants and 41 of the 133 male (31%) participants reported that they initiated the separation.

Measures

Participants were mailed a package including an informed consent form, questions regarding demographics, and a series of questionnaires. Participants completed the Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test (PAST) (Sweeper & Halford, 2006), a 26-item measure of former partner attachment (eight items), loneliness (11 items), and coparenting conflict (seven items) over the past 2 weeks. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 “*strongly disagree*” to 5 “*strongly agree*”. The PAST has a reliable factor structure, high test–retest reliability, all ICC $\geq .85$, and convergent validity with confidante’s reports of the person’s adjustment (Sweeper & Halford, 2006), and had high internal consistency, all $\alpha \geq .83$ in the current sample.

The Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale-21 (DASS) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a 21-item measure of depression, anxiety, and stress over the past week, and the total score on the DASS has been widely used as a measure of psychological distress. Each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 “*did not apply to me at all*” to 3 “*applied to me very much, or most of the time*”. The DASS has a well replicated factor structure, high internal

consistency $\alpha = .87$, and concurrent validity with other measures of anxiety and depression (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

The 18-item attachment anxiety scale of the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory (ECL; Brennan, Clarke, & Shaver, 1998) was completed. Each item is rated on a 7-point Likert scale from “disagree strongly” to “agree strongly” to yield an overall score of attachment anxiety. The anxious attachment scale had high internal consistency in the current sample $\alpha = .94$. The Social Support Scale is a 27-item self-report measure of the availability and perceived quality of social support (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983). The total rated quality of social support had high internal consistency in the current sample, $\alpha = .90$.

Procedure

Potential participants were screened by telephone for study eligibility and then sent an informed consent sheet and a questionnaire booklet. Two telephone calls were made 3 and 6 weeks later if the questionnaire was not returned. Once the consent form was received, participants completed a semistructured telephone interview about their experience of the separation. Six months later, participants were sent a second questionnaire booklet and reply paid envelope. Again two telephone calls were made if the questionnaire was not returned. Once the questionnaire was received, the participants again completed a semistructured telephone interview about their separation experience.

RESULTS

Of the 303 participants who completed the initial assessment, 263 (87%) provided the second assessment 6 months later. There were high correlations between time 1 and time 2 scores on each index of adjustment, attachment $r = 0.73$, loneliness $r = 0.73$, psychological distress $r = .67$, and coparenting conflict $r = .72$. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables are presented in Table 2. There was a high correlation between attachment and loneliness, and between loneliness and psychological distress, with a low correlation between attachment and psychological distress. Coparenting conflict showed low but statistically significant associations with the other adjustment outcomes. Prior marital status and presence of children showed low, mainly nonsignificant associations with adjustment, but there were small but reliable associations of some indices of adjustment with gender, social support, and anxious attachment.

We used MLwin (Rasbash, Browne, Healy, Cameron, & Charlton, 2005) to conduct separate MultiLevel Model (MLM) analyses of trajectory on each of the four indices of adjustment (PAST attachment, loneliness, and coparenting conflict, and DASS psychological distress). Each MLM analysis had two levels, with the two occasions of measurement forming level 1 and individuals forming level 2. The model used all available data at Time 1 and Time 2 to estimate model parameters of intercept, linear, and quadratic change as a function of time in years since separation. The intercept was centered at the time of separation. The varying duration of separation at Time 1 assessment for different participants essentially provides a contiguous overlapping cohort design.

Trajectories of Adjustment

The variance component analyses and unconditional growth models are summarized in Table 3. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress each showed a linear decline in adjustment problems with time since separation. Moreover, attachment showed a positive quadratic change, meaning the rate of decline decelerated with increasing duration of separation. There also was a trend for deceleration in

TABLE 2
Means (SD) and Correlations between Variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.
1. Attachment	20.54 (8.30)	.61*	.36*	.22*	-.31*	-.27*	.03	-.01	-.43*	.02	.04	-.22*	.45*
2. Loneliness	28.46 (10.38)		.73*	.28*	-.24*	-.12	-.07	-.01	-.16	-.01	-.01	-.35*	.50*
3. Psychological distress	15.41 (13.73)			.30*	-.19*	-.08	-.13	.02	-.04	-.09	-.02	-.33*	.38*
4. CoParenting Stress	22.19 (5.07)				.03	-.45*	-.18	.08	-.25*	.01	-.18	-.27*	.14
5. Years separated	1.09 (0.52)					-.04	-.04	-.06	-.04	.04	.06	.09	.13
6. Female gender	0.56						-.06	-.14	.36*	-.31*	.10	.18	.01
7. Marital status	0.72							.30*	-.08	.27*	.47*	.20*	-.03
8. Presence of child	0.58								-.11	.03	.15	.01	-.07
9. Initiated separation	0.46									-.05	-.05	.03	-.22*
10. Duration	10.8 (8.8)										.27*	.09	.13
11. Income (\$000)	31.7 (19.2)											.04	-.07
12. Social support	49.81 (9.76)												-.20*
13. Attachment anxiety	71.39 (23.39)												

* $p < .05$.

TABLE 3
Trajectory Coefficients (Standard Errors in Parentheses) of Separation Adjustment

Outcome	ICC	Model Coefficients		
		Intercept	Linear Change	Quadratic Change
Attachment	0.65	29.34 (1.01)	-10.32 (1.73)*	1.74 (0.74)*
Loneliness	0.67	36.48 (1.29)*	-8.05 (2.20)*	0.63 (0.95)
Coparenting stress	0.72	11.56 (0.90)	0.72 (1.51)	-0.08 (0.63)
Negative affect	0.66	23.63 (1.81)	-10.49 (4.14)*	2.36 (1.36) ^a

ICC = intra-class correlation coefficient for the individual level.

* $p < .05$.

^a $p < .1$, linear and quadratic change are expressed as scale points per year.

decline of DASS psychological distress over time. Loneliness had no quadratic component. In contrast with the other three measures of outcome, coparenting conflict was stable over time.

Demographic Predictors of Adjustment

To evaluate the effects of the predictor variables, separate hierarchical MLM analyses were conducted for the outcome variables of attachment to former partner, loneliness, and psychological distress. In each MLM analysis, a block of variables of the demographic variables of interest was entered: female (male = 0 female = 1); marital status (previously cohabiting = 0, previously married = 1); presence of children (no = 0, yes = 1); and the interaction of female gender by presence of children, which tests the possibility that presence of children differentially impacts on men's and women's adjustment. A second block was entered of separation stress, consisting of who initiated the separation (participant no = 0, participant yes = 1, with a mutual decision being coded as 1), duration of the relationship before separation and income. We followed the MLM convention of removing non-significant predictors before the next step in model building to reduce the chance of model saturation. Finally, the psychological vulnerability measures of social support and attachment anxiety were entered in a third block. An identical three block hierarchical MLM analysis was conducted predicting coparenting conflict except that the terms presence of children and the interaction of gender with presence of children in block 2 were not entered. In none of the analyses was there any association between the moderators and the quadratic terms. Following MLM convention (Singer & Willett, 2003), the nonsignificant interaction of moderators with the quadratic terms was dropped from the equations, and the results are summarized in Table 4 predicting the intercept and linear change of attachment, loneliness, psychological distress, and coparenting conflict.

As is shown in Table 4, entering block 1 demographic factors predicted each of the separation adjustment outcomes. Gender was unrelated to loneliness or psychological distress. However, there was an interaction of gender with presence of children for attachment to the former partner both for the intercept and slope. Women with children reported less initial coparenting conflict than men with children. Marital status was unrelated to attachment to the former partner or coparenting conflict, but having cohabited rather than married was associated with more initial loneliness and psychological distress after separation. However, rates of decline of loneliness and psychological distress across time were more marked for those who had cohabited rather than married.

Figure 1 shows the trajectories of adjustment as moderated by demographic variables that predicted trajectory. There were large reductions in attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress, but no change in coparenting conflict, for all participants from

TABLE 4
Multilevel Model Prediction of the Trajectories of Four Indices of Separation Adjustment

Outcome	Block	χ^2	(df)	Predictor	Intercept	Slope
Attachment to the former partner	1	31.75*	8	Female	0.31 (2.39)	-1.16 (1.81)
				Marital status	-0.42 (1.67)	0.85 (1.30)
				Children	1.43 (2.42)	-1.18 (1.79)
	2	94.64*	6	Female × children	-9.64 (3.09)*	5.62 (2.35)*
				Female	3.05 (2.30)	-2.66 (1.75)
				Marital status	-0.90 (1.78)	0.64 (1.39)
				Children	1.74 (2.55)	-1.92 (1.69)
				Female × children	-8.12 (2.88)*	5.36 (2.24)*
				Initiated separation	-10.92 (1.43)*	3.81 (1.10)*
	3	84.36*	4	Relationship duration	0.00 (0.08)	0.04 (0.07)
				Income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
				Female	4.21 (2.13)*	-3.17 (1.67)
				Marital status	-1.05 (1.50)	0.13 (1.20)
				Children	-2.62 (2.10)	-2.30 (1.61)
				Female × children	-8.67 (2.71)*	5.47 (2.13)*
Prediction equation			Initiated separation	-9.42 (1.39)*	3.15 (1.07)*	
			Social support	-0.13 (0.07)	0.03 (0.06)	
			Attachment anxiety	0.11 (0.03)*	-0.02 (0.02)	
			Initiated separation	-10.19 (1.31)*	3.56 (1.02)*	
			Attachment anxiety	0.11 (0.02)*		
Loneliness	1	19.29*	8	Female	-4.02 (3.10)	2.59 (2.33)
				Marital status	-5.97 (2.15)*	4.17 (1.66)*
				Children	-0.77 (3.13)	1.79 (2.30)
	2	38.06*	6	Female × children	-2.66 (4.00)	0.73 (3.02)
				Female	-1.77 (3.16)	1.42 (2.34)
				Marital status	-7.71 (2.44)*	4.90 (1.86)*
				Children	-0.38 (3.10)	-1.60 (2.27) (3.00)
				Female × children	-1.60 (3.95)	0.13 (2.99)
				Initiated separation	-9.21 (1.96)*	5.09 (1.46)*
	3	133.02*	4	Relationship duration	0.13 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.09)
				Income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
				Female	0.91 (2.80)	0.18 (2.17)
				Marital status	-2.22 (1.97)	2.71 (1.56)
				Children	-1.47 (2.77)	0.51 (3.00)
				Female × children	-3.07 (3.56)	0.81 (2.77)
Prediction equation			Initiated separation	-6.85 (1.83)*	4.11 (1.39)*	
			Social support	-0.48 (0.09)*	0.15 (0.07)*	
			Attachment anxiety	0.19 (0.04)*	-0.05 (0.03)	
			Initiated separation	-7.48 (1.168)*	4.31 (1.31)*	
			Social support	-0.54 (0.09)*	0.21 (0.07)*	
			Attachment anxiety	0.14 (0.02)*		
Psychological distress	1	16.25*	8	Female	-6.21 (4.31)	4.64 (3.30)
				Marital status	-11.13 (3.00)*	6.21 (2.36)*
				Children	-0.76 (4.36)	-1.59 (3.24)
	2	18.78*	6	Female × children	3.23 (5.57)	-3.46 (4.28)
				Female	-6.17 (4.47)	4.43 (3.38)
				Marital status	-11.51 (3.45)*	6.30 (2.68)*
				Children	-0.55 (4.38)	1.24 (2.67)
				Female × children	3.69 (5.60)	-3.48 (4.31)
				Initiated separation	-3.66 (2.2.78)	1.41 (2.11)
	3	114.95*	4	Relationship duration	0.10 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.13)
				Income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
				Female	-2.45 (4.06)	3.29 (3.17)
				Marital status	-6.46 (2.86)*	4.66 (2.28)*
				Children	1.35 (4.01)	0.43 (3.07)
				Female × children	3.13 (5.16)	-4.07 (4.07)
			Social support	-0.34 (0.14)*	-0.02 (0.11)	
			Attachment anxiety	0.27 (0.06)*	-0.08 (0.04)†	

(continued)

TABLE 4
Continued

Outcome	Block	χ^2	(df)	Predictor	Intercept	Slope
Prediction equation	1	48.59*	4	Social support	-0.38 (0.07)*	
				Attachment anxiety	0.19 (0.03)*	
Coparenting conflict	2	10.96	6	Female	-4.90 (1.44)*	0.28 (0.88)
				Marital status	-3.30 (1.42)*	0.57 (2.00)
	Female	-4.57 (1.34)*	0.13 (1.01)			
	Marital status	-2.21 (1.64)	0.17 (1.26)			
	Initiated separation	-0.47 (1.25)	-0.53 (0.94)			
	Relationship duration	-0.11 (0.09)	0.06 (0.07)			
	Income	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)			
3	8.54	4	Female	-4.55 (1.14)*	0.21 (0.89)	
			Marital status	-2.36 (1.47)	0.28 (1.13)	
			Social support	-0.05 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.05)	
			Attachment anxiety	0.05 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	

* $p < .05$, † $p < .1$.

immediately after separation across the next 2 years. The initial attachment to the former partner for women with children was much lower than the weighted average for the other participants (women without children, or men irrespective of whether they had children or not), $d = 1.05$. However, the trajectories of attachment converge across time, and attachment is similar 2 years after separation. Relative to formerly married people, immediately after separation cohabiting people reported more loneliness, $d = 0.56$, and psychological distress, $d = 0.60$. However, again the trajectories converge across time. Married women reporting much less initial coparenting conflict than formerly cohabiting women, $d = 0.65$, formerly married men, $d = 0.97$, or formerly cohabiting men, $d = 1.60$, and these differences persist across time.

Psychological Predictors of Adjustment

As shown in Table 4, psychological predictors entered in block 2 accounted for additional variance in each of the outcome variables. Not surprisingly, participants who initiated the separation reported less initial attachment to the former partner, $d = 1.13$, and less initial loneliness, $d = 0.66$, than those people who had not initiated the separation. However, these aspects of adjustment converged across time for those who did and did not initiate separation. Initiating the separation was unrelated to the trajectory of psychological distress. Low social support was unrelated to attachment to the former partner, but was associated with more reported loneliness and psychological distress soon after separation. Initial loneliness declined more in those with low social support, but psychological distress remained elevated in those with low social support. Anxious attachment predicted more initial attachment to the former partner, more loneliness, and more negative effect, and these effects persisted across time.

To illustrate the effects of the psychological vulnerability variables on adjustment trajectory, the predicted adjustment on each of the three indices was calculated based on the final equations shown in Table 4, which retain the reliable psychological predictors of adjustment averaged across demographic variables. (There was insufficient power to test if sociodemographics moderated the effects of the psychological variables). We estimated adjustment at annual intervals for 2 years after separation assuming either: (a) all risk factors reliably predicting poor adjustment were high (high-risk individuals), or (b) all risk factors were low (low-risk individuals). The categorical predictor initiating the separation was coded as present (0 = no, high risk) or absent (1 = yes, low risk). For the continuous predictors of adjustment (social support and attachment anxiety), we compared scores 1.0

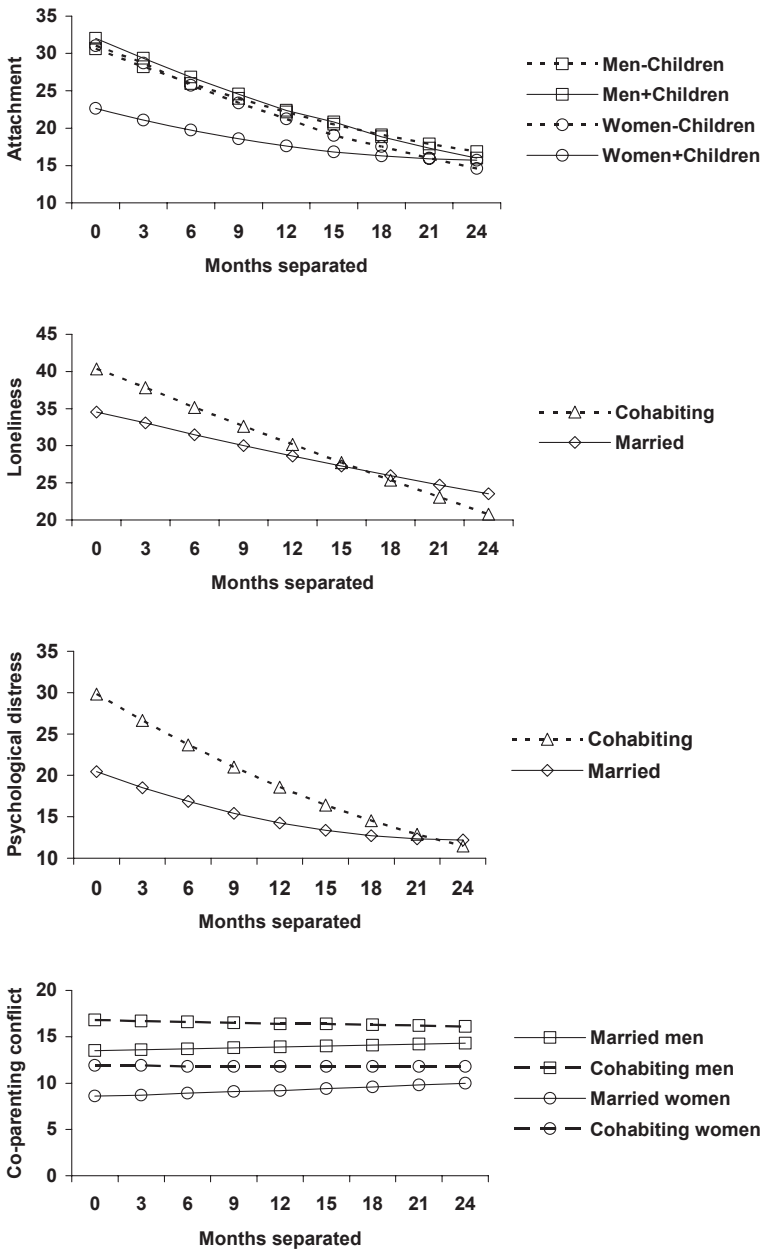


FIGURE 1. The Association of Marital Status, Gender, and Presence of Children with Trajectories of Relationship Separation Adjustment.

standard deviation from the mean in the direction that predicted better adjustment (low risk), or 1.0 standard deviations from the mean in the direction that predicted poorer adjustment on the significant predictors (high risk).

Figure 2 presents the trajectories of predicted adjustment for low- and high-risk individuals. High-risk individuals have more adjustment problems at the time of separation than low-risk individuals on attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress, and these correspond to large effect size differences of $d = 1.83$, 2.36 , and $d = 1.04$, respectively. The trajectories of high- and low-risk individuals converge somewhat over time on attachment

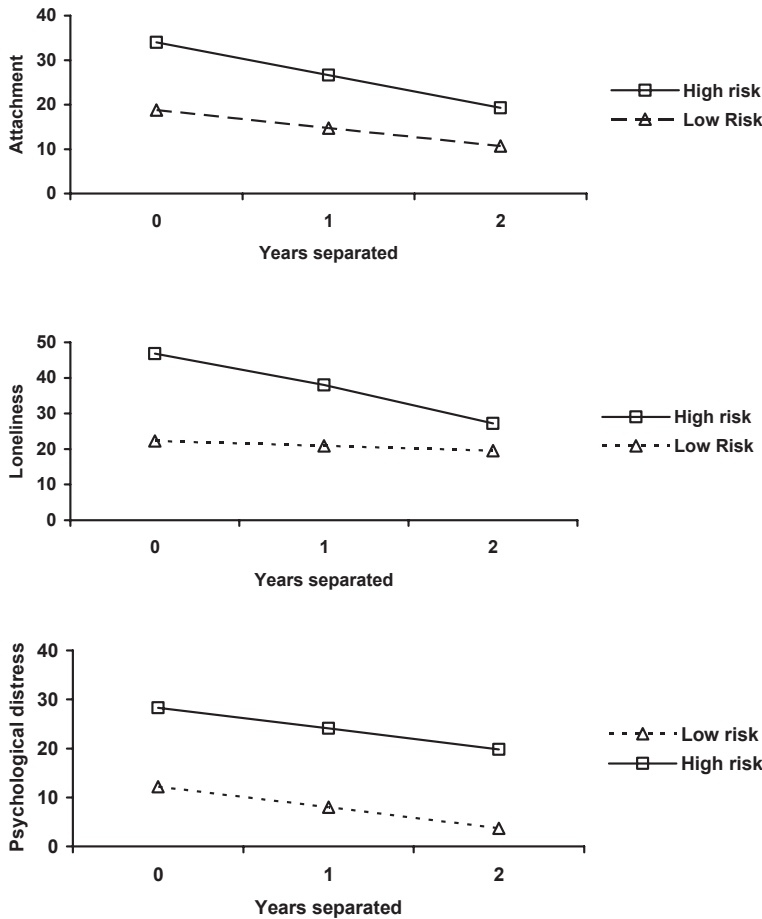


FIGURE 2. The Association of Psychological Risk Factors with Trajectories of Relationship Separation Adjustment.

and loneliness, although high-risk individuals still show substantially more adjustment problems 2 years after separation, $d = 1.03$ and $d = 0.74$, respectively. Psychological distress declines at a similar rate for low- and high-risk individuals, and there is still a much higher rate of distress in high- than low-risk individuals at 2 years after separation, $d = 1.04$. In contrast with the other indices of adjustment, coparenting conflict was not associated with any of the psychological predictors.

DISCUSSION

The current study assessed the trajectory of different dimensions of separation adjustment. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress all declined over time, and these were generally large magnitude declines. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, coparenting conflict showed no reliable change over time. Immediately after separation, attachment problems were substantially lower in women with children relative to other separated people, whereas loneliness and psychological distress initially were somewhat higher in people separating from cohabiting relationships relative to those separating from marriages. However, these moderating effects attenuated with time and 2 years after separation there was little evidence of differences in attachment, loneliness,

or psychological distress on the basis of gender, prior marital status, or presence of children. In contrast, coparenting conflict showed a chronic unchanging course, with those separated from a cohabiting relationship reporting more conflict than people separating from a marriage, and men reporting more conflict than women.

Having initiated separation predicted less feelings of attachment to the former partner and loneliness, although these effects attenuated with time. High social support predicted less loneliness and psychological distress, although again these effects attenuated with time. Low attachment anxiety predicted less attachment to the former partner, loneliness, and psychological distress, and these effects persisted across time. Coparenting conflict was unrelated to who had initiated the separation, level of social support, or attachment anxiety.

Does Time Heal All Wounds?

The current study replicates previous research showing that former partner attachment (Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1989) and psychological distress (e.g., Booth & Amato, 1991) both decline with time, and extends prior findings by showing loneliness also decreases with time. The current research also replicates prior findings (e.g., Buchanan & Heiges, 2001) that coparenting conflict is a chronic problem at least across the first 2 years after separation. In sum, the current and previous research suggest that relationship separation approximates a transient crisis on the outcomes of attachment, loneliness, and psychological distress, but seems more like a chronic stress with respect to coparenting conflict.

The observed average reduction in adjustment problems over a 2-year period does not mean that the level of suffering during the crisis of separation is unimportant. Of the 303 participants, 73 (24%) had a psychological distress score of 30 or more on the DASS on at least one of the assessments, which is the cutoff used to define clinical distress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Even brief periods of such high distress can have extreme consequences; the first year after separation is a high-risk time for suicide attempts (Cantor & Slator, 1995). Psychological vulnerabilities (particularly high attachment anxiety) predicted higher initial distress as well as persistent elevated distress. Thus, high distress abates for most people, but not for those with psychological vulnerabilities. Selective offering of psychological support to high-risk individuals might enhance adjustment to separation. An online assessment of risk for poor adjustment might cost-effectively enable at risk individuals to self-identify a need for psychological help, and this possibility warrants research.

Separation from Cohabitation versus Marriage

As noted in the introduction, the prevalence of cohabitation as a prelude or alternative to marriage has grown markedly in most Western countries. It has been suggested that some people cohabit in preference to marriage either because they have not made a conscious decision on whether to commit permanently to the relationship, or in the belief that cohabitation somehow prevents experiencing some of the problems associated with marital distress and separation (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). The mean DASS psychological distress in those separated from a cohabiting relationship was at the cutoff used to define clinical distress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), and was substantially more severe than the mean distress experienced immediately after marital separation. This does not show that cohabitation causes severe separation adjustment problems, but it does show that choosing to cohabit clearly does not prevent severe separation adjustment problems.

Formerly cohabiting couples reported more severe coparenting problems than formerly married couples. The reasons for this finding remain unclear. The characteristics of those who have a child while cohabiting might differ in important ways from those who have a

child when married. For example, less religiosity, less initial commitment to the couple relationship or shared parenting, might covary with cohabitation and predict more coparenting conflict. Alternatively, the process of marrying might reduce coparenting conflict in the event of separation (e.g., by increasing support from extended family for the couple and children). Irrespective of marital status, chronic conflict between separated parents is associated with significant problems in children's psychological adjustment (Amato, 2010). Providing assistance to separated parents to enhance parenting is a priority of many agencies working with separated parents, although in the United States often these programs are only offered to divorcing couples (Frackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011). Extending such programs to separated formerly cohabiting parents would seem important to address the needs of children.

Limitations of the Study

The current study has some noteworthy limitations. First, although the sample was similar on most demographics to divorcing couples in Australia, it was a volunteer sample that had more education than the Australian population, and the sample might be unrepresentative on other unmeasured variables. Sampling bias might influence the mean of adjustment problems, but seems less likely to distort the pattern of trajectories over time or the association of adjustment with moderators. Second, the assessment of separation adjustment was restricted to self-report, although self-reported adjustment on the PAST shows high convergence with reports from significant others (Sweeper & Halford, 2006).

A third limitation is that the study was not the traditional single cohort longitudinal design, but rather used two measurements 6 months apart of individuals forming contiguous overlapping cohorts to estimate trajectory of separation adjustment. The current design has some advantages over the more traditional longitudinal design. It allows estimation of trajectory across 2 years from data collected with a 6-month follow-up assessment, which likely reduces study attrition. This is of particular importance in recently separated participants who can be difficult to track as they often move residences multiple times after separation. On the other hand, if good participant retention could be achieved with a single cohort of individuals providing repeated measurements (at least five measurements per individual would be required to estimate linear and quadratic change) across a 2-year period, this would reduce the risk that recruiting volunteers at different periods after separation might produce sampling biases that distort parameter estimates.

A final important limitation of the current study is that it cannot demonstrate causal relationships. The adjustment problems observed coincide with relationship separation, but might not be caused by the separation. For example, people with long-standing mental health or substance abuse problems that antedate marriage are at high risk of later relationship separation, and the extent of their preexisting problems predicts some of the variance in their separation adjustment (Wade & Pevalin, 2004). The limitations in drawing causal conclusions also apply to interpreting the association of moderators with separation adjustment. For example, Stanley et al. (2006) found that cohabiting individuals report lower relationship satisfaction than married individuals during the relationship, and the high initial adjustment problems in those separating from a cohabiting relationship may reflect a continuation of their problems when the relationship was intact. Alternatively, relative to those who had been married, those who had been cohabiting were younger. Marks and Lambert (1998) found that among separating men and women, those over 40 years of age had higher psychological well being than those under the age of 40. Perhaps those who are older have developed a certain wisdom in handling a major life stress like separation.

CONCLUSIONS

An important contribution of the current work is the finding that the different aspects of relationship separation adjustment have quite different trajectories. For most separating individuals attachment to the former partner, loneliness, and psychological distress all seem to fit a crisis model of moderate to high initial distress that moderates over 1–2 years. In contrast, coparenting conflict most often seems like a chronic stress. The long-term adjustment of men and women, those who were cohabiting and those who were married, seem similar in the long term. One exception is that those who formerly cohabited rather than married, and men relative to women, report more coparenting conflict.

A second contribution of the study is finding that a stress-diathesis model predicted the trajectory of a number of aspects of adjustment to separation. Most notably, high attachment anxiety was associated with high and only slowly remitting adjustment problems. Future research needs to investigate whether selective offerings of psychological assistance to separated individuals can enhance their recovery from the difficult life stress of relationship separation.

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