The Role of Self-Blame in Children's Adjustment to Parental Separation

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A longitudinal study of a nonclinical sample of 6- to 12-year-old children of divorcing parents examined the incidence, antecedents, and correlates of feelings of self-blame about parental separation during the first 18 months after the breakup. About one third of the children reported some feelings of self-blame at 6 months after the separation; 1 year later this figure had dropped to 20%. Being caught in triadic relations with the two parents was associated with self-blame, but parental disagreement over child rearing and a history of physical, mental, or school problems were not. The consequences of self-blame for children's adjustment to the separation were primarily negative, according to self-, mother, and teacher ratings. Children who reported feelings of self-blame had lower perceived competence, more psychological symptoms, and more behavior problems.

One of the most frequent concerns of divorcing parents is that their children not blame themselves for the divorce. Warshak and Santrock (1983) point out that, according to "folklore," it is quite common for children of divorcing parents to experience at least some guilt or self-blame. Yet the few empirical studies that exist suggest that in fact many children do not feel responsible for their parents' divorce.

For example, Kurdek and his colleagues (Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980) reported that when White, middle-class children aged 8-17 were asked, "Do you think anyone is to blame for your Mom and Dad not being together like they used to be?" fewer than 7% indicated that they felt to blame. Parents reported similar rates when asked similar open-ended questions about their children's self-blame. However, nearly 30% of the same children endorsed, at least to some degree, a closed-ended item with a 5-point scale, "I sometimes secretly felt that the divorce was because of me." The difference in responses to these two questions may be due to the presence or absence of a rating scale, to semantic differences ("because of me" is not the same as being "to blame"), to a slightly different time referent (the first is presumably the child's current opinion; the latter may refer to past feelings), to different weights of cognitive judgment (stronger in the first) versus affective response (stronger in the latter), or to differential reference to private experience (stronger in the latter).

The importance of the response format in producing different prevalence estimates is underlined by results from two other studies. Using a projective storytelling task about a child whose parents are divorcing, Warshak and Santrock found that only 11% of children from middle-class, White, divorcing or intact families attrib-

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uted any blame for the divorce to the child protagonist. However, in a study of attribution of blame for divorce, Young (1983) reported at least some degree of self-blame in 50% of a nonclinical sample of over 220 children and adolescents with divorced parents. Children (and, in a related study, their parents) were asked, "Sometimes children feel blame for their parents' divorce. How do you feel?" with responses ranging from *very much to blame* to *no blame* on a 5-point scale. Interestingly, Young also found that children overwhelmingly viewed their parents as "at fault" for the divorce.

It is difficult to be sure how to reconcile these different findings about children's sense of responsibility for their parents' divorce, except to note that the highest rates of self-blame (which are still usually a minority of children) seemed to emerge in studies in which a closed-ended item with a rating scale was used to assess self-blame. Perhaps the ability to indicate partial or weak endorsement was critical to children's acknowledgment of self-blame. In addition, the highest reported rate occurred in response to a question whose wording suggested that such thoughts or feelings occur in other children.

SELF-BLAME AND ADJUSTMENT TO PARENTAL DIVORCE

Many studies of the effects of divorce on children's adjustment focus on guilt as a negative outcome, often combining reports of these feelings with other indicators of postdivorce adjustment (see, e.g., Kurdek et al., 1981; Warshak & Santrock, 1983). Others view self-blame as an outcome separate from, but associated with, poor adjustment. Thus, Young (1983) showed positive correlations between self-blame and anxiety levels in his samples of children and adolescents in divorcing families. Similarly, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) reported that not all children felt guilty but that guilty feelings did lead to loneliness and isolation in younger children. Moreover, older children who felt guilty were much more likely to be troubled by psychological symptoms and behavior disturbances. In fact, Wallerstein and Kelly pointed out that the connection between guilt feelings and other adjustment problems might be the reason that clinicians report universal guilt feelings among children of divorcing parents (as these children may be the ones most likely to enter therapy). However, research on traumatic stress has failed to show a consistent negative consequence of self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979, 1985).

Separate examination of self-blame and adjustment, then, suggests that only under some conditions is there an association between self-blame and adjustment difficulties. However, most researchers to date have not attempted to conceptualize very precisely how self-blame and adjustment are linked. Part of the problem may lie in the fact that feelings of guilt or self-blame are somewhat difficult to assess. Nevertheless, most operationalizations include a focus on *affect* (rather than judgment or belief) which is *negatively* toned and which includes a sense of *responsibility* or causality. Although these elements can be distinguished (one can feel responsible without guilt, or accept that one has caused an effect without feeling negative about it), they often co-occur when people blame themselves for negative outcomes (see Shaver, 1985).

ANTECEDENTS OF SELF-BLAME

Theoretical discussions of self-blame suggest that it can be rational or irrational and functional or maladaptive, depending on the circumstances. For example, sometimes self-blame may seem "rational" if it is based on an assumption of responsibility for transgressions. Few studies have considered the possibility that children who feel guilty about their parents' divorce may actually have some rational base for this feeling, though Emery (1982) suggested that this possibility should be explored. In other words, some aspect of child rearing may actually have posed a significant challenge to their parents' marriage.

Alternatively, the psychological significance of self-blame may lie less in its rational relationship to responsibility for a bad outcome and more in a felt capacity to control that outcome. Thus, Janoff-Bulman (1979) found that behavioral self-blame (blame about things one did or failed to do that are under one's control) was not correlated with depression whereas characterological self-blame (blame about one's basic nature, presumably less controllable or changeable) was. Using related reasoning, Weiss (1975) proposed that children's self-blame in the context of parental separation is an alternative to feeling powerless in the family situation. For the child, guilt may be empowering, in that the divorce is then presumed to be the result of something the child did or failed to do. The child can, then, gain a sense of control and avoid a sense of helplessness by feeling self-blame.

These two factors (parenting as a stressor in the marriage; the child's desire for control) may converge in the situation of children who are involved in triadic relationships with their divorcing parents. Triadic relations in families are those in which a child feels caught or torn between two parents. The child may be asked by both parents—directly or indirectly—for her or his exclusive loyalty. Family systems theorists see this configuration as a common one in families in distress (see Haley, 1959; Minuchin, 1974, 1984; Napier, 1978). When children are directly involved in parental conflict in this way, it may seem reasonable to them to conclude that they played a

role in precipitating the divorce. In addition, children in triadic relations with their parents may feel more blame for their parents' separation, because they have been directly involved in the conflict and may have thereby developed some illusion of responsibility for the well-being of the relationship. Westerman (1987) has argued that investigation of the role of triadic relations may help clarify the mechanism mediating the frequently observed link between marital discord and children's behavior problems.

RELATIONSHIP OF SELF-BLAME TO AGE AND GENDER

The degree to which children are capable of distinguishing fantasized from real transgressions and reasonable from unreasonable goals should be closely tied to age. Piaget (1930) argued that children's sense of efficacy (which depends somewhat on their egocentrism) peaks at about age 4 and then declines gradually with cognitive development. Young children have been found to overestimate their own responsibility for events that are not in fact under their control (Weisz & Stipek, 1982) and consequently feel some pride in them (Graham, Doubleday, & Guarino, 1981, cited in Stipek, 1983). Hence, young children may be more likely to blame themselves for their parents' divorce, because they may perceive themselves as having more control over the divorce than they actually do.

Older children are likely to be more selective in the kinds of experiences that will produce self-blame. Graham, Doubleday, and Guarino (1984) found that controllability of events was a factor in older children's reports of guilt but not in younger ones'. Similarly, Harris (1989) argued that as children's understanding of social norms and consequences increases, their capacity to experience and understand social emotions such as guilt increases or becomes more discriminative. In fact, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) noted that fewer older children felt guilty about their parents' marital dissolution.

In light of prior emphasis in the literature on sex differences (see Zaslow, 1988, 1989, for a review) in reactions to parental divorce, differences between boys' and girls' reports of self-blame were of interest. In the most common situation of mother custody, boys may be particularly prone to self-blame if they are more vulnerable than girls to identification with the "abandoning" husband and father (Kalter & Rembar, 1981). In addition, sex role stereotypes may support boys' overestimates of their efficacy and power to solve family problems.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research presented here addresses the following questions:

1. What is the prevalence of self-blame in a nonclinical sample of children contacted and interviewed shortly after their parents separated? Does this prevalence change 1 year later? The clinical literature would lead one to expect high rates; on the basis of the empirical literature, the proportion of children reporting self-blame should be less than 50%.
2. Are there age or sex differences in children's self-blame about their parents' separation? If self-blame results from overestimates of one's power and efficacy, younger children and boys may be more prone to it than older children and girls.
3. Did parenting play a role in marital stress, leading children to conclude—reasonably—that there is a basis for self-blame? Is parental conflict about child rearing or the child's history of physical, psychological, or school problems correlated with children's self-blame?
4. Are children who are involved in triadic relations with their parents more likely to report self-blame for the separation? Triadic relations may support children's sense of responsibility for all aspects of the parents' relationship; in addition, overestimates of their own efficacy may lead some children to insert themselves in triadic relations with their parents.
5. What are the correlates of self-blame for the divorce, in terms of postseparation adjustment in children, and how do these change over time? If parental separation is a situation in which children can in fact play no effective role, self-blame should be related to behavior problems, emotional distress, psychological symptoms, and poor self-esteem during the period following parental separation. Alternatively, if self-blame can empower children, then self-blame should be related to positive adjustment outcomes.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants in this study were 121 White children from mother-custody families in which the parents had recently separated. These families were participants in a larger, 2-year longitudinal study. Excluded from this report are those families in which fathers had physical custody ($n = 17$), in which the parents reconciled by the second year ($n = 7$), or in which data from only one year from the children are available ($n = 28$). Families all included at least one child aged 6 to 12 years, who was arbitrarily designated as the focus child by the project staff. Designation of the focus child simply meant that parents answered questionnaire and interview items with that child in mind. Focus children and their siblings themselves received identical questionnaires and interview procedures. The parents had all filed for legal separation and had been physically separated for no

more than 8 months before the first-year interview (Time 1). Because our concern was the process of adjustment to divorce, not absolute levels of adjustment difficulties, the study relies on comparisons among families all experiencing parental separation and divorce, not on comparisons of intact families and divorcing families.

Data were collected from all family members (including noncustodial fathers) willing to participate. However, by far the most extensive data involve questionnaires and interviews with custodial mothers and focus children. The data reported here are drawn from these two sources as well as from questionnaires about the children completed by teachers. Wherever possible, measures were obtained from all three respondents, under the assumption that mothers, teachers, and children have validly different perspectives on the child. Sample sizes for particular analyses differ depending on the type of data being reported. Follow-up data were collected 1 year later (Time 2), about 18 months after the initial parental separation. At that time about half of the couples were legally divorced.

The mean age of the children in this study was 8.61 (SD = 1.99); there were 63 focus boys and 58 focus girls in the 121 families; and each family had an average of 2.41 (SD = 1.69) children. The socioeconomic status (SES) of the postseparation households, based on the SES of the mothers' occupations, ranged widely. On a 7-point scale used to code the SES of occupations (1 = unskilled labor such as waitress or janitor, 7 = major professionals such as doctor or lawyer, adapted from Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958), the mean SES of mothers' occupations was 3.61 (SD = 1.56). Occupations ranged from unskilled labor to minor professionals (e.g., engineers, registered nurses, certified public accountants, secondary school teachers). At both data collection points, over 50% of the mothers worked full-time, and fewer than 25% were not employed for pay outside the home.

Procedure

Families selected for participation in the project were recruited through public divorce court dockets in five metropolitan Boston-area counties. All families who had at least one child between ages 6 and 12 and who had been separated less than 6 months were contacted by a letter describing a study of the effects of parental separation on families with children. Fifty-five percent of the families we reached who met our criteria agreed to participate. Each family was paid $20 for participating at each time.

Mothers who agreed to participate were scheduled for an appointment at the university with their children and were sent a questionnaire packet to be filled out in advance. On arriving at the university and giving informed consent, all family members were interviewed privately in separate offices by female interviewers, and the interviews were tape-recorded (and later transcribed for coding purposes). Confidentiality of the interviews was guaranteed to each family member.

The interviews were semistructured and focused on the daily and weekly routines of each family member, his or her knowledge of the history and status of the marriage and separation, and the current situation in the family (including a discussion of relationships and activities with each of the other family members). Several brief questionnaires were administered to children during the interview. Details of the interviews relevant to variables used in this article are provided below.

Measures

Measures included standardized tests and coding of both mother and child interviews. Coding of interviews was carried out using the following procedures: Interviews from the two years, from parents or from children, were mixed together so coding could take place blind to year. Coders worked from detailed coding instructions for particular questions or themes and coded blind to hypotheses and all other scores or responses. Coders were trained to achieve interrater reliability as defined by percentage category agreement above .85 for every category (average reliability for the scores reported here was .91, with no category below .85); periodic checks of reliability in the course of coding ensured that this standard was maintained throughout the coding.

Four types of measures derived from various sources will be described: (a) children's self-reported immediate (i.e., at Time 1) affective reaction to the separation, with particular emphasis on reports of feeling that the separation was partly their fault, (b) children's physical, psychological, and interpersonal adjustment at both Time 1 and Time 2, reported by mothers, teachers, and the children themselves, (c) the presence of child or parenting stresses in the marriage, (d) child involvement in triadic relations with the parents.

CHILDREN'S REPORTS OF AFFECTIVE REACTIONS AND ADJUSTMENT

Affective reaction to the separation. In the course of structured individual interviews with all children in a family, both open- and closed-ended questions were posed to elicit self-reports about how children felt at the time they learned of their parents' separation. First, the open-ended question was "How did you feel when they told you [about the separation]?" Responses were coded as present or absent for the following feelings: angry, sad, relieved, afraid, confused, self-blaming, surprised, and global negative (e.g., "bad"). Responses were coded as self-blaming if the child used that term or an expression

implying responsibility (e.g., "like it was my fault" or "like I did something bad").

The closed-ended question followed:

> It's usually very hard for people to describe exactly how they feel—partly because sometimes they feel a lot of different things at the same time. I'm going to read you a list of things that kids sometimes feel when their parents are getting separated, and for each of these I'd like you to tell me if you feel that way about your parents getting separated a lot, a little, or not at all. Some kids feel sad. Do you feel that way a lot, a little, or not at all?

The question was repeated for the following affects: angry, confused, glad, scared, surprised, like it's partly their fault. At the conclusion of this section of the interview, regardless of whether children indicated in either the open- or the closed-ended question that they felt responsible for the separation, the interviewer pointed out that parents' separations are never actually "kids' fault." We used this language ("feel like it's partly their fault") rather than "blame themselves" or "feel guilty" because on pretest it seemed to be clearest to younger children. This language included the three definitional elements of self-blame or guilt: affect, negative tone (because fault implies that something bad has happened), and responsibility.

Children were then classified into self-blame groups on the basis of their replies to either the open- or the closed-ended question. Children who reported any sense of responsibility, regardless of what other affects they reported, constituted the *self-blame group*, and those who did not report any feeling of responsibility constituted the *no self-blame group*.

Total scores for each of the other feelings ranged from 1 (no report on the open-ended inquiry and reporting "not at all" on the closed-ended one) to 4 (reporting the presence of the feeling on the open-ended inquiry and reporting "a lot" on the closed-ended one). (Note that global negative responses—e.g., "I felt bad"—were combined with *sad*; similarly, positive ones—"good"—with *glad*. It is possible that some children who described themselves as feeling "bad" actually felt self-blame, but it seemed most conservative to limit our definition of self-blame to those responses that were clearly articulated, particularly as any expression on the closed-ended inquiry would be captured in the total self-blame score.) A total negative affect score was created that summed the remaining negative feelings (angry, confused, scared, and surprised) and subtracted the positive one (glad).

Self-report measures. In addition to this measure of affective response, the following standard, well-validated self-report measures of adjustment were used.

Perceived Competence Scale, total score (see Harter, 1982, for validity data). This measure was used as an estimate of children's overall self-esteem. Children were read statements that dichotomized feelings of general self-worth and cognitive and social competence (e.g., "Some kids are pretty sure of themselves but other kids are not very sure of themselves") and were asked to say which child they resembled more and then to rate whether they resembled that child "a lot" or "a little."

Symptom Checklist (modified from the Twenty Symptoms measure described by Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981). Children were asked whether they felt any of a list of physical and psychological symptoms (such as bad dreams, loss of appetite, headaches) "a lot," "a little," or "not at all." A total score was created by summing across 15 items (5 of the original items inapplicable to children, such as "drinks too much," were dropped). Although the scale has not been used with children before, children were generally able to report on the symptoms quite readily, and the scale has been successfully used in large-scale survey studies of randomly sampled adults (see Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Veroff et al., 1981).

In addition to these standard measures, two specific areas of adjustment were assessed in the interview: peer relations and school performance.

For *peer relations*, children were asked to describe their experiences with friends and their after-school activities: "Where do you usually go right after school? Where did you go yesterday? What did you do there? Is that what you usually do there? And what do you usually do after dinner on school nights? What about weekends? What do you usually do on Saturdays and Sundays?" Responses were coded for evidence that the child ever spends time with friends (no or yes), evidence of the frequency with which the child plays with friends (on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* through *daily*), and the degree of personal intimacy involved in the activities engaged in with friends (on a 4-point scale from *none* to *"talking"* as an activity engaged in for its own sake). Total scores were created by standard-scoring responses in these three areas and averaging the scores. This score was significantly correlated, both years, with the Social Competence subscale of the Perceived Competence measure described above ($rs = .21$, $p < .05$, and .30, $p < .01$).

For *school performance*, responses to interview questions about school ("What school do you go to? What grade are you in? How are you finding being in the ___ grade? How do you think you're doing? What are your favorite things to do in school? Is there anything you don't like about school?") were coded for the child's view of his or her school performance (as poor, okay, or good) and for the degree to which the aspects of school that were enjoyed were substantive (e.g., school subjects, the teacher; not "lunch," "recess") and outweighed the aspects disliked. Scores for these two variables were then standard-scored and summed. These scores were signif-

icantly correlated with the Cognitive Competence subscale of the perceived competence measure described above, both years ($rs = .23$, $p < .05$, and .30, $p < .01$), and with teacher ratings of class adjustment at Time 1 ($r = .25$, $p < .05$) but not at Time 2.

MOTHER REPORTS OF CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Mothers were asked, in the interviews, whether they thought their child had ever felt guilty, as follows:

> Children often think a separation or divorce is their fault, even though, of course, it isn't, and even though they are usually told that it's not. How about [your child]? Has s/he ever given any indication over the past year that s/he feels the separation is his/her fault? How is/was this expressed?

Language recognizing the likelihood that children had been assured that the divorce was not their fault was included here because in pretesting of this question virtually every parent interviewed indicated that the child did not feel guilty or responsible because the parent had told the child that the divorce was not his or her fault. With the wording reported above, aimed to overcome this powerful social norm, we were able to elicit some variance in parent reports. Responses were coded into the following five categories: child expressed guilt feelings directly; child expressed some passing or minor worry about responsibility or feelings of guilt; child never expressed the feelings directly, but mother suspected feelings were there; mother suspected child *used* to have such feelings, though child did not say so; mother never saw any evidence of guilt feelings.

Mothers were also asked to complete the following ratings on the focus child:

Child Behavior Checklist, Parent Form (CBCL-Parent) (Achenbach, 1978; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1978). Individual subscales (e.g., Hyperactive, Depressive) from this widely used, well-validated mother-report checklist of 113 behavior problems were highly intercorrelated in this sample, and so only the total scales for Internalizing problems (e.g., somatizing, withdrawing) and Externalizing problems (e.g., misbehaving, acting out) are reported.

Child Health Questionnaire. A list of 26 childhood health disorders, drawn from several standard health questionnaires (Abramson, Terespolsky, Brook, & Kark, 1965; Wahler, 1973) was presented to mothers. Then mothers were asked to rate the frequency of acute disorders on a 6-point scale (from *once or twice* to *daily*). Common illnesses (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, colds, allergies) experienced by the child in the past 3 months were summed to create a total common illness score.

TEACHER REPORTS OF CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT

Teachers of all participating children were asked to complete the Child Behavior Checklist, Teacher Form (CBCL-Teacher; see Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1984, for validity and other psychometric data). Parents were asked to give permission for project staff to mail questionnaires to the teachers of all children participating in the project. Teachers were then asked, by mail, to complete a CBCL similar to the parents'. Forty-five teachers returned the form. Internalizing and Externalizing scores are also reported for this measure.

ROLE OF CHILD OR PARENTING STRESS

Evidence that parenting might have played a role in the stress that resulted in the parents' separation was obtained from mothers' accounts of the causes of the separation, the child's problems, and both mother and child accounts of the child's relationship with the parents.

First, mothers were asked to describe the history of their marriage up to and including the separation. They were asked when they first thought about separating and why, what was going on at the time, what happened after that, and how the decision to separate was ultimately made. Finally, they were asked to describe the main reason for the separation. From this section of the interview, coders assessed the reasons for the divorce, using presence/absence codes for 14 possible reasons, including one reason that indicated the child may have contributed to the separation: disagreements over child rearing or childbearing. Coders determined whether, at any point during the discussion of the history of the marriage and separation, child rearing was given as one of the reasons for the breakup of the marriage (coded as present or absent).

We also assessed the child's likely contribution to stress during the preseparation period. As part of an effort to assess a variety of stressors in the preseparation family, a coder read each mother interview completely and coded the presence of a variety of family stressors. Among these were indications that the child had had serious physical health problems, problems in school, or serious mental disturbance before the separation. We combined these three indicators to create a second variable (which could, then, range from 0 to 3).

TRIADIC RELATIONS

We assessed the degree to which the child was involved in triadic relations between the parents in terms much like those suggested by family systems theorists (e.g., Haley, 1959; Minuchin, 1974; Napier, 1978). We defined triadic relations as instances in which the child felt caught or torn between the parents or instances in which the child tried to play the parents off against each other. The essence of triadic relations is an interpersonal triangle with the child at the center between the two parents. Triadic relations may appear to be child initiated ("He's always preferred his father and takes his side against me about everything") or parent initiated ("I told

him [the father] at the very beginning I didn't want him pumping her. And he did this one weekend. He asked her if I [the mother] had company, if I talked to K. a lot, and what kinds of things Mommy does"). Coders counted the instances of triadic relations in which the focus child was involved throughout the Time 1 interviews conducted with the mothers and the children. Thus, our indicator of triadic relations includes the reports of both mothers and children. Triadic relations were coded whether the events were described as occurring in the pre- or the postseparation period. It is likely that this interaction pattern is fairly stable over time (for example, from Time 1 to Time 2, the correlation was .48, $p < .001$). In any case, reports of triadic relations and children's reports of self-blame were obtained at the same time and were all postseparation.

RESULTS

Overview of Analyses

First we present analyses of the representativeness of the sample. Next, an assessment of the frequency of feelings of responsibility for the parental separation among boys and girls of various ages in our sample is made. The potential roles of parenting stress and triadic relations are examined as possible antecedents of self-blame. Finally, we undertake an analysis of the relationship between child adjustment and children's age, sex, and reports of self-blame over time.

Representativeness of the Sample

We conducted an analysis of data obtainable from public court records to assess the extent to which our respondents differed from three other groups of divorcing families: (a) those separated too long for our study who met our other criteria, (b) those we attempted to reach but never succeeded in reaching, and (c) those we reached who refused to participate. Comparisons were made using analysis of variance and chi-square on the four groups. Data were available to explore geographic representativeness (e.g., city vs. suburban vs. semirural), family and marital characteristics (including number of children, age and sex of oldest and youngest children, and length of marriage), and divorce-related indicators (including grounds and the number of legal motions filed with the complaint and later). Our sample did not differ from the other three groups on any of these indicators, leading us to conclude that, at least on the variables we can assess, our sample is quite representative of divorcing families in the Boston area with children in the targeted age range.

A second representativeness issue is the potential bias created when some of the children failed to return for the Time 2 assessment. To determine whether our longitudinal sample of children was representative of the sample of children we originally recruited, we compared those who participated at both times with those who participated at Time 1 only (using chi-square and t tests), in terms of the family situation (mother's age, education, SES, length of marriage, number of children, family religion, length of separation, divorce grounds, legal conflict, and mother's adjustment) and individual variables (age, sex, and all adjustment indicators). Children who did not return at Time 2 were lower in school performance and higher in feelings of loss and teacher-rated internalizing behavior problems (at Time 1), and had mothers who were less educated, than children who did return. With one exception (school performance and teacher-rated internalizing behavior problems), these variables are not correlated with each other. In addition, these are fewer differences than one would expect by chance. Overall, the sample seems relatively representative, but results should be interpreted cautiously, as it may underrepresent children adjusting less well in school.

Frequency of Feelings of Self-Blame for Parental Separation

Reports of a feeling of guilt or responsibility in response to open-ended inquiry about the child's feelings about the separation were rare; only three children (two younger boys and one older girl) expressed such feelings at Time 1, and none did at Time 2. However, on direct inquiry more children expressed some feeling that the separation might be "partly my fault." Five children (about 4% of the sample) said they felt that "a lot," and 35 (31% of those answering) said they felt that "a little" at Time 1. Thus, about one third of the sample reported any feelings of self-blame at Time 1. (It is this group that defines the self-blame group in the analyses to follow.)

At Time 2, there was a significant decline in the report of self-blame (matched t test = 3.81, $p < .001$); this decline is reflected in the fact that by Time 2 only about 19% of the sample reported any feelings of self-blame. There were no age or sex differences in the tendency to report presence of these feelings either at Time 1 or at Time 2. Report of any feelings of self-blame at Time 1 was significantly correlated with report of any feelings of self-blame at Time 2 ($r = .48$, $p < .001$).

According to mothers' reports, 14% of the children may have felt a little self-blame; 13% "used to"; 7% of the mothers indicated that they suspected their child felt this way but their child had not actually said so, and 2% indicated that their child expressed such feelings directly. Although the number of mothers reporting overt statements of self-blame was very small, it was actually about the same as the number of children spontaneously reporting self-blame in the interview. Similarly, the proportion of mothers reporting any level of self-blame in

the child (36%) was about the same as the proportion of children reporting such feelings on direct inquiry. Moreover, there was a small, but significant, positive correlation between mothers' reports of children's self-blame (any vs. none) and children's self-report ($r = .27$, $p < .01$). It should be noted that although this relationship was equivalent for boys and girls, it really held only for the younger (6-8-year-old) children ($r = .38$, $p < .01$); among older (9-12-year-old) children there was no significant relationship ($r = .16$, n.s.).

Child or Parenting Stress and Triadic Relations as Antecedents of Self-Blame

At Time 1, mother reports of child-rearing disagreement as a cause of the separation were uncorrelated with children's reports of self-blame ($r = -.01$, n.s.), as were mother reports of children's preseparation physical, emotional, or school problems ($r = -.01$, n.s.). However, triadic relations with the parents were significantly correlated with children's self-blame ($r = .36$, $p < .001$).

Relationship of Self-Blame to Child Adjustment

The relationship between child adjustment and self-blame was examined using a multivariate approach. Because different reporters on the child's adjustment are likely to have different views based on different frequencies and types of access to the child's experience (see, e.g., Achenbach, McConaughy, & Howell, 1987; Kurdek, 1987), we conducted separate analyses on measures obtained from mothers, teachers, and the children themselves. Analyses are reported using time (Year 1/Year 2), gender, and age (the younger group consisted of 29 male and 30 female 6-8-year-olds; the older group consisted of 34 male and 28 female 9-12-year-olds) as factors, but main and interaction effects for these variables *not* involving self-blame are reported elsewhere. Only main and interaction effects involving self-blame will be discussed here.

To isolate the effects of self-blame on our dependent measures (vs. the effect of general negative affect about the divorce), we conducted three separate sex by age by self-blame by time MANCOVAs on the child, mother, and teacher reports of children's adjustment, with overall negative affect about the divorce as a covariate.

Child reports of adjustment. We included the children's reports of peer relations, school performance, general perceived competence, and symptoms in the MANCOVA (symptoms scores were reverse-coded for consistency with the other indicators, for which a high score indicates better adjustment); see Table 1. A trend for a main multivariate effect was found for self-blame, $F(4, 76) = 2.00$, $p < .10$. Univariate F tests revealed significant effects for the general perceived competence score, $F = 5.51$, $p = .02$, and the symptoms score, $F = 5.43$, $p = .02$. Children who blamed themselves for the divorce had lower perceived competence and more symptoms than children reporting no self-blame.

TABLE 1: MANCOVA Results on Children's Self-Reports of Adjustment

	Mean	
Indicator	*Time 1*	*Time 2*
Symptoms		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys ($n = 14$)	6.06	6.23
Young girls ($n = 17$)	6.20	6.48
Old boys ($n = 13$)	6.26	5.63
Old girls ($n = 14$)	5.91	5.66
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys ($n = 8$)	6.56	6.12
Young girls ($n = 7$)	7.46	6.17
Old boys ($n = 8$)	6.83	6.79
Old girls ($n = 7$)	6.90	6.81
Peer relations		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys	51.14	50.14
Young girls	50.53	49.71
Old boys	50.92	52.39
Old girls	53.43	50.71
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys	49.88	51.13
Young girls	51.00	43.86
Old boys	51.13	49.88
Old girls	46.00	51.14
School performance		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys	54.86	52.21
Young girls	52.65	51.06
Old boys	48.46	50.62
Old girls	51.36	53.00
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys	48.00	50.75
Young girls	51.00	52.29
Old boys	46.88	45.63
Old girls	47.57	52.71
General perceived competence		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys	56.57	55.79
Young girls	50.71	51.77
Old boys	52.62	54.92
Old girls	55.29	54.93
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys	46.50	52.25
Young girls	53.71	52.14
Old boys	47.88	48.88
Old girls	42.29	47.71

NOTE: Symptoms scores were reverse-scored for the MANCOVA. For ease of interpretation, means listed here for symptoms are raw scores, summing 15 symptoms scored 0 = *none*, 1 = *a little*, 2 = *a lot*. Thus, high scores indicate more symptoms. For all other variables, high scores indicate better adjustment, and scores are expressed as standard scores.

Mother reports of child adjustment. Included in the mother-report MANCOVA were scores on physical illness and on externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Table 2). There was a main multivariate effect

TABLE 2: MANCOVA Results on Mothers' Reports of Adjustment

Indicator	*Mean*	
	Time 1	*Time 2*
Physical illnesses		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys (n = 13)	1.09	1.08
Young girls (n = 16)	1.20	1.09
Old boys (n = 14)	1.12	1.14
Old girls (n = 9)	1.11	1.14
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys (n = 8)	1.12	1.09
Young girls (n = 7)	1.17	1.12
Old boys (n = 8)	1.12	1.05
Old girls (n = 7)	1.18	1.32
Externalizing behavior problems		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys	11.08	10.54
Young girls	11.81	10.44
Old boys	13.93	14.21
Old girls	11.89	7.33
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys	24.12	19.63
Young girls	13.83	14.17
Old boys	22.20	18.10
Old girls	12.57	14.29
Internalizing behavior problems		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Young boys	4.92	5.31
Young girls	7.06	5.63
Old boys	4.36	4.57
Old girls	8.22	4.56
Children reporting self-blame		
Young boys	13.12	11.88
Young girls	10.50	10.17
Old boys	11.50	9.60
Old girls	10.57	9.57

NOTE: For all variables, high scores indicate more adjustment difficulties.

for self-blame, $F(3, 72) = 5.43$, $p < .001$, with significant univariate F tests for both the externalizing, $F = 10.73$, $p < .01$, and internalizing, $F = 18.44$, $p > .001$, behavior problems scores. Children who reported feeling some degree of self-blame were rated by their mothers as having more of both types of behavior problems.

A multivariate interaction among self-blame, sex, and time was also found, $F(3, 73) = 3.00$, $p < .05$. The univariate F test was significant only for externalizing behavior problems, $F = 7.35$, $p < .01$. Boys who reported self-blame were highest on mother-rated externalizing behavior problems at both times ($p < .01$). However, although most children showed little change in these problems over time, the boys who reported self-blame showed a substantial decrease from Time 1 to Time 2 ($p < .01$, according to Newman-Keuls post hoc comparison). Interestingly, girls who reported self-blame were substantially higher than other girls on externalizing behavior problems at Time 2 ($p < .01$, according to Newman-Keuls post hoc comparison), but not at Time 1.

TABLE 3: MANCOVA Results on Teachers' Reports of Children's Adjustment

Indicator	*Mean*	
	Time 1	*Time 2*
Externalizing behavior problems		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Boys (n = 15)	19.13	8.40
Girls (n = 12)	5.83	3.08
Children reporting self-blame		
Boys (n = 10)	24.10	17.00
Girls (n = 8)	5.50	10.00
Internalizing behavior problems		
Children not reporting self-blame		
Boys	5.27	1.27
Girls	2.17	2.25
Children reporting self-blame		
Boys	7.50	3.90
Girls	4.75	5.50

NOTE: For all variables, high scores indicate more adjustment difficulties.

Teacher reports of child adjustment. The MANCOVA on teacher-reported child adjustment included scores on internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Because of the reduced sample size for which we had complete teacher data (n = 45), we conducted two MANCOVAs: self-blame by age by time and self-blame by sex by time. There were no significant main or interaction effects linking age with self-blame and adjustment. The analysis presented here is therefore based on the self-blame by sex by time MANCOVA (Table 3).

There was a main multivariate effect for self-blame, $F(2, 39) = 4.13$, $p < .05$, with a significant univariate F test for internalizing ($F = 8.17$, $p < .01$) behavior problems. Teachers reported children to have more internalizing behavior problems if the children reported feeling responsible for the separation.

DISCUSSION

About one third of the children in the sample reported feeling any sense of responsibility for their parents' divorce. Only three children spontaneously mentioned feeling guilty when asked how they felt about their parents' separation in an open-ended way. This is consistent with other findings (e.g., Kurdek et al., 1981; Kurdek & Siesky, 1980) when direct but open-ended questions were asked. The remaining children who reported self-blame did so in response to a direct question about whether they felt the divorce was partly their fault—a lot, a little, or not at all. Moreover, even on closed-ended questioning, the number of children who continued to feel self-blame by 18 months postseparation dropped to 20%. Because our sample was not drawn from a clinical population and was broadly representative of divorcing families in the Boston area, these find-

ings suggest that only a minority of children may feel at all responsible for their parents' divorce; moreover, these feelings of guilt subside over a relatively short period. Finally, it is worth noting that self-blame was not linked to age or gender.

The difference between reports of self-blame on open-ended inquiry and reports on closed-ended rating scales deserves comment. Children's reports of affect on open-ended inquiry tended to be relatively diffuse; children frequently reported feeling "bad," and the only other specific feeling they identified often was feeling "sad." Children may generally lack a well-developed emotional vocabulary for spontaneous conversation, and parental separation may be so emotionally charged and so negative, that they tend to rely on crude and undifferentiating affect labels. However, on closed-ended, direct inquiry, children were able to respond with differentiated rates of endorsement of different negative affects (sad, confused, scared, angry, like it's your fault). The use of a rating scale also clearly encouraged endorsement of the less salient, or normative, feelings. The value of multiple inquiry approaches, and particularly of use of rating scales in exploring the subject of self-blame, is clear. Future studies assessing children's understanding of various aspects of guilt and self-blame, as well as the value of contextualizing feelings as acceptable (in our study "some kids feel"; in Young, 1983, "sometimes children feel"), would be particularly helpful.

Interestingly, mothers' and children's reports about whether the children blame themselves converged somewhat but not closely (as Young, 1983, also found). Separate analyses by age suggested that mothers and children agreed more if the children were young (6-8 years), much less if the children were older (9-12 years). Younger children may be more open or transparent in their expression of self-blame than older children. (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980, suggested that 9-12-year-olds were particularly likely to have "layered" responses to their parents' divorce, such that they themselves lacked awareness of some of their more deeply buried feelings.) Moreover, it is clear that a number of mothers attributed self-blame to children who do not report such feelings, even on rating scales in response to direct questions. Because self-blame for parental separation does seem to be consequential for children's adjustment generally, it is important to accurately identify children who feel it. Future research might profitably explore the evidence mothers (and fathers) are using when they conclude that their children feel guilty.

Child or Parenting Stress and Triadic Relations

Parental conflict over child rearing and the child's past physical, psychological, and school problems were not related to children's reporting of self-blame. Thus, the simple test of a rational explanation for self-blame was not supported.

However, child involvement in triadic relations with the parents was associated with Time 1 self-blame. By definition, triadic relations place the child in the middle of the parents' relationship. Family systems theory suggests that children may plausibly feel either that they contributed to the divorce (e.g., by failing in loyalty to one or both parents) or that they should contribute to the resolution of the conflict (because they are so closely involved in it). Given that parenting stress during the marriage did not seem related to self-blame, perhaps the latter explanation is more likely. If this is so, because triadic relations seem to persist long after the parental separation, children who blame themselves for the separation may continue to make efforts to improve their parents' relationship. It may be this persistence at a hopeless task that accounts for the negative consequences of self-blame for the child.

Relationship of Self-Blame to Adjustment

Overall, the consequences of self-blame for parental separation were negative, within the time frame of this study, according to mother, teacher, and child self-reports (though the overall effect—across all indexes of adjustment—was only a trend for children's self-reports). In univariate analyses, self-blaming children were significantly lower in their own reports of perceived competence and higher in psychological symptoms. They also displayed more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, according to their mothers, and more internalizing behavior problems, according to their teachers. These differences persisted across the 18 months after the separation covered by this study. As noted above, self-blame may reinforce triadic relationship patterns and may encourage children to make continued efforts to resolve their parents' conflict. It may, then, delay their acceptance of the finality of separation and divorce and consequently their adjustment to it.

With two exceptions, age and gender did not interact with self-blame in our analyses. Boys who reported self-blame were highest in mother-rated externalizing behavior problems at both points in time (in comparison with other boys and all girls) and also showed a significant decrease in these kinds of problems from Time 1 to Time 2. Perhaps boys in this study were particularly vulnerable to the immediate effects of self-blame, because these were all mother-custody families, in which, perhaps, boys felt more pressure to fill the vacated male parent role. Over time, as the family accommodated to its new structure, that pressure may have dissipated. Interestingly, girls who reported self-blame were significantly higher than other girls on mother-rated externalizing behavior problems at Time 2 (but not at Time 1), suggesting a

possible "sleeper" effect of self-blame for girls. Perhaps over time, in mother-custody households, girls are more likely to get involved in a confidante role with their mothers and therefore to feel increasing responsibility for family problems.

The pattern of results we found for adjustment and self-blame in children in this situation is not consistent with the notion that guilt or self-blame is adaptive. It may be that children who are having more adjustment difficulties are more prone to self-blame (though in our study children who felt more at fault for the divorce were not reported by their mothers to have had more problems of any kind before the separation). Alternatively, at least in the context of parental separation, in which children are basically helpless to resolve the marital dissolution, feeling responsible for something one cannot control may be particularly maladaptive. That inappropriate sense of responsibility may, in turn, result in maintenance of unhealthy interaction patterns (such as triadic relations) and pointless efforts to change the situation. Continued efforts to change the situation of parental divorce not only may preclude the child's adjustment to the new family situation but also may annoy parents and siblings who do recognize the situation as irreversible. Future research should be aimed at identifying precisely how self-blame compromises adjustment in this situation, as well as clarifying the kinds of situations in which this relationship holds. Beneficial effects of self-blame may appear in contexts in which it motivates restorative or repentant actions that are not doomed to failure.

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