

INTRA AND INTERPARENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING POST-DIVORCE CO-PARENTING**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26758/13.1.2>**

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Abstract

Objectives. The objective of this study was to determine how intraparental (i.e., cognitive schemas, parental competence, cognitive-emotional coping style) and interparental variables (i.e., family conflict, unfavorable conditions of divorce) influence post-divorce co-parenting through the relationship between parents after separation.

Materials and methods. The study was conducted on a sample of 169 divorced or divorcing participants (84% females and 16% males), aged 24 to 61 years ($M = 42.71$, $SD = 6.15$). The following instruments were used to measure the research variables: the Divorce Adjustment Inventory Scale, the Young Schema Questionnaire - Version 3, the Parental Competence Questionnaire, the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, the Coparenting Relationships Scale, and the reasons for divorce were assessed in an exploratory manner.

Results. Dysfunctional cognitive schemas were positively associated with dysfunctional co-parenting behaviors and negatively associated with functional co-parenting behaviors. Participants who reported violence as a cause for divorce had significantly higher scores ($M = 22.22$) on the undermining ($M = 22.22$ vs. $M = 10.17$) and exposure ($M = 21.66$ vs. $M = 10.20$) dimensions of the dysfunctional co-parenting relationship compared to those who identified infidelity as a cause for divorce ($M = 10.17$).

Conclusions. The quality of co-parental relationships may be influenced by maladaptive cognitive schemas and poorly developed parenting skills. Also, pre-divorce family interaction experiences and poor adjustment to divorce are associated with dysfunctional aspects of co-parental relationships that impact children post-divorce. Exploratory analyses indicate that training healthy, functional cognitive-emotional coping strategies and addressing maladaptive cognitive schemas can prevent engaging in abusive relationships.

Keywords: divorce, co-parenting, cognitive schemas, conflict, coping.

Introduction

Co-parenting relationships are of major importance both for the healthy development of children and for the relationship between the two parents (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). In order to properly inform interventions aimed at improving co-parenting relationships and the way they impact the couple and child functioning; it is necessary to identify the factors they are associated with and should make the object of such interventions.

According to the theory formulated by Johnston (1994), the interaction of three categories of factors determines conflictual relationships after divorce: individual factors, external factors and interaction factors.

Of these factors, the current study will focus on individual characteristics that may influence the quality of co-parenting relationships after divorce (such as cognitive schemas, parenting skills), but also on interaction factors such as reasons for divorce, experience of divorce and pre-divorce relationships.

Maladaptive cognitive schemas

Cognitive schemas are patterns of thinking about oneself and others that are formed and reinforced throughout life as a result of the interaction between life experiences and the individual's temperamental predispositions. Maladaptive cognitive schemas tend to manifest during situations perceived by the person as being difficult or even challenging such as certain chronic conditions (Rada, Gheonea, Țieranu, & Popa, 2022).

A first argument in support of the role maladaptive cognitive schemas might play in parenting relationships is that, considering the taxonomy proposed by Young (1999; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2006), eleven of the eighteen schemas refer to maladaptive beliefs related to social relationships (Shorey, Anderson, & Stuart, 2013). Numerous studies have indeed shown that early maladaptive schemas increase the risk of developing disorders that directly impact social functioning and emotional regulation in social contexts. For example, schemas of Emotional Inhibition, Approval-Seeking, Abandonment, Failure, and Other-Directedness were positively associated with social anxiety symptoms, whereas schemas of Grandiosity and Punitiveness were negatively associated with them (Calvete, Orue, & Hankin, 2013; González-Díez, Calvete, Riskind, & Orue, 2015). Associations have also been identified between several maladaptive cognitive schemas and hostile behaviors, anger (Santos, Vagos, & Rijo, 2018), negative consequences of alcohol use (including relational ones; Simons, Sistas, Simons, & Hansen, 2018), and sexual assault offences (Richardson, 2005). Other schemas, such as Mistrust/Abuse, Self-Sacrifice, and Emotional Inhibition appear to be more salient in victims of intimate relationship abuse (Calvete, Fernández-González, Orue, & Little, 2018), while Disconnection/Rejection schemas, Emotional Inhibition, and Insufficient Self-Control predict intimate partner aggression (Crawford & Wright, 2007).

The Emotional Deprivation schema, which involves a person's belief that their emotional needs will not be met by others, has been associated with abusive behaviors in couple dynamics such as cyber abuse (exerting control, limiting freedom, threatening, denigrating, soliciting or experiencing sexual pressure via social media and phone (Caridade, Braga, & Borrajo, 2019) or domestic violence (McKee, Roring, Winterowd, & Porras, 2012).

McKee et al. (2012) showed that all the schemas belonging to the *Disconnection and Rejection* domain were strongly internalized in a group of men from domestic violence treatment

centers. Schemas from the *Impaired Limits* domain (such as Disrespecting Others' Rights, Insufficient Self-Control, Entitlement) were also prevalent among them, suggesting the need to investigate schemas from other domains as potential predictors of conflict between partners.

The results of a meta-analysis generally indicate moderate effect sizes for the association between the majority of the maladaptive cognitive schemas and interpersonal difficulties, with the exception of Unrelenting Standards, Approval-Seeking, and Punitiveness schemas (Janovsky, Rock, Thorsteinsson, Clark, & Murray, 2020). However, these results may also be influenced by the fact that several studies only considered certain schema domains (such as Disconnection and Rejection). In addition, the Approval-Seeking and Punitiveness schemas have only recently been included in the taxonomy of maladaptive cognitive schemas, so most studies concerned by the meta-analysis did not report considerable effect sizes for their association with interpersonal difficulties (Janovsky et al., 2020). Contradictory results may also be due to the heterogeneity of the interpersonal difficulties investigated, with few studies focusing exclusively on partner conflict and even fewer on parenting dynamics or co-parenting relationships after divorce.

The present study aims to address these limitations by investigating the role that all eighteen maladaptive cognitive schemas play in influencing co-parenting relationships after divorce.

Parental competence

After divorce, parental competence involves the parent's ability to stay actively involved in the child's upbringing, to create a climate that is responsive to the child's emotional needs, and to be open to the child's manifestations of grief and their perception of the separation (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Studies show that the child's post-divorce adjustment and transition to the new lifestyle will be eased by the consistent and active parental involvement in the child's life through discipline, rules, and healthy boundaries, as well as through emotionally nurturing attitudes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Despite the importance of this warm and consistent environment, the literature suggests that after divorce, both parents show lower levels of parental competence, probably as a result of the stress associated with the separation (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Moreover, the child's close contact to both parents after divorce does not always appear to be beneficial. Amato and Rezac (1994) have shown that when separation occurs under conditions of increased interparental conflict, closeness to the non-custodial father is more likely to be associated with poorer post-divorce adjustment of the child. Other studies show that, even in situations of high interparental conflict, children face greater adjustment difficulties if the relationship with both parents is weak. This can be compensated by having a healthy relationship with only one parent. In other words, the high level of parenting skills of one parent can protect the child from negative effects even in the case of a high-conflict separation (Sandler, Miles, Cookston, & Braver, 2008).

In a scientific literature review investigating the effectiveness of parenting programs in improving post-divorce adjustment for both children and parents, Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik and Braver (2011) identified a number of studies which showed that improving parenting skills through educational programs can lead to reduced interparental conflict. However, the authors highlight that the interventions have revealed mixed results; moreover, few of them have focused on co-parenting relationships, the main point of interest being the children's post-divorce adjustment (Sigal et al., 2011).

In order to test if investing in such interventions to improve co-parenting relationships is justified, it is necessary to assess to what extent parental competence is indeed correlated with the quality of co-parenting relationships.

The present study will therefore also investigate the relationship between parental competence and the post-divorce co-parenting relationship.

Family conflict and unfavorable pre-divorce conditions

In order to enrich the explanations concerning divorce and its aftermath, Cao, Fine and Zhou (2022) proposed the Divorce Process and Child Adaptation Trajectory Typology Model, which considers the family context (family conflict, its frequency and intensity, its overt or implicit/hidden nature, the child's extended support network, etc.) both before and after divorce. Indeed, longitudinal studies show that children's adjustment process is deeply dependent on the pre-divorce relationship between parents. Thus, it is the dysfunctionality of the family environment, and not the divorce itself, that often leads to internalizing and externalizing disorders among children (for a review of the literature, see Harold & Sellers, 2018). However, even in the absence of a high level of conflict prior to divorce, the whole process may entail new grounds for interparental conflict, such as issues of custody, child support, the unilateral decision to divorce, etc. This suggests that families that eventually separate have a different configuration in terms of conflict before and after divorce, which may also generate different consequences for the child.

According to Cao et al. (2022), four configurations of family contexts can be distinguished: 1) a low pre-divorce and post-divorce level of conflict, 2) a high pre-divorce and low post-divorce level of conflict, 3) a low pre-divorce and high post-divorce level of conflict, and 4) a high pre-divorce and post-divorce level of conflict. Based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior (Ouellette & Wood, 1998), it is justified to assume that the first and last configurations are the most common. Taking into account the cumulative effect of negative experiences, the latter configuration is probably the most detrimental to a good post-divorce adjustment of the child, and one of the important factors explaining this link could be the dysfunctional co-parenting relationships. However, few studies have directly investigated the extent to which pre-divorce conflict between parents is associated with higher post-divorce levels of conflict.

Additionally, the model Johnston (1994) proposed suggests that external factors concerning the relational experience with the partner prior to divorce are reflected in how the partners manage the separation from a parenting perspective. Also, according to the model, the conditions under which the divorce happens, including financial disagreements between the parents and the economic difficulties they face as a result of the divorce, have their own contribution to the quality of co-parenting relationships after divorce. It is highly likely that all of these factors amplify the stress associated with divorce and are mirrored in parenting dynamics after separation (Johnston, 1994). The present study therefore aims to investigate the relationship between pre-divorce family conflict/dysfunctionality and the unfavorable conditions of divorce on one hand and the quality of post-divorce co-parental relationships on the other.

Cognitive-emotional coping

Cognitive-emotional coping refers to the complex ability to regulate emotions (both positive and negative) through cognitive thinking/processes. Regulation can be done either through

dysfunctional cognitive processes (such as self-blaming, blaming others), which have been frequently associated with negative outcomes (mood disorders, impaired interpersonal relationships; Garnefski et al., 2002) or through functional cognitive processes (acceptance, putting into perspective, positive refocusing). Many interventions have used the restructuring of coping strategies to increase couple satisfaction, optimise communication with others or even help individuals overcome major interpersonal obstacles such as their partner's infidelity (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2008).

In terms of co-parenting relationships, cognitive-affective coping strategies can influence the quality of co-parenting relationships both negatively and positively. For example, the use of dysfunctional strategies such as catastrophizing or blaming others prevents effective conflict resolution, rather facilitating conflict escalation. Consistent with these assumptions, Bonach and Sales (2002) have shown that the tendency to put the responsibility on the other partner after divorce is associated with a lower quality of co-parenting relationships. Also, according to Rusu, Bodenmann and Kayser (2019), a low level of cognitive-emotional coping skills is associated with lower levels of couple satisfaction, which might also spill over into co-parenting management. However, up to the present time, studies have not investigated the relationship between adaptive and maladaptive cognitive-affective coping strategies and functional and dysfunctional components of the co-parenting relationship. Therefore, no prior expectations will be formulated regarding these associations, so they will be investigated in an exploratory manner in the current study.

Reasons for divorce

The reasons preceding the divorce (such as infidelity or violence) can influence the whole course of the divorce process, the quality of the co-parenting relationship and the psychological functioning of the people involved. Studies show that people who report infidelity, conflict and domestic abuse as causes of divorce experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to people who report other types of reasons (Chang, 2004). Results obtained by Porjorat (2016) show that certain maladaptive cognitive schemas (such as Emotional Deprivation, Mistrust-Abuse) are more noticeable among people who have been cheated on compared to those who have not been cheated on, suggesting both a possible effect of infidelity and divorce (i.e., activation of maladaptive relational schemas) and pre-existing characteristics of people facing different reasons for divorce.

Most interventions for couples affected by infidelity use various strategies (cognitive, experiential) to improve emotional regulation skills (Gordon et al., 2008; Teymouri, Mojtabaei, & Rezazadeh, 2020), suggesting the importance of the way the experience is managed from a cognitive-affective perspective. Cognitive coping strategies (i.e. cognitive responses to life experiences) can be both dysfunctional (such as self-blame, catastrophizing, rumination or blaming others) and functional (including positive reappraisal, putting into perspective or refocusing on planning; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2007). Some reasons for divorce might also influence interpersonal aspects, such as parenting skills and co-parenting relationships (e.g. it is justified to anticipate that exposure to conflict - a component of co-parenting relationships - is higher in the case of violence as the reason for divorce).

However, few studies (mostly published more than twenty years ago) have considered investigating the contextual, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that might display differences in the various reasons for divorce (Amato & Previti, 2003; Gigy & Kelly, 1993; Ponzetti et al.,

1992). Given the limited results, the present study will explore the differences in maladaptive cognitive schemas, parental competence, co-parenting relationship, cognitive-emotional coping strategies, conflict and adverse pre-divorce conditions depending on the reasons for divorce.

Current study. Objectives and research questions

The way in which post-divorce conflict and parental alienation affect children's development and functioning in general has been extensively investigated in the literature. Far fewer studies, however, focus on factors that influence how parents manage post-divorce relationships, and those that do are largely qualitative, with little methodological robustness. It is essential to identify the variables that predispose separated partners to dysfunctional behaviors in order to determine the main categories of parents that should be targeted by interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of high-conflict divorce on both the parents themselves and the children as indirect victims.

According to the theoretical model elaborated by Johnston (1994) concerning variables that influence post-separation partner relationships, both intraparental and interparental contribute to post-divorce adjustment. Building on findings suggesting that intraparental and interparental factors are associated with dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors after separation, the present study aims to investigate the extent to which factors within each of these two categories generate dysfunctional co-parenting patterns. The intraparental variables analysed in the current paper are: cognitive schemas, parental competence, and cognitive-emotional coping, while the interparental variables include family conflict and unfavorable conditions of divorce.

Research questions

Given the scarcity of existing results on these associations, we exploratorily investigated the aforementioned relationships. In this respect, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: Are dysfunctional cognitive schemas negatively associated with the functional components of the co-parenting relationship (agreement, closeness, support, approval) and positively associated with the dysfunctional components of the co-parenting relationship (undermining, exposure)?

RQ2: Is parental competence positively associated with the functional components of the co-parenting relationship and negatively associated with the dysfunctional components of the co-parenting relationship?

RQ3: Are family conflict and adverse pre-divorce conditions positively associated with dysfunctional components of the co-parenting relationship and negatively associated with functional components of the co-parenting relationship?

RQ4. To what extent are there statistically significant differences in family conflict, unfavorable pre-divorce conditions, functional and dysfunctional co-parenting behaviors, parental competence, maladaptive cognitive schemas and cognitive-emotional coping strategies between individuals who reported different causes of divorce?

RQ5. To what extent are cognitive-affective coping strategies associated with functional and dysfunctional components of co-parenting relationships?

Material and methods

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of 169 participants, 84% female and 16% male, aged 24 to 61 years ($M = 42.71$, $SD = 6.15$). Of these, 91.7% lived in urban areas and 8.3% lived in rural areas. In order to be included in the study, participants had to be divorced or in the divorce process and have at least one child with the partner they divorced/were divorcing. Thus, 94.1% of parents were divorced or separated and 5.9% were in the divorce process.

Procedure

The data for the present study were collected online by disseminating the form in virtual communities (social media groups) of divorced or divorcing parents and through a website dedicated to divorced parents.

Participants gave their consent for participation and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition to completing the instruments, they also provided a range of demographic information (age, gender, background).

Instruments

Family conflict and unfavorable pre-divorce conditions

The Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised (DAI-R), developed by Portes, Smith and Brown (2000), was used to measure family conflict and adverse pre-divorce conditions. DAI-R consists of five factors that assess family functioning patterns and children's pre- and post-divorce reactions. For the specific measurement of family conflict and unfavorable pre-divorce conditions, three of the factors were selected and analysed: Family conflict and dysfunction, Favorable divorce conditions and child's coping ability and Positive divorce resolution. The first factor, *Family conflict and dysfunction*, assesses the level of conflict between the former partners and the family's ability to cope with the current situation. The factor *Favorable divorce conditions and child's coping ability*, investigates pre-divorce protective variables for the child: the absence of financial difficulties and the frequency of arguments and shouting in the presence of the child. The *Positive divorce resolution* measures the family's level of healthy adjustment.

Dysfunctional cognitive schemas

Dysfunctional cognitive schemas were assessed using the Young Schema Questionnaire - Version 3 (Young Schema Questionnaire - Short Form; YSQ - S3; Young & Brown, 2005). In Romania, the questionnaire has been adapted and distributed by Cognitrom. YSQ-S3 consists of 114 items measuring 18 dysfunctional schemas: Emotional Deprivation, Abandonment/Instability, Mistrust/Abuse, Social Isolation/Alienation, Defectiveness/Shame, Failure, Dependence/Incompetence, Vulnerability to harm and Illness, Enmeshment/Undeveloped Self, Subjugation, Self-Sacrifice, Emotional Inhibition, Unrelenting Standards, Entitlement/Grandiosity, Insufficient Self-Control, Approval-Seeking, Negativity and Punitiveness.

Parental competence

Parental competence was measured using the Parental Competence Questionnaire (PCQ), developed by Glăveanu (2012). It includes 81 items assessing five types of parenting skills

(Knowledge of the specifics of the child, Affective support and stress management, Disciplining, Time management and Crisis management), providing both an individual score per dimension as well as an overall score regarding the parental competence.

Cognitive-emotional coping

Cognitive-emotional coping was measured using the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ), developed by Garnefski and Kraaij (2007), adapted to the Romanian population and distributed by Cognitrom. CERQ is a questionnaire designed to assess the coping strategies a person uses after undergoing a negative experience, distinguishing between what the individual does and what he or she thinks. Responses are given on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 5 (almost always), and their sum represents the score for each of the nine dimensions, which describe different coping strategies: Self-blame, Acceptance, Rumination, Positive refocusing, Refocusing on planning, Positive reappraisal, Putting into perspective, Catastrophizing, and Blaming others.

Quality of co-parenting relationships

Co-parenting relationships were assessed with the *Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS;* Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012), adapted to the Romanian population by Dumitriu, Dudu and Butac, (2022). The scale contains 28 items, which measure the quality of six distinct dimensions of co-parenting relationships: Coparenting agreement, Coparenting closeness, Coparenting support, Endorse partner parenting/Approval, Coparenting undermining, and Exposure of the child to conflict. The scores for each dimension are obtained by summing responses rated on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (“Not true of us”) to 6 (“Very true of us”).

Reasons for divorce

The relationship between the reasons for divorce and the rest of the variables was assessed in an exploratory manner. Questions with dichotomous (Yes/No) answers to the most common reasons were asked in order to measure the reasons for divorce and to divide participants into groups. The reasons included in the instrument administered to the participants were as follows: the infidelity of the respondent (score 1), the partner's infidelity (score 2), financial reasons (score 3), family-related reasons (score 4), domestic violence (score 5), alcoholism (score 6), other causes (score 7) and multiple causes (score 8). Depending on the answer, each participant was assigned to one of the eight categories.

Statistical analysis

The IBM.SPSS.24 software was used for the statistical analysis of the data in this study. The following statistical operations were performed: correlation analyses for the variables assessed, independent sample t-tests in order to observe differences between groups depending on the reported cause for divorce, and analysis of variance (ANOVA), using the Boferroni Dunn post-hoc test to determine whether there were specific and statistically significant differences between the various categories of causes for divorce at the sample level.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) for the scales used in this study are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics for maladaptive cognitive schemas, parental competence, co-parenting relationships, pre-divorce conditions, and cognitive-emotional coping strategies

	Min.	Max.	M	SD
YSQ_Emotional Deprivation	5	30	16.60	7.11
YSQ_Abandonment Instability	5	30	13.20	7.20
YSQ_Mistrust Abuse	5	30	15.08	6.16
YSQ_Social Isolation	5	29	13.00	6.51
YSQ_Defectiveness Shame	5	28	9.75	5.92
YSQ_Failure	5	29	10.17	6.12
YSQ_Dependence	5	29	10.79	5.42
YSQ_Vulnerability	5	30	9.86	5.39
YSQ_Enmeshment	5	30	11.27	5.47
YSQ_Entitlement	5	30	16.92	4.79
YSQ_Self-Control	5	29	13.39	5.00
YSQ_Subjugation	5	30	12.40	5.67
YSQ_Self-sacrifice	5	30	20.19	5.92
YSQ_Approval-Seeking	14	82	40.45	15.68
YSQ_Negativity	11	63	26.86	13.78
YSQ_Inhibition	5	28	13.50	5.53
YSQ_Unrelenting Standards	5	28	17.15	4.72
YSQ_Punitiveness	14	74	37.90	13.51
PCQ_Knowledge	43	79	60.49	7.24
PCQ_Affective support	49	76	62.52	5.76
PCQ_Disciplining	54	87	73.87	6.50
PCQ_Time management	34	67	50.98	6.65

	Min.	Max.	M	SD
PCQ_Crisis management	42	70	55.80	5.48
CRS_Agreement	0	18	6.76	4.90
CRS_Closeness	0	24	8.301	6.55
CRS_Support	0	36	11.66	10.19
CRS_Approval	0	36	17.05	10.01
CRS_Undermining	0	30	12.72	8.84
DAIR_Conflict	14	70	26.82	9.99
DAIR_Divorce conditions	9	45	23.56	7.88
DAIR_Positive resolution	10	40	25.40	6.78
CERQ_Self-blame	4	20	10.32	3.66
CERQ_Acceptance	4	20	16.03	3.67
CERQ_Rumination	4	20	14.05	4.58
CERQ_Positive refocusing	4	20	15.36	3.98
CERQ_Refocusing on planning	4	20	16.33	2.68
CERQ_Positive reappraisal	4	20	17.68	3.02
CERQ_Putting into perspective	4	20	14.00	2.78
CERQ_Catastrophizing	4	20	9.37	3.78
CERQ_Blaming others	4	20	8.47	4.02

Note: YSQ = Young Schema Questionnaire; PCQ = Parental Competence Questionnaire; CRS = Coparenting Relationship Scale; DAIR = Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised; CERQ = Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.

Inferential statistics

In order to test the hypotheses, correlation analysis was first used (Table 2). The strongest associations were observed between dysfunctional cognitive schemas and dysfunctional co-parenting behaviors (undermining, exposing the child to tal conflict). In contrast, dysfunctional cognitive schemas were associated to a much lesser extent with functional co-parenting behaviors. In terms of parental competence, affective support appears to be the most relevant skill for co-

parenting relationships, being positively associated with functional dimensions of the co-parenting relationship (agreement, closeness, support and approval between parents) and negatively associated with the dysfunctional ones (undermining, exposure to conflict). Significant negative correlations were also observed between the overall score of parental competence and the dysfunctional dimensions of the co-parenting relationship. On the other hand, the global score for parental competence was not significantly associated with the functional dimensions of the co-parenting relationship.

Family conflict and pre-divorce conditions showed the strongest association with co-parenting relationships. Healthy adjustment to divorce (including pre-divorce functional behaviors of the family such as communicating and discussing family difficulties, spending time together, etc.) was strongly associated with all dimensions of co-parenting relationships. Also, conflict both before and after divorce was significantly negatively associated with functional components of coparental relationships and positively associated with dysfunctional ones.

Table 2

Correlations of cognitive schemas, parental competence, cognitive-emotional coping strategies and pre-divorce conditions with co-parenting relationships

	CRS_ Agreement	CRS_ Closeness	CRS_ Support	CRS_ Approval	CRS_ Undermining	CRS_ Exposure
YSQ_Emoional Deprivation	-.073	-.062	-.112	-.115	.110	.200**
YSQ_Abandonment Instability	-.072	-.002	-.002	.046	.173*	.239**
YSQ_Mistrust Abuse	-.206**	-.133	-.180*	-.084	.190*	.324**
YSQ_Social Isolation	-.176*	-.028	-.068	.041	.196*	.305**
YSQ_Defectiveness Shame	-.106	-.044	-.028	.037	.216**	.285**
YSQ_Failure	-.052	.054	.090	.093	.250**	.182*
YSQ_Dependence	-.104	-.032	.030	.047	.175*	.223**
YSQ_Vulnerability	-.083	-.104	-.057	.000	.265**	.209**
YSQ_Enmeshment	-.069	-.039	.017	.036	.164*	.180*
YSQ_Entitlement	-.186*	-.005	-.057	-.037	.186*	.203**
YSQ_Self-Control	-.153*	-.044	-.025	-.014	.240**	.183*
YSQ_Subjugation	-.108	-.094	-.065	-.026	.236**	.240**
YSQ_Self-sacrifice	-.166*	-.072	-.181*	-.138	.165*	.114
YSQ_Approval-Seeking	-.059	-.049	-.005	.040	.184*	.181*

	CRS_	CRS_	CRS_	CRS_	CRS_	CRS_
	Agreement	Closeness	Support	Approval	Undermining	Exposure
YSQ_Negativity	-.119	-.093	-.084	-.002	.186*	.248**
YSQ_Inhibition	.026	.038	-.006	.041	.096	.064
YSQ_Unrelenting Standards	-.093	-.115	-.106	-.094	.163*	.138
YSQ_Punitiveness	-.096	-.063	-.064	-.042	.173*	.273**
PCQ_Knowledge	-.063	.118	.079	.012	.032	-.148
PCQ_Affective support	.198**	.114	.175*	.140	-.292**	-.307**
PCQ_Disciplining	-.021	.043	.046	.019	-.106	-.241**
PCQ_Time management	-.018	-.010	.010	-.114	-.062	-.137
PCQ_Crisis management	-.007	.061	.023	.030	-.177*	-.138
DAIR_Conflict	-.277**	-.143	-.193*	-.141	.517**	.513**
DAIR_Divorce conditions	-.381**	-.387**	-.431**	-.435**	.500**	.534**
DAIR_Positive resolution	.337**	.583**	.607**	.628**	-.288**	-.385**
CERQ_Self-blame	-.036	.073	.044	.115	.048	.047
CERQ_Acceptance	-.129	-.026	-.024	-.046	.067	-.032
CERQ_Rumination	-.150	.047	.009	.029	.160*	.140
CERQ_Positive refocusing	.056	.063	.059	-.085	-.048	-.100
CERQ_Refocusing on planning	.019	-.004	.008	-.073	.032	.090
CERQ_Positive reappraisal	.089	.030	.077	-.058	-.124	-.213**
CERQ_Putting into perspective	-.084	-.090	-.061	-.120	.104	.070
CERQ_Catastrophizing	-.248**	-.170*	-.202**	-.166*	.362**	.335*
CERQ_Blaming others	-.160*	-.088	-.124	-.028	.363**	.195*

Note: CRS = Coparenting Relationship Scale; YSQ = Young Schema Questionnaire; PCQ = Parental Competence Questionnaire; DAIR = Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised; CERQ = Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.

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

Independent sample t-tests were applied to verify for differences in the cause for divorce reported by participants. Thus, it was investigated the extent to which there were statistically significant differences between those who reported infidelity as the cause for separation from their partner and those who did not, between those who reported violence as a cause vs. those who did not, and between those who reported family causes for divorce vs. those who did not. Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the statistically significant results for the subscales of the questionnaires used.

Table 3

Family conflict and unfavorable post-divorce conditions, maladaptive cognitive schemas, cognitive -emotional coping strategies, and co-parenting behaviors by cause for divorce (partner infidelity vs. lack of partner infidelity)

Variable	Partner infidelity (n = 74)		No partner infidelity (n = 95)		t	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
YSQ_Abandonment Instability	14.54	7.54	12.15	6.78	2.157	.032
YSQ_Defectiveness Shame	10.82	6.21	8.92	5.58	2.085	.039
YSQ_Enmeshment	12.29	5.64	10.47	5.22	2.172	.031
YSQ_Subjugation	13.67	5.89	11.42	5.32	2.605	.010
YSQ_Approval-Seeking	44.17	15.96	37.55	14.90	2.776	.006
YSQ_Negativity	29.28	14.38	24.97	13.06	2.033	.044
CERQ_Putting into perspective	14.66	2.19	13.48	3.08	2.786	.006
CERQ_Catastrophizing	10.18	3.59	8.73	3.82	2.513	.013

Note: CRS = Coparenting Relationship Scale; YSQ = Young Schema Questionnaire; PCQ = Parental Competence Questionnaire; DAIR = Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised; CERQ = Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.

Table 4

Family conflict and unfavorable post-divorce conditions, maladaptive cognitive schemas, and co-parenting behaviors by cause for divorce (violent vs. non-violent)

Variable	With violence (n = 37)		No violence (n = 132)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
	DAIR_Conflict	30.45	10.66	25.80		
DAIR_Divorce conditions	28.59	7.15	22.15	7.51	4.652	.000
DAIR_Positive resolution	22.21	7.35	26.30	6.48	-3.288	.001
CRS_Support	8.08	9.63	12.66	10.15	-2.453	.015
CRS_Approval	13.05	9.17	18.18	9.98	-2.808	.006
CRS_Undermining	17.27	8.83	11.45	8.44	3.664	.000
CRS_Exposure	17.54	9.71	11.60	8.72	3.565	.000
CERQ_Positive refocusing	16.73	3.02	14.97	4.14	2.395	.018
CERQ_Putting into perspective	14.94	2.02	13.73	2.91	2.373	.019

Note: CRS = Coparenting Relationship Scale; YSQ = Young Schema Questionnaire; PCQ = Parental Competence Questionnaire; DAIR = Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised; CERQ = Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.

Table 5

Family conflict and unfavorable post-divorce conditions, maladaptive cognitive schemas and co-parenting behaviors by cause for divorce (family vs. non-family causes)

Variable	Family causes (n = 32)		No family causes (n = 137)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
	YSQ_Subjugation	14.28	6.67	11.97		
YSQ_Punitiveness	42.21	13.24	36.89	13.41	2.024	.045
DAIR_Conflict	30.50	11.94	25.96	9.32	2.343	.020

Variable	Family causes (n = 32)		No family causes (n = 137)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
	DAIR_Divorce conditions	26.53	7.62	22.87		
DAIR_Positive resolution	22.28	5.50	26.13	6.97	-2.921	.004
CRS_Undermining	15.50	9.02	12.08	8.70	1.987	.049
CERQ_Catastrophizing	12.28	3.34	8.69	3.56	5.186	.000
CERQ_Blaming others	11.87	3.81	7.68	3.65	5.793	.000

Note: CRS = Coparenting Relationship Scale; YSQ = Young Schema Questionnaire; PCQ = Parental Competence Questionnaire; DAIR = Divorce Adjustment Inventory - Revised; CERQ = Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire.

Scores on family conflict and unfavorable post-divorce conditions, cognitive-emotional coping strategies, parental competence, maladaptive cognitive schemas, and co-parenting behaviors were also compared across different categories of divorce causes (e.g., partner infidelity, financial problems, violence, family-related causes, alcoholism, other causes, or multiple causes).

Results on the ANOVA test showed that there were significant differences between participants regarding the dysfunctional components of the co-parenting relationship: undermining, $F(6, 162) = 3.152, p = .006$ and exposure, $F(6, 162) = 2.974, p = .009$. Specifically, there were statistically significant differences between participants who reported violence as a cause for divorce and those who reported partner infidelity. In terms of undermining ($M = 22.22$ vs. $M = 10.17$) and exposure ($M = 21.66$ vs. $M = 10.20$) behaviors within co-parenting relationships, those who reported violence as the cause for divorce had significantly higher scores ($M = 22.22$) compared to those who reported partner infidelity as the cause for partner separation ($M = 10.17$).

Discussions

The present study investigated the relationships between a number of individual parental differences (maladaptive cognitive schemas, parental competence) and aspects of family context (family conflict, divorce resolution, pre-divorce favourable aspects) on one hand and co-parenting relationships on the other.

Consistent with the hypotheses, the results showed that all three categories of factors were significantly associated with post-divorce co-parenting relationships. Bellow, explanations for each of the three categories will be presented in detail.

Dysfunctional cognitive schemas and post-divorce co-parenting

Regarding dysfunctional cognitive schemas, the results partially support the hypotheses. Specifically, although most schemas are significantly positively associated with dysfunctional aspects of coparental relationships, only some of them (Mistrust/Abuse, Isolation and Self-Sacrifice) are negatively associated with functional aspects of co-parental relationships. However, the negative correlations are relatively small and significant only in relation to certain components of the co-parenting relationship, which calls into question the extent to which they are indeed associated. This tendency may be explained by the fact that the cognitive schemas in Young's taxonomy describe dysfunctional relational attitudes, emotions, and behaviors, which may be directly or proximally associated with other dysfunctional behaviors rather than healthy behaviors.

Consistent with other studies exploring the relationship between dysfunctional cognitive schemas and relational behaviors, the results of the present study also highlight that cognitive schemas belonging to the *Disconnection and Rejection* category are to a greater extent associated with negative co-parenting attitudes and behaviors, such as undermining the partner or exposing the child to conflict (e.g., Calvete et al., 2018; Messman-Moore & Coates, 2007; for a meta-analysis, see Janovsky et al., 2020). The context of divorce predominantly activates separation-related schemas (such as Abandonment, Mistrust, Emotional Deprivation, Shame or Isolation), which generate unhealthy behavioral responses. For example, fear of abandonment, loneliness, mistrust of partners and emotional deprivation are easily triggered by separation experiences, and may increase the level of conflict between partners as a way of protecting themselves from negative emotional states. Moreover, as these schemas have been associated with reduced emotional regulation skills (Mc Donnell, Hevey, McCauley, & Ducray, 2018; Nicol, Kavanagh, Murray, & Mak, 2022), parents who experience them more severely may have difficulty managing frustration and tension brought on by divorce and may resort to dysfunctional ways of emotional regulation, such as undermining their partner. This strategy could also serve to prevent child abandonment or rejection, situations commonly anticipated in Abandonment or Rejection schemas (Young et al., 2006).

Schemas belonging to other categories also showed significant associations with dysfunctional aspects of co-parenting, although these correlations were relatively small. These included schemas of Punitiveness, Negativity, Subjugation, and Vulnerability, thus highlighting the frailty that dysfunctional schemas can create in difficult relational contexts such as divorce and their potentially negative impact on others, particularly children (through exposure to interparental conflict).

Parental competence and post-divorce co-parenting

When analysed separately, the results indicate that emotional support is the parental competence which holds the most relevance to the quality of co-parenting relationships, having low and medium significant correlations with most facets of co-parenting, including agreement between parents, support of the other parent, avoidance of undermining the other parent, and lack of exposure of the child to interparental conflict. This may happen because in emotionally difficult contexts such as divorce, emotional support is more relevant and useful than any other parental competence which may be more commonly used in other parenting situations (disciplining, time management, etc.). Indeed, studies have repeatedly shown that a parenting style characterized by empathy, understanding and responsiveness to children's emotional needs has numerous benefits

for children's functioning, increasing their well-being and protecting them in situations of family stress (Bastais & Mortelmans, 2016; Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990; van Dijk, van der Valk, Deković, & Branje, 2020). Since paying attention to children's needs entails being aware of the importance of interparental relationships, the association between parental emotional support and the quality of the co-parenting relationship is justified. Surprisingly, however, crisis management, which involves the parent's ability to facilitate the resolution of difficult problems for the child, is significantly and negatively associated only with the variable of undermining the other parent, but the correlation is not very strong. Although divorce is often perceived as a crisis for the child, the lack of significant association between the dimension of crisis management and co-parenting relationships may be due to the fact that the focus of co-parenting relationships (and the instruments that measure their quality) is on the interaction with the other partner rather than the child. Even if this interaction most likely impacts the child as well, the effect is indirect and represents a distal antecedent, thus diminishing the association between the two.

Overall scores for parental competence were also significantly and negatively associated only with dysfunctional components of co-parenting. This could be due to parents' tendency to over-report desirable behaviors (such as parental competence), while under-reporting less desirable behaviors (such as undermining their partner and exposing their child to interparental conflict).

Family conflict and unfavorable pre-divorce conditions

Of the three categories of factors, family conflict and family context before and after divorce show the strongest associations with co-parental relationships. For example, pre-divorce family conflict is significantly and negatively associated with partner agreement and co-parenting relationship support, and positively associated with partner undermining and child exposure to intra-family conflict. Likewise, unfavorable conditions both before (tense atmosphere, poor financial situation) and after divorce (conflict, level of impact on economic status, etc.) were strongly and negatively associated with post-divorce partner agreement, approval, closeness and support, and positively associated with partner undermining and child exposure to conflict. In contrast, healthy adjustment to divorce is positively associated with functional aspects of co-parenting relationships and negatively associated with dysfunctional ones. The strong association with co-parental relationships is in line with expectations and is most likely due to the fact that they describe behaviors and characteristics which are specific to family relationships, representing proximal antecedents of co-parental relationships, as opposed to the individual differences investigated above, which are distal antecedents. The fact that conflict attitudes before divorce predict conflict and hostile attitudes after divorce is consistent with a hypothesis frequently supported by data in the behavioral sciences that prior actions are the best predictor of future behavior (Ouellette & Wood, 1998).

Exploratory results

In terms of research questions, a series of significant results were highlighted. The majority of maladaptive schemas were more pronounced in people who divorced as a result of infidelity compared to those who divorced for other reasons. Significant differences between the two groups were identified for the following schemas: Abandonment/Instability, Defectiveness/Shame, Enmeshment, Subjugation, Approval-Seeking and Negativity, with those

who divorced as a result of infidelity reporting higher scores on these dimensions. These results can be explained by the fact that infidelity as a potentially traumatic interpersonal experience is itself a source of instability and can fuel thoughts regarding self-worth, dependence on others and the need for approval as a result of perceived rejection. Most likely, these patterns are pre-existing to some extent, but are activated or accentuated by the experience of infidelity. Subjugation and Punitiveness schemas were also more pronounced in people who reported family-related causes as reasons for divorce compared to people who did not report them as an antecedent.

In terms of cognitive-affective regulation strategies, the most relevant were: catastrophizing (especially in cases of infidelity and family-related causes such as influence of the extended family), putting into perspective (noticeable for infidelity and domestic violence), blaming others (for family causes), and positive refocusing (for domestic violence). In terms of family causes as a diffusely manifesting stressor, the presence of dysfunctional cognitive-emotional coping strategies in particular (catastrophizing and blaming others) might indicate certain relational patterns that are constantly manifesting, affecting all areas of family functioning and eventually leading to divorce. In contrast, domestic violence and infidelity are acute stressors with a very intense emotional impact, thus requiring the mobilisation of functional coping strategies (putting into perspective and positive refocusing) in order to increase the tolerance to the traumatic experience, which has a major destabilising potential. Unsurprisingly, conflict and unfavorable pre-divorce conditions are higher in people who have divorced as a result of domestic violence, which is associated with a pervasive and extremely high level of family conflict.

The functional and dysfunctional components within co-parenting relationships seem to differ particularly in people who have divorced as a result of domestic violence. Thus, dysfunctional competencies such as exposure to conflict and undermining manifest to a greater extent in the case of domestic violence as a reason for divorce, while support and approval are present to a lesser extent. These findings are consistent with the high prevalence of conflict exposure reported by children and adolescents (Selic, Pesjak, & Kersnik, 2011) and indicate the existence of dysfunctional relational patterns also generalized to emotional abuse (in the form of undermining). These results are in line with those obtained in studies showing that physical and emotional violence frequently coexist (Dutton, Kaltman, Goodman, Weinfurt, & Vankos, 2005).

Considering that divorce is handled differently by parents and felt differently by children, it is important to identify those factors preceding divorce (such as parental characteristics and family conditions) that can be addressed in interventions designed to lessen the impact of separation on both children and parents.

Practical and theoretical implications

From a theoretical point of view, the present study contributes to the model proposed by Johnston (1994), according to which three categories of factors contribute to conflictual co-parental relationships after divorce: individual, interaction and external factors.

From a practical point of view, these results highlight a number of factors on which interventions aimed at improving post-divorce co-parenting relationships and thus reducing the negative impact of divorce on both partners and children should focus. In the case of strong maladaptive cognitive schemas, more complex psychological interventions are recommended, while counselling programmes may target behavioral aspects related to the development of parental competence, facilitating healthy adjustment to divorce and reducing conflict in relation to both the child and the partner.

Limitations and future directions

In addition to the implications the results of this study have, there are a number of limitations. First, the data are correlational. Therefore, a causal relationship between maladaptive cognitive schemas, parental competence, pre-divorce conditions and divorce resolution on one hand and the quality of co-parenting relationships on the other cannot be established. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to identify the extent to which improving parental competence, reducing maladaptive schemas and facilitating positive divorce resolution improve co-parenting relationships.

Secondly, the present study does not capture the way in which cognitive schemas, parental competence, and conditions of divorce influence children's functioning and adjustment to divorce through co-parenting relationships. Future studies could investigate whether intervening on these factors with the aim of improving co-parenting relationships also positively impacts children.

Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of individual and relational characteristics for the quality of co-parental relationships. Results provide further evidence that maladaptive cognitive schemas and undeveloped parental competence (as individual factors) and experiences of family interaction prior to divorce, as well as poor adjustment to divorce (as interactional factors) are particularly associated with dysfunctional aspects of co-parental relationships, such as undermining the other parent and exposing the child to interparental conflict.

The results of the exploratory analyses also highlight the importance of training healthy, functional cognitive-affective coping strategies and addressing maladaptive cognitive schemas to prevent engaging into abusive relationships.

This points to the need for and importance of personal development (to restructure the mechanisms underlying maladaptive cognitive schemas and strengthen healthy coping), in parallel with improving parental competence. In this way, the variables mentioned can become important resources both for alleviating conflict before divorce and for optimal post-divorce adaptation of parents, ensuring a favourable environment for the child in the context of instability caused by separation. Given that associations can be interpreted bidirectionally, these results also point to potential areas of intervention tailored to the reason for divorce. Taking into account the differences between groups, the results suggest that it is necessary to consider the family context preceded by divorce (in the case of violence or infidelity) and the specific consequences (through undermining and exposing behaviors) this might have on co-parenting. Depending on these criteria, partners can learn self-regulation and assertive communication strategies adapted to their own situation as a part of therapy programmes.

Thus, some of the factors that should make the object of psychological assessment and intervention in order to lessen the negative impact of divorce and improve parental relationships are: the maladaptive cognitive schemas of the parents, their parental competence, the healthy adjustment to divorce, the alleviation of conflict before and after divorce, and the ability to provide favorable divorce conditions.

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