

Communication Privacy Management: Examining Adult Sibling Relationships  
and the Mid/Later-Life Parental Divorce Experience

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Jillian R. Jensen, B.A.

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Approved

Dr. Patrick C. Hughes  
Chairperson of the Committee

Dr. Mark A. Gring

Dr. David E. Williams

John Borrelli  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

Divorce is a subject that has been thoroughly researched across numerous fields with the most common focus being the impact on the children who experience divorce during their childhood. Unfortunately, literature has failed to examine the impact of divorce on children during their adulthood. This study focuses on adult children and adult sibling relationships impacted by mid/late-life parental divorce. Specifically, how adult siblings discover private information in accordance with Petronio, Jones, and Morr's (2003) typology of privacy dilemmas and the overall experience of the adult child of divorce in an effort to better conceptualize this unique and understudied aspect of divorce. Data is comprised of transcripts from fourteen interview participants and examined using thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Results are consistent with the typology of privacy dilemmas and revealed the following themes descriptive of the adult child experience of mid/late-life parental divorce: (1) Parent- Adult Child Communication Technique, (2) Continuity, (3) Comparison, (4) Unique Characteristics of Adult Sibling Relationships, (5) Developmental Aspects of Communication Coping, and (6) Regrets. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of this research is to obtain a richer understanding of adult sibling relationships, specifically the role of managing (discovering and revealing) private information by individuals who have experienced mid-life or later-life parental divorce during their lifetime. Through examining the management and negotiation of privacy boundaries among siblings, between siblings and their parents, as well as between siblings and others (family, friends, and the public), the role of an adult sibling is better understood, especially within the context of parental divorce.

Mid/late-life parental divorce has become increasingly common in the United States and adult children are profoundly impacted by the unique demands and stresses brought on by this family disruption. Because of their independent nature, adult children are often viewed as being more capable of handling the difficult family transition of divorce and, therefore, assumed to be less affected than young children and adolescents. Still, they frequently struggle to cope with the new, and often unanticipated, challenges that accompany mid/late-life parental divorce. The general societal assumption that adult children are better equipped to deal with parental divorce combined with the private nature of divorce often results in inadequate support systems for successfully managing the demands and stresses of mid/late-life parental divorce. Managing issues of privacy is a major concern in all families and this becomes increasingly apparent when a family must cope with major life disruptions and transitions. Such is the case with divorce and all it entails. While support for adult children of mid/late-life divorce is often

insufficient, sibling relationships can potentially provide an outlet for individuals to discuss the personal and familial issues surrounding the divorce. Additionally, a shared history and understanding of the family, unique to siblings and family members, makes the sibling relationship an optimal source to be sought out for support. Communicating with siblings, as opposed to those outside of the family, may allow a family to somewhat maintain their previously constructed boundaries protecting private information and protect the family from vulnerability to outsiders and sometimes even each other.

While little is known about mid/late-life parental divorce and its effect on adult children, research is also lacking in regards to adult sibling communication specific to parental divorce and the privacy concerns that arise within the family as a result of a divorce. Adult children are often more aware of and involved in the details surrounding the divorce of their parents and this creates unique privacy predicaments. For example, adult children must manage information revealed to and concealed from each parent regarding the other parent, they must decide what and how much information to reveal to other family members and the outside world, and, in some instances, negotiate these boundaries with their sibling(s), as well as construct boundaries around information they choose to reveal and conceal from their sibling(s). Through in-depth interviews, this study validates the thematic privacy dilemmas identified as part of Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003).

Additionally, a grounded theory examination of the interview transcripts reveals unique aspects of the adult child experience of mid/late-life parental divorce. The themes discussed in this study are: (1) Parent- Adult Child Communication Technique, (2)

Continuity, (3) Comparison, (4) Unique Characteristics of Adult Sibling Relationships,  
(5) Developmental Aspects of Communication Coping, and (6) Regrets.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Divorce

The impact of divorce in recent history is undeniable and, as Amato (2000) asserts, the rise in the divorce rate during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been one of the most influential relational patterns in American culture. The prevalence of divorce has doubled since 1960 and, while the current overall divorce rate appears to have stabilized since its peak in the 1980s, statistically the probability of a first marriage ending in divorce remains between 40 and 50 percent (The National Marriage Project, 2006). The fact is that the American divorce rate continues to remain at one of the highest levels in history (Wolfinger, 2005).

Scholars have undeniably taken note of the prevalence of divorce. The literature in the area is rich across numerous fields, with a large majority focusing on the children of divorce. Research has sought to understand the impact that divorce has on child development, academics, social skills, and relationships with parents (Stevenson & Black, 1995) and has longitudinally followed children as they progress into adulthood, investigating the impact that parental divorce has on their own personal relationships, marriages, and intimacy with others (Wolfinger, 2005). Research in the area has focused almost entirely on children who experience parental divorce as children and adolescents. Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) report that children who experience divorce during childhood face ongoing mental problems, feelings of distress, distressing memories

regarding the divorce, and problems in developing and sustaining intimate relationships into adulthood.

Similar to the experiences of young children, Cartwright (2006) found that individuals between the ages of 19-29, who had experienced parental separation/divorce during childhood and adolescence, report that they experienced and/or continued to experience problems “functioning in every day life, perceive problems in their intimate relationships, and report problems in relationships with other family members, especially parents” (p.125). While it is necessary to have studied and to continue to study children and adolescents who experience divorce during this phase of development in life due to the significant impact it has on the lives of those individuals, the number of children experiencing divorce during adulthood has significantly increased. Unfortunately though, the literature has not sufficiently investigated the adult children of mid/late-life parental divorce (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992; Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Lye, 1996; Foster, 2006). It can be assumed that these children have been overlooked for numerous reasons. One such reason is that these adult children had two parents for the majority, if not entirety, of their childhood and are believed to be better off as a result of the delayed occurrence of parental divorce.

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that about 20 percent of divorces occurring today take place among individuals married more than fifteen years (Foster, 2006). Pett, Lang, and Gander (1992) first coined the term *later-life divorce* to represent divorce that occurs after a significantly lengthy marriage, often involving individuals 35 years or older. For the purposes of this study, that term has been slightly altered to more

accurately represent the type of divorce being examined and the experience will be referred to as *mid/late-life divorce*. In this study, the term *mid/late-life divorce* has been selected to represent divorce that occurred at any point after the child(ren) entered adulthood (eighteen years or older) and to differentiate it from divorce that occurred during offspring childhood and adolescence. Mid/late-life divorce has become a common occurrence and, as early as 1990, divorce statistics show a substantial number of divorcing families have children over the age of eighteen (Foster, 2006). Fentushel and Hillary reported in 1991 that approximately 2.5 million adults between the ages of 18-40 experienced a parental divorce during the 1980s (Fentushel and Hillary, 1991), and one can reasonably speculate that this number has only continued to increase over the last quarter of a century. More recent research (Galvin, 2006) has noted that middle-aged adults are increasingly forced to confront issues that arise due to the divorce of their elderly parents, further acknowledging the presence of this trend.

As early as the 1980s (Arnold, 1980; Levinson & Gooden 1985; Levinson, 1986; Lang & Pett, 1992), scholars began to show interest in this phenomenon, but unfortunately research since the mid-1990s continues to be sparse. Why have adult children of mid/late-life divorce not been significantly addressed by researchers? While young children are often seen as the victims of divorce, the children of these mid/late-life divorces are often overlooked because they are assumed to be less affected by the impact of divorce due to their increased maturity (Cooney, 1995). In some instances, parents will postpone an inevitable divorce due to concern for the welfare of the child(ren) believing that the impact will be lessened once they enter into adulthood and

have left the home (Foster, 2006). In actuality, if the family is distressed, child well-being may improve as the result of a divorce (Stevenson & Black, 1995).

Additionally, many adult children of mid/late-life divorce have established some or complete independence, have moved out of the home, began/completed college, have careers, families of their own (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986), and have begun to establish a life separate and (thought to be) less dependent of their parents. In addition to not having to experience the physical displacement (i.e. moving) that often results from parental divorce for young children and adolescents, adult children are seen as less emotionally and financially dependent and may be physically absent from experiencing the divorce and, therefore, assumed to be less affected by the divorce.

Research is lacking in this area of mid/late-life divorce, but what little research exists, points to just the opposite. Adult children of divorce may not be impacted in exactly the same ways, but they do report often being deeply affected. Foster (2006) reports that of the adult children she surveyed who experienced their parents' divorce during their adulthood, over ninety percent reported that their parents' divorce was a defining moment in their lives. With increased maturity, often comes increased awareness. Adult children are forced to 'parent their parents' earlier than expected, as one or both parents may turn to the adult child for support during this time. Parents disclose details of the divorce more readily to their adult children because they are viewed more as equals, again, believing they are less affected by the divorce than they would have been as young children.

In families where the divorce was postponed solely for the sake of the child(ren), individuals may experience feelings of guilt upon the realization that their parents remained in an unsatisfying marriage at the expense of their own ‘happiness’ and/or well-being. Anger may also arise with comprehension that their life was not what they thought it had been; that they were misled by their parents and then shocked by the unforeseen news of the family dismantling. Therapists report that parents are often shocked by the response of their adult children to their divorce (Foster, 2006), because they assumed the children would hardly be affected. Researchers report that adult children in their early to mid twenties often have the most difficulties dealing with mid-life parental divorce because of a lack of stability that stems from decreased financial support and loss of both family and home (metaphorically and/or physically) (Foster, 2006) at a time when the child(ren) had just began to stand on their own from a foundation they believed to have been strong.

Society’s overall lack of acknowledgment, avoidance, and rationalizing of the experiences of adult children of mid/late-life parental divorce, due to the assumption that adult children are less affected by parental divorce, often eliminates the potential for the support and validation necessary during this difficult family transition. Adult children who experience the phenomenon of mid/late-life divorce often feel confusion as they, themselves, believe they should not be affected, but find, instead, that impact on their life is significant (Foster, 2006). They struggle with the ability to reconcile their intense emotions with societal and parental expectations surrounding the management of their parents’ divorce. Add to this, the classic sentiments of shame that accompany divorce, for

all family members, regardless of when a divorce may occur, and a desire to protect the family from being vulnerable to the outside world and exposure of the details, one is often left questioning not only what to disclose about the divorce, but also who to disclose to and, as a result, potentially place the family in a vulnerable position.

### Communication Privacy Management Theory

The impact of the disruption that is incurred upon a family, as a result of divorce, is far-reaching, and the extent is often unimaginable. The family is pushed beyond its 'normal' dynamic nature and forced, as individual members and as a whole, to redefine their concept of 'family' and renegotiate their various relationships within the family, because what was previously established has been, at the very least, damaged by divorce. This process can be extremely lengthy, complex, and "often involves families renegotiating their communication boundaries" (Afifi & McManus, 2006, p. 174). While boundaries can be interpreted as physical, emotional, or relational, they can also be metaphorical. Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM), a product of Altman's (1975) metaphor of *boundary* (Petronio, 2002; 2004), is one way in which researchers can begin to understand these boundaries and their roles regarding the management of private information within a family, especially during pivotal family transitions such as divorce.

CPM's illustration of boundaries, in regards to private information, allows for a new conceptualization of the relationship of privacy and disclosure as dialectical.

According to CPM, individuals construct boundaries (through conscious decisions to

reveal or withhold information) around private information, which help to regulate the flow of information with others. These boundaries help individuals to maintain the private self and public self, individually and of the family.

CPM theory is grounded in the dialectical tension of openness and closedness, or disclosure and privacy, which is an ever present tension in the decision process of disclosure. Prior to CPM, the study of disclosure was limited to focus on self and the process of revealing of information, but failed to acknowledge the central role of privacy in disclosure (Petronio, 2002) and neglected the interactive role of the receiver/confidant (Petronio, 2004) in the process of disclosure. This theory allows researchers to investigate 'private disclosures,' or the lack there of, and the complexity of the tension between privacy and disclosure (Petronio, 2004) in a more comprehensive manner.

CPM is a practical theory (Petronio, 2004) that has examined the dialectical tensions surrounding private disclosures in areas such as: romantic and marital couples (Petronio, 2000c; 1991; Petronio, Olson, & Dollar, 1989), family privacy dilemmas (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003; Petronio, 1994), disability (Braithwaite, 1991), gender (Petronio & Martin, 1986; Petronio, Martin, & Littlefield, 1984), HIV/AIDs (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003; Greene, Parrot, & Serovich, 1993; Yep, 2000), healthcare (Petronio & Kovach, 1997; Petronio, Sargent, Andea, Reganis, & Cichocki, 2004), sexual abuse (Petronio, Flores, & Hecht, 1997; Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mon'tros-Medonza, 1996), topic avoidance (Caughlin & Golish, 2002), and small group interactions (Petronio & Braithwaite, 1987). Furthermore, CPM can also offer a practical perspective with which researchers and scholars can begin to understand disclosure and

privacy issues in divorcing and post-divorce family relationships, which is the goal of this study.

Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) clearly outline the premises of CPM theory in their article *Group communication in context: Studies of bona fide groups*. According to the authors, the first premise is that people assert ownership (in the sense of possession, rather than economical ownership) of their private information. Individuals often believe that they are the sole proprietors of their private information and, as a result, believe that they have the right to control the flow of that information to others. This desire to control emanates from the need to protect themselves from potential vulnerability (Petronio, 2004).

According to CPM theory, vulnerability is the key to understanding disclosures (Petronio, Ellemers, Giles, & Gallois, 1998) and the decision to reveal or conceal private information, which ultimately forms personal privacy boundaries. Individuals are most likely to restrict communication boundaries by opting not to disclose private information if the perceived degree of vulnerability is high (Rawlins, 1983). Therefore, being the receiver of a private disclosure enters one into a privacy boundary with the discloser, ideally appointing the receiver as co-owner. The individual who discloses the information often expects the receiver to abide by the discloser's pre-constructed privacy boundaries or expectations for management of the specific information that has been revealed. The discloser is no longer in complete control of the information because the decision to reveal or conceal it is, ultimately, to be made by the receiver. This transforms a personal

privacy boundary into a dyadic or collective privacy boundary. The rule(s) regarding the future disclosure of the private information must be negotiated by the, now, co-owners.

Additionally, according to CPM, people can enter into pre-existing boundary systems, through marriage for example, in which they are expected to learn, often through socialization, and honor the established rules regarding privacy within the family or group (Petronio, 2004). Divorce, metaphorically, fractures the family and the numerous relationships within the family, beyond those of merely the spouses. Upon marriage, spouses entered into pre-existing boundary systems of their partner's family, as well as co-constructed dyadic and familial boundary systems of their own. The fractures caused by divorce make the family, a group that may have previously been united and protective of each member and the group, much more vulnerable not only to extended family, friends, and the outside world, but also to each other. As the family splits into factions, members may disagree as to what information, the extent, and to whom it is revealed. Family members may then choose to reveal information that others would prefer not to be divulged, resulting in increased opportunities for vulnerability.

Second, CPM uses a boundary metaphor to illustrate that people 'mark ownership lines' to make distinctions between self-owned information and other-owned information and that individuals must manage personal, dyadic, and collective (family, organization, and other group) boundaries around private information (Petronio, 2002). Collective boundaries are established when information is shared within a group, such as a family, and all individuals become co-owners of the information (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). Often, rules to regulate such shared information are negotiated through talk

between members or have been implicitly or explicitly taught to children by the parents (Petronio, 2000b; 2002). Exterior boundaries are established to protect the family from exposing potential vulnerability to the outside world and also help to maintain and construct a sense of group identity and solidarity with the family. Members become jointly responsible for the maintenance of the private information (Berardo, 1974). Interior family privacy boundaries are also present within the family system. Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) refer to these boundaries as *cells*. These cells regulate the permeability of privacy information between specific family members, often withholding private information from one or more specific family members. Siblings may, for instance, disclose to each other, but not to their parents (Petronio et al., 2003), creating a cell around the siblings that protects the private information from their parents.

While a family may have been able to manage its collective boundaries prior to divorce, if family members choose to terminate communication upon the divorce, or even as soon as a separation, the management of collective boundaries becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible. In fact, the management of previous constructed privacy boundaries is often nonexistent as previously clearly defined lines of ownership blur and more than one member may lay claim to ownership of information. Some individuals may assert ownership over information so strongly that they believe they have been granted *carte blanche* to reveal or conceal the information as they desire without consulting others who may be impacted.

Third, CPM asserts that the intricacies of the latter two boundary systems, dyadic and collective, are maintained through rule-management systems. Rules are developed to

regulate boundary permeability and manage co-ownership of private information. Rules created to maintain and regulate privacy in families help members to understand the extent of ownership and the manner in which it should be controlled (Petronio 1991, 2000a). CPM posits that individuals frequently struggle with how much information they should reveal and conceal when disclosing. Ultimately, this means that individuals are forced to manage the porousness of their boundaries through which information passes. Rules set the parameters for disclosure, in an attempt to eliminate this confusion or struggle that occurs when disclosing private information.

In the context of divorce, parents often struggle with the extent to which children should be knowledgeable of particular details of a divorce. Spouses may struggle with how much information should be revealed to extended family members and the public regarding the divorce or even to each other. Differing opinions around these complicated issues often results in a lack of mutually-created (and agreed upon) rules. Instead, divorcing spouses may institute two differing sets of personal rules for privacy management that, most likely, align with each spouse's respective personal agenda regarding disclosure rather than a co-created collective boundary.

To understand the process of rule making, Petronio (2000a) proposes five criteria for rule formation: culture, gendered criteria, motivations that people have concerning privacy, contextual constraints, and a risk-benefit ratio. All are taken into consideration when individuals establish or negotiate rules to regulate the control of private information. All five criteria influence the establishment of privacy rules. These rules, as mentioned before, often determine the stipulations under which privacy is

expected to be maintained and when and to whom revealing such information is considered (un)acceptable (Petronio, 2002). These rules may remain relatively stable over time or situations, such as divorce, may generate modifications to the rules (Petronio, 2000c). It is often expected that family members will honor the established rules (Petronio, 2003) during times of stability and, sometimes, even during times of disruptions. Disequilibrium, or disruption, in the system may occur when one or more family members oppose or are not aware of the rules that have been established and choose to disregard the family's rules. Petronio (2004) identifies this lack of successful coordination of privacy rules as *turbulence*.

Disruption, or turbulence, of personal and family privacy boundaries often occur when individuals, or recipients, become knowledgeable of private information and this knowledge creates a particularly stressful situation for the recipient because any solution or action taken as a result of this newfound knowledge is problematic. Petronio (2002) identifies these situations as *privacy dilemmas*. A privacy dilemma occurs within a family when one or more family members know private information “that, if kept confidential, has the potential to cause family problems and, if told, may result in conflict” (Petronio, 2002, p. 200). Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) created a typology of privacy dilemmas: *confidant*, *illicit*, and *accidental*. A *confidant privacy dilemma* occurs when an individual is sought out to confide private information. An *illicit privacy dilemma* occurs when an individual actively seeks out private information from another. And an *accidental privacy dilemma* occurs when an individual becomes aware of private information inadvertently or by chance. Sometimes not through verbal channels, but more often through

observation or the discovery of particular artifacts or objects that reveal some form of previously unknown private information. This typology aids in the understanding of the manner in which individuals enter into privacy dilemmas or discover private information. Regardless of the type of privacy dilemma, some sense of turbulence results for the individual and, often, for the family when a privacy dilemma occurs. This typology of privacy dilemmas is of particular interest and focus to this research study because it is useful in understanding the manner in which siblings discover private information surrounding or resulting from the mid/late-life parental divorce experience.

Turbulence is consistently evident in families who experience or are experiencing divorce. Issues surrounding divorce are often considered by the family to be private, but there may be instances where one or more members reveal information to an outsider or other family member resulting in a violation of the family rule system through failure to honor an interior or exterior privacy rule that was established prior or during the divorce. People lack an awareness of “how their disclosures and inability to regulate their privacy boundaries affect other family members” (Afifi, T. D. & McManus, T., 2006, p. 175). When turbulence occurs and previously agreed upon rules have been violated, families then have to address the issue through discussion and/or renegotiation of the rules managing the boundaries of the private information to avoid similar, future obstacles.

While CPM has been used to explain the management of privacy in numerous situations and relationships, as noted previously, very little research has utilized CPM to explore the family and its relationships, especially when the family is confronted with divorce. CPM theory is ideal in further explaining family communication behavior,

especially in times of crisis, such as divorce, where control and leadership (in general and, specifically, regarding rules managing privacy) of the family becomes strained and often divided, if not entirely absent. Families exemplify instances in which privacy management is of utmost importance to the members, often due to the large investments (money, time, energy, hopes, etc.) individuals make within the family (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003) and the sub-relationships that comprise the family. Subconsciously, families employ CPM regularly in their daily routine, both within the family and outside the family, co-constructing collective interior and exterior boundaries.

In addition to the difficulties divorce brings to individual and family privacy management, expectations, both societal and personal, of management of mid/late-life parental divorce by adult children further complicate privacy management during this difficult family transition. Adults who find themselves in the predicament of being impacted by their parents' mid/late-life divorce often do not have sufficient support systems to cope with a parental divorce, and even spouses and close friends may be less than comforting due to a lack of personal experience with mid/late-life parental divorce. Siblings are the only individuals who, potentially, can both relate to the pain that results from a mid/late-life parental divorce and understand the detailed complexity of the destruction to their specific family unit. Siblings may find support in their relationship(s) with each other, as they are able to discuss the issues they are struggling with, while still maintaining family privacy by abiding by privacy management rules established by the family. Assuming that one of the family rules is to not disclose private information regarding the family to outsiders or even to family members outside the immediate

family. In this manner, disclosure of intimate details is possible because it may not be in violation with family rules in the same manner that disclosing to someone outside the family would.

### Siblings

“The sibling relationship is pervasive” (Mikkelson, 2006, p. 22) and often the most enduring lifetime relationship an individual may possess (Bedford, 1993). Research estimates that 80% of the population spends a minimum of one-third of their lives with their siblings (Fitz & Badzinski, 1994) and in 1998 a General Social Survey found that 96% of American adults report having at least one sibling (National Opinion Research Center, 1998). Demonstrating that being a sibling and having siblings is a common characteristic of most individuals.

Regardless of personal degree of preference for one’s sibling status, the sibling relationship is involuntary and permanent unlike selected friendships (Mikkelson, 2006). It is difficult, if not impossible to dissolve because the active relationship may be terminated, but the sibling status cannot be absolved (Cicirelli, 1995) and siblings continue to remain connected, at the very least indirectly, often through parents or other family (Allen, 1977) during their lifetime. It is likely that step-sibling relationships within families where parental marriage is short-lived may be the exception, as the formation of solid bonds may not have had sufficient time to cement. The inability to sever the connection of most sibling relationships leaves an ever-present opportunity to rekindle the relationship and creates a sense of permanence, whether desired or not. While it does occur, the dissolution of the adult sibling relationship is atypical (Mikkelson, 2006). The

permanence of the sibling relationships allows it to endure trials that would devastate other relationships.

The sibling bond may be second in importance only to that of the parent-child until the death of the parents, in which case it may supersede (McGoldrick et al., 1999) and become the most important bond two individuals have. The importance of the sibling relationship in individual development across the lifespan has been well documented (Dunn, 2000). Positive sibling relationships have been linked to increased cognitive development, social skills, and self-esteem during childhood (Bush and Ehrenberg, 2003). Transitioning from adolescence into middle adulthood, siblings can become a source of companionship (Cicerelli, 1995) and support (Ponzetti & James, 1997), but McGoldrick et al. (1999) notes that this period in the lifespan is also often marked with distancing as siblings marry and focus on their own families and rivalry and competition increase as a result. Still, as siblings progress into adulthood their status within the family hierarchy appears to be more equilateral, increasing sentiments of acceptance (Cicirelli, 1995) and the likelihood of developing a relationship similar to that of the closest of friends (Mikkelson, 2006). In later and elderly adulthood, sibling bonds may strengthen even further as they share reflections of childhood memories and reconnect after widowhood (Connidis, 2001).

Family systems theory acknowledges the importance of sibling relationships within the larger family system (Minuchin, 1988). It posits that changes in one family subsystem, such as the marital relationship, inevitably resonate to impact all other family subsystems, including the sibling relationship(s), and ultimately the family system as a

whole. Divorce is a primary example of one such change and, although divorce researchers have examined in detail the effects on the parent-child relationship (Amato, 2000), the impact on the sibling relationship remains neglected (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003), not only in the area of family systems theory, but across the board.

The limited body of research regarding the impact of family transitions, like divorce, on sibling relationships has focused mainly on the behavioral interactions of siblings from divorced families in comparison to siblings from 'intact' families (e.g., Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005) revealing that during this family transition, siblings of divorce express more conflict toward one another, including more arguing, name-calling, and physical fighting (Bush & Ehrenberg, 2003) than siblings whose parents do not divorce. It should be noted that these studies are limited to young children, rarely longitudinal, and fail to assess the long-term implications of divorce on the sibling relationship. Still, Anderson (1999) suggests that the sibling relationship has the potential to serve as a buffer against potentially adverse effects of divorce on children. One possible explanation is that supportive and stable sibling relationships may provide a source of stability and security that can help children to cope with the uncertainty and stress ensuing from their parents' divorce (Caya & Liem, 1998).

With only 56% of children living in traditional nuclear families (Usdansky, 1994), it is necessary to redefine the conventional conception of both *family* and *sibling* to expand beyond the nuclear to reflect contemporary families and increase research of siblings beyond that of full biological siblings (Mikkelson, 2006; Galvin, 2006). For the purposes of this study, effort will be made to re-conceptualize the term 'sibling.'

Biological siblings (having both biological parents in common), half-siblings (sharing one biological parent), step-siblings (created through marriage of parents, when one sibling is adopted), and adoptive siblings (sharing no biological parents, no connection through marriage, only legal definition when one or more siblings is adopted into a family) all will assume the term ‘siblings.’ With approximately 11.8 million American children currently living in blended families (Fields, 2001), research should reflect the contemporary family and refrain from ignoring the large number of siblings that are not solely full biological siblings.

Scholarship in sibling communication is expanding, but the research present regarding adult sibling relationships is very limited. Sibling research is rooted in psychology and sociology offering a focus limited to development, rivalry, birth order, and competition, most often of young children and adolescents. In regards to sibling communication, research across the lifespan is scarce. Regarding adult sibling communication, four areas in particular have been the central focus: (1) contact patterns, (2) degree of closeness, (3) support, and (4) rivalry (Mikkelson, 2006). While research has examined the presence, influences, and changes over time of these four variables, research has failed to address *how* these variables are communicated. Actual communicative behaviors of adult siblings and the role communication plays in the adult sibling relationship continue to remain understudied.

As research has shown, mid/late-life divorce among individuals who have children over the age of eighteen is a significant phenomenon in the United States. The adult children of this divorce trend are suffering in ways that are both similar to and

unique from their younger counterparts. Just as young children need to deal with parental divorce, so do adult children, but the ways in which they manage coping with this family transition has yet to be investigated. The sibling relationship is a primary relationship in the life of any individual and, as a result, is thought to be one potential channel for coping due to the assumption that society and the adult children themselves believe they should be minimally, if at all, affected and often feel uncomfortable revealing the degree to which they are affected to others.

The sibling relationship has not only been understudied in terms of dealing with parental divorce, but the communication between siblings during adulthood has been relatively unaddressed. It is therefore necessary that research not only concentrate on the experiences of adult children of mid/late-life divorce, but the siblings who are faced with this experience. As discussed previously, a primary concern of many members in a family involved in a divorce is managing privacy surrounding the divorce and the family. As a result, and in accordance with CPM, the family and individual members construct and negotiate boundaries dealing with the disclosure of private information. It is therefore necessary to investigate *if* and *how* adult siblings discover and communicate private information surrounding the divorce to each other and with other family members, friends, and the outside world through the lens of CPM theory. Additionally, it is important that research begin to understand the overall experience of the adult child of mid/late-life parental divorce. This research study seeks to do both and, as a result, the following research questions were posed:

***RQ<sub>1</sub>***: How do adult siblings discover private information surrounding their parents' mid/late-life divorce in accordance with Petronio, Jones, and Morr's (2003) typology of privacy dilemmas?

***RQ<sub>2</sub>***: How do adult children/siblings describe their experience of mid/late-life parental divorce?

CHAPTER III  
METHODOLGY

Participants

Fourteen individuals (male = 4; female = 10) who reported being eighteen years or older at the time of their parents' divorce and also reported having one or more siblings who was also eighteen years or older at that time participated in this study. Participants ranged in age from 19-50 years old ( $M = 35$ ). Participants' racial background was Caucasian (100%). The educational backgrounds of participants were as follows: some college (28.5%), college graduate (28.5%), and post graduate (43%). The reported annual income of the participants ranged from \$200 to \$75,000 ( $M = \$40,000$ ). At the time of the study, twelve participants reported being married (85%) and the remaining two participants reported being in a serious relationship (14%). Participants reported age at time of parents divorce to be between 18-29 years old ( $M = 22$ ). Reported length of parents' marriage was between 16-33 years ( $M = 26$ ). Participants reported having between 1-3 ( $M = 2$ ) adult siblings at the time of their parents' divorce. Elapsed time since the divorce occurred until the time the interview took place ranged from 0-30 ( $M = 13$ ) years. All participants (100%) reported that their adult sibling(s) shared the same parents at the time their parents divorce occurred.

Procedure

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Snowball sampling was ideal for this study because it “yields a study

sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p.141). This study called for participants who possessed very specific characteristics and experiences not overwhelmingly common in the general population. Although divorce is increasingly common, it still can be associated with sentiments of shame or guilt resulting in what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) refer to as an “elusive population.” The snowball sampling technique offered the highest likelihood of success in recruiting individuals from this potentially elusive population. This recruitment method was employed in the researcher’s daily interactions with various individuals regarding the study who provided referrals and then, additionally, with the participants themselves who knew of other individuals who had similar experiences and also met the criteria for participation.

Potential participants who met these criteria were initially contacted via phone or email. Upon agreement to participate in the study, individuals were asked to complete an informed consent form (Appendix A) and a short demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) prior to the interview. Upon receipt of the consent form and questionnaire by the researcher, the participant was contacted once again to schedule an interview with the researcher at a time of most convenience for the participant.

Individuals participated in interviews, which last approximately one hour. Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone (79%) due to preference of participant or physical distance. A select few interviews (22%) were conducted in person at the request of the participant. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher. A semi-structured interview format was used to facilitate more naturally occurring talk between

the participants and researcher (Spradley, 1979) (See Appendix C). All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until saturation – similar themes in additional interviews emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Owen's thematic technique (1984). According to Owen, a theme is present when it meets three criteria: (1) recurrence; (2) repetition; and (3) forcefulness. Thematic analysis is ideal because it "offers insight into the way people interpret family and other relationships" (Owen, 1984, p. 275). The themes were interpreted according to Petronio, Jones, and Morr's (2003) typology of privacy dilemmas as part of Communication Privacy Management Theory. The data from the fourteen interviews yielded 273 pages of transcripts to analyze.

Consistent with the thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and following the analytical procedures recommended by Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Strauss & Corbin (1990), transcripts were read for an overall impression of the data assuming the unrestricted principles of open-coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Second, transcripts were re-read and coded (1) for themes correspondent to Petronio, Jones, and Morr's (2003) typology of privacy dilemmas and (2) for emergent themes describing participants' experiences as a child and sibling of mid/late-life parental divorce. Third, transcripts were reviewed and coded a final time to ensure that all relevant excerpts had been coded accordingly. Using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as new themes emerged old themes were revisited and revised. The data were organized and cataloged using QSR NVivo qualitative research software (QSR International Pty Ltd,

2002). Use of this software allowed for more thorough, accurate, and expedited coding of the data.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The purpose and goal of this study was to better understand the privacy management experiences in which adult siblings discover private information and, beyond this, a more accurate understanding of the experience of adult children of mid/late-life. Through thematic analysis, participant talk provided answers to the research questions that were posed in this study.

Before beginning a discussion of the results of this study, it must be noted that only gender-neutral pronouns are incorporated in discussing participant excerpts to protect the identity of the participants. Many participants expressed interest in obtaining a copy of this study upon completion for personal use and, potentially, to share with family members. As a result, it is imperative to eliminate any potentially identifying terms.

The results of the interviews produced two separate, but interesting findings. First, the data support the three thematic privacy dilemmas outlined by Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) as part of Communication Privacy Management Theory. *Confidant*, *illicit*, and *accidental* privacy dilemmas were present in the responses provided by the participants of this study. Secondly, a grounded theory approach revealed unique themes regarding the experience of being an adult child of mid/late-life parental divorce. The themes revealed were: (1) Parent-Adult Child Communication Technique, (2) Continuity, (3) Comparison, (4) Unique Characteristics of Adult Sibling Relationships, (5) Developmental Aspects of Communication Coping, and (6) Regrets.

### Privacy Dilemmas

It is important to note that, contrary to the main focus of this research study - siblings, the majority of reported privacy dilemmas experienced by one or more adult siblings were rarely prompted by another sibling, but rather by one or both parents through talk about problems in the marriage, the disclosure that the decision to divorce had been made, or a wide variety of issues that arise as a result of a divorce. This should not be surprising since the particular experiences of these participants are a product of the parental decision to divorce. Privacy dilemmas are systems and not dyadic interactions. It is therefore logical that the dilemmas stem most often from the parent(s) as opposed to the sibling(s). The private information that is disclosed, verbally or nonverbally, by the parent(s) then results in one or more privacy dilemmas experienced by one or more siblings as they interact with each other and the public. As a result of the parental disclosure, the recipient(s) of the information become conflicted with the predicament of whether to divulge the private information regarding their family to the other sibling(s), extended family, outsiders, and sometimes even the other parent or to opt not to disclose the information.

The primary concern of this study was how the siblings report entering into privacy dilemmas, i.e. discover private information, that results from the parents' divorce and what they chose to do once they found themselves in the dilemma. The privacy dilemmas identified by Petronio, Jones, and Morr (2003) emerged as the answer to these questions. The typology of *confidant*, *illicit*, and *accidental* privacy dilemmas categorize

not only how siblings report entering into the dilemmas, but also how they reveal this information, if they choose to.

### *Confidant Privacy Dilemma*

The dilemma most present in the interview data was that of *confidant*. The confidant privacy dilemma presented itself in 57% of the excerpts dealing with privacy dilemmas in the interviews. Participants reported discovering information regarding the divorce or issues stemming from the divorce most often by being told or confided in by a parent or sibling.

Participants reported being the recipient of private information most often with a parent who sought them out as a confidant. This reveals that parents do in fact readily disclose to their adult children, potentially to the detriment of the adult child. One of the most common topics that arose in participant talk regarding *confidant* privacy dilemmas was the decision to divorce. In recalling how he/she had become aware that her/his parents were getting a divorce one participant stated that it was revealed by her/his mother.

[Mom] came into my room that morning and she was crying. She told me that it was over and that she was going to move out or Dad was moving out or something. And she was really upset.

This excerpt illustrates the painful reality of being an adult child of divorce. Parents may often turn to the adult child as a source of support during their time of distress; unable to comprehend the impact, not only of the news of the impending family break up, but also the impact of the parents' reaction to the divorce on the adult child. The initiation of a *confidant* privacy dilemma is employed by siblings and appears to be, from

participant talk, less traumatizing than when this occurs with a parent. Even though they may appear to be extremely similar occurrences, participants discussed them with much different sentiments. For example, in the following excerpt another participant was informed of his/her parents' decision to divorce by a sibling in much the same manner as the previous participant:

[My sister] called me and she was bawling. And she just said, 'It's over.' I didn't even know what she was talking about. She just said, 'It's really, really over.' She was just bawling.

Some participants even reported being the initiator of a *confidant* privacy dilemma. The following excerpt demonstrates a sense of obligation and protection for other siblings to enter into a *confidant* privacy dilemma with the parent: "I didn't feel right letting my parents tell them or anyone else. It wasn't going to be okay unless it came from us." Participant talk similar to this excerpt reveals that it appears to be much easier for adult children to enter into *confidant* privacy dilemmas with other siblings, rather than parents and that siblings are aware of this and, as a result, seek to protect siblings by dispensing the private information. While this is interesting to note, and potentially useful, parents could not expect their adult children to become aware of important private information, such as the decision to divorce, without first informing one sibling and entering into *confidant* privacy dilemma. While some adult siblings report being the recipient of privacy information, others reported illicitly seeking out private information for their knowledge.

### *Illicit Privacy Dilemma*

The illicit privacy dilemma occurred in 40% of the excerpts of participant talk regarding privacy dilemmas. The illicit privacy dilemma theme most often emerged in talk where participants sought out information about, surrounding, or resulting from the talk about the divorce from parents or siblings. Rarely, did the participants discuss talk where the parents sought out information from the adult child(ren). The directional nature of this specific privacy dilemma highlights the reality that, in the specific instance of divorce, the parents appear to possess most, if not all, of the private information, not the siblings. This illustrates another explanation for the prominence of talk about the parents rather than the siblings in the data.

Often participants reported seeking out information about the parents' lives, past or present, in an effort to better understand what had or was occurring in the family. One participant recalled when a sibling asked his/her father about his sexual preference in an effort to better understand what was occurring in his life and potentially explain why the divorce occurred:

[He/She] actually asked our dad if he was gay or not when all this happened ... [he/she] would just blurt that out and ask Dad if he was gay. It was like - Oh lord, we might all wonder that, but we're not going to ask him.

For this participant, it created a dilemma because the response placed him/her in a position where, regardless of the answer, it created difficulties. Some participants reported a preference for seeking out information from a sibling rather than a parent. In one instance, another participant stated that she/he felt most comfortable seeking out information from an older sibling to better understand what was occurring within the

family because she/he felt she/ he could trust the sibling. “I asked my oldest sister what was going on. And then that’s when she told me that Dad [was] having an affair.” The data revealed that seeking out information from another sibling was much easier and, while it resulted in an *illicit* privacy dilemma, the dilemma was not to the same extent that it was when it occurred with a parent.

There were fewer reports of illicit privacy dilemmas than confidant privacy dilemmas, but one participant clearly articulated a valid and relevant explanation for the decreased presence of this type of privacy dilemma when he/she explained why he/she didn’t seek out more information from his/her parents:

My thing was I didn’t want to ask questions. I didn’t want to be in it. We would kind of wonder, but we didn’t want to know the answer, truthfully. So we decided if we didn’t want to know the answer we weren’t going to ask.

While the *illicit* privacy dilemma is utilized during mid/late-life parental divorce, participant talk revealed that it is much more comfortable to enact it with a sibling rather than a parent, but that there may be times, when parents are often not forthcoming, and the adult children feel compelled to enter into this privacy dilemma in order to discover the desired information. If private information is revealed, but it is not discovered through a *confidant* or *illicit* privacy dilemma, it is then discovered accidentally.

#### *Accidental Privacy Dilemma*

The *accidental* privacy dilemma appeared the least of all the dilemmas, in terms of the number of excerpts that emerged in participant talk. When reporting discovering information via this manner, 3% of the excerpts regarding privacy dilemmas fell under

this category. Only two representative excerpts were present in the data, but both excerpts demonstrate that this privacy dilemma is often entered into nonverbally, rather than verbally like the first two dilemmas outlined in this section.

In one instance a participant recalled how, together with a sibling, they stumbled upon information that revealed that their parents had ultimately decided to divorce.

The divorce... now the thing that sticks out more in my mind was when my dad left. He moved all of his stuff out. Everybody had been gone for the weekend or something like that... [my sister] and I came home and we knew as soon as we walked in the door that my dad was gone. That was a very, very empty feeling.

Another participant happened to be at home when an altercation arose between the parents which led to witnessing a situation that revealed a disturbing aspect of her/his parents' relationship.

I went into the dining room. It was breakfast time before school. And I went into the dining room because my parents were yelling and my mom was biting my dad on his wrist. It was just one of those things that was really troubling and I didn't know what to do. Here is my mom biting my dad.

This dilemma appears to be the most complicated in terms of coping because the individual(s), the parents, in the case of the above excerpts, are not aware of the information the adult child or sibling has obtained. This creates an extremely difficult situation for the recipient of the private information, in terms of what action to take.

The absence of a significant number of excerpts exemplifying the theme of discovering information via an accidental privacy dilemma may appear counterintuitive, but it can be viewed as a statement about the mid/late-life parental divorce experience. Adult children and siblings may not be discovering information in this manner. One

obvious explanation for this is that most adult children no longer reside with their parents and this absence decreases the amount of daily interaction and the chances of accidentally discovering information.

These findings tell us that adult siblings of divorce most commonly discover information through being treated as a *confidant*. It appears that this is also the most successful manner for which to receive private information, if done correctly and not in a manner that may be considered disclosure of excessive and/or unnecessary information. The pitfalls of excessive parental disclosure are discussed thoroughly in the following set of findings. Discovering information *accidentally* appears to be the most harmful and least employed method to discovering private information.

#### Adult Child of Divorce Experience

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the data yielded a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the experience of parental divorce as an adult. Participants provided an introspective view of the overall experience of adult children of mid/late-life parental divorce that provides a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of this experience. A grounded theory approach revealed unique themes regarding the experience of being an adult child of mid/late-life parental divorce. The themes revealed were: (1) Parent-Adult Child Communication Technique, (2) Continuity, (3) Comparison, (4) Unique Characteristics of Adult Sibling Relationships, (5) Developmental Aspects of Communication Coping, and (6) Regrets.

#### *Parent-Adult Child Communication Technique*

The data demonstrates that parents who divorce during their children's adulthood often employ a wide variety of techniques in communicating the decision to divorce and issues surrounding the divorce. These techniques ranged from direct disclosures, third-party disclosures, deception, denial, to lack of communication. Parents of younger children are often unable to select from such a wide variety of strategies available to parents of adult children, most likely due to the immature nature of young children. Parents of young children often have to omit details surrounding the family split and describe the divorce in simple terms. There seems to be a more conscious effort to shield young children from knowledge of the details surrounding the divorce, whereas parents of adult children do not appear to sense that obligation to the same extent. As we saw in the first set of findings, confiding in the adult child appears to be the most common technique, but further research is needed to decide if it is the most successful and least harmful for both the parents and the adult children.

### *Continuity*

Participants often reported experiencing similar emotional hardships that have long been associated with young children of divorce such as loss of family identity, loss of family home, and loss of a sense of security. This is of extreme importance in conceptualizing the adult child experience of divorce. While adult children and young children may not experience all the same difficulties to an equal extent, they may not be as different as many, including their parents, assume. Interestingly, the adult children themselves may be better able to cope if they were prepared for the extent of the impact their parents' mid/late-life divorce would have on their lives. For example, one

participant reported surprise at the impact the parents' divorce was having on his/her life as an adult.

I wasn't letting myself feel hurt and anger at my parents for the choices they've been making and the choices they've made. I wasn't allowing myself to feel that because I felt as though I wasn't entitled to it because I was an adult. Because I'm an adult I should handle this better. I shouldn't handle this like a kid.

This participant's sentiments were well-founded based on the reports of other participants who experienced difficulty with many aspects of parental divorce most commonly assigned to young children.

Although most adult children of mid/late-life parental divorce do not still live at home, the loss of the family home or loss of sense of a family home was apparent in the excerpts of some of the participants and surprisingly painful for many. A family home, be it the physical house associated with the term home or any place where the parents would have continued to reside together and created a sense of home, may be a safe place for the adult child long after becoming independent. The loss of this safe place for the adult child may feel like the loss of an anchor for their lives or a place in which they feel they can return to, regardless of the hardships they face. One participant went as far as openly comparing her/his emotions to that of what they speculated a young child would experience: "I felt and a young kid, I think, would feel this way. They can't feel like they have a home anymore." This loss of a sense of home is extremely powerful for many adult children, but they also felt pain at the disintegration of the original family structure.

The impact of the loss of the original family structure was also identified by some participants as an issue that they must confront because of the parental divorce. Often,

new people enter the lives of the adult children because the parents decide to remarry. This not only means that the adult child must cope with the loss of their original family structure, but learn to cope and adapt to the new structure of multiple family relationships and, in essence, multiple new families. This was articulated by one participant in the following excerpt:

I have to live with it because I have to go through holidays with multiple families and children that have 50 gazillion different grandparents that they've got to come up with a different name [for].

And, finally, many adult children also reported a very strong sense of loss of security in their lives. One participant recalled that "After, I know for myself, I felt very afraid and very insecure." Another participant revealed that "I felt panicky when I found out for sure... I felt panicky. I felt like my world had crumbled." This data demonstrated that loss is a very large aspect of the impact on adult children of mid/late-life divorce. The data in this study also revealed that problems faced by young children should not be considered exclusive to young children, but rather inclusive of all children who experience parental divorce at any point during a lifetime. While the extent of the impact of any one aspect of parental divorce may vary by individual, practitioners and academics alike should recognize that the impact of divorce is not restricted to any particular age group. Awareness of this could aid in family coping with mid/late-life parental divorce for adult children and parents. Adult children may be more willing to communicate their emotions and feelings with parents, siblings, and others, if they felt more comfortable about their emotions and that having these emotions was not only common, but

acceptable. Parents could also benefit by an increased understanding of what their adult children truly are experiencing.

### *Comparison*

While adult children report being affected by parental divorce in many ways similar to young children, many individuals also reported a strong sense that their experience, while not to trivialize the obstacles that young children of divorce endure, was more difficult in some aspects. In comparison to the assumed experiences of most young children of divorce, adult children of divorce cited increased awareness of what was occurring within the family, increased parental disclosure, and the act of questioning what was real in their lives pre-divorce as factors that resulted in the sentiment that experiencing divorce as an adult is more difficult.

Many participants stated that one aspect that makes divorce more difficult for adult children is that, while they may have more faculties with which to cope with their parents' divorce, they are also more aware of what is occurring within the family and the amount of pain that the family is experiencing. One participant poignantly acknowledged this when she/he stated that as an adult, "Yes, you can understand things better. You can process things better, emotionally, but you also feel like you're subject to knowing more and that's not a good thing." This excerpt acknowledges that adult children are aware that they should be more able to cope than a young child, but that it remains extremely difficult and, potentially, they are not able to deal with their increased knowledge more constructively than a young child.

Participants also reported that this increased awareness was partially, if not entirely, the result of increased parental disclosure. Many participants referred to the ease and comfort with which one or both parents openly disclosed information about the other parent and/or the divorce. One participant simply said it was difficult being an adult because, “It would be easier as a kid because we know way too much crap.” This statement makes the assumption that young children are often shielded from the details of parental divorce. While this may not always be the case, it is the more common occurrence and the strategy championed by most experts who interact with families with young children experiencing divorce. Parents of adult children are more likely to view their adult children as equals and feel that that adult status grants more liberty to freely disclose. Just as one participant reported that, “As adult children, the parents feel a lot freer to talk about what’s going on than they do in front of children.”

The participants in this study were not particularly satisfied with the heightened disclosure of their divorcing parents. Some participants reported sentiments of distress and frustration. Often participants made reference to one or more instances in which they had to request that the parents cease disclosing specific information to them. Other participants expressed a desire for this behavior to discontinue. If divorcing parents of adult children were more conscious of the continuity of the similarity of the impact of certain aspects of divorce on the adult children as young children, the amount of private disclosures may decrease resulting in less stress being placed on the adult child(ren) during the already traumatic experience of divorce.

Some participants also noted that their parents' mid/late-life divorce caused them to, at one or multiple points in their lives, revisit and question their sense of reality pre-divorce. Many individuals stated that they were forced to question what was 'real' or their 'foundation;' often referring to an entity of themselves (ex: moral standards, etc) previously believed to have been firmly established through parental teaching or modeling. The changes in behavior of the parent(s) were considered contradictory and nonnormative to behavior and lessons taught during childhood. Some participants reported confusion due to the unanticipated changes in the parents' behavior. One participant expressed her/his emotions regarding this issue by stating "Everything that you know to be real is suddenly not real. And so you question."

It is undoubtedly a life-changing event regardless of what phase of life the parental divorce occurs. In discussing the unique aspects of being an adult child of divorce, another participant reiterated this experience as a reaction to mid/late-life parental divorce:

Like I said, the only thing I know is being older when it happened and I still think that it was probably one of the biggest things in my life. I mean it just destroyed my perception of things.

Another participant recalled the impact of divorce during adulthood and the toll it took on a previous sense of a strong familial foundation:

Because our whole foundation...everything we were raised with...our values that we were raised with had really been shaken. Everything we really thought our dad was and had claimed to be had been shaken.

This sense of questioning brought on by the mid/late-life parental divorce creates extremely difficult obstacles for the adult child to overcome. Due to the point at which

the divorce occurs during life, adult children may have much more difficulty adapting to the personal and familial changes occurring because of their previously established identity of self. Because they feel they were established in who and what they and their family was, the ability for the divorce to destroy that may result in adult children finding it extremely difficult to redefine who they are and who their family is.

Some participants reported experiencing calling into question what is/was “real” or their “foundation” to the same extent. Some participants reported that they did not feel that their parents’ divorce resulted in any form of self-doubt or questioning about what was “real” their “foundation,” what they believed in, or who they were. It is interesting to note that many of the participants who did not feel as impacted in this manner were married at the time their parents’ divorce occurred.

It appears as though marriage may provide a sense of stability during the unstable time of mid/late-life parental divorce. As one participant reported,

...being married I think there is that realization that I’ve got my life and my wife and my own family to take care of. I can help, but I’ve got my family. So I think that did make it a little easier.

Another participant reiterated the possibility that marriage may serve as a buffer or coping tool for mid/late-life parental divorce by discussing the instability that his/her parents’ divorce created during her engagement. This participant reported the distress his/her parents’ divorce caused him/her prior to his/her wedding which took place after his/her parents announced the decision to divorce.

When [I was] engaged I really doubted. I said, ‘Okay, I thought it worked for my parents. This is what I looked up to and now am I going to find out that once we get married, thirty years down the road I’m going to turn radical and want to be 30 again when I’m really fifty because that’s what

my dad did?’ I truly had a hard time. ‘Should we do this? Should we even get married? Should we just live together?’ It is not normal for me to think that way. I just looked up to Mom and Dad and that was the perfect marriage or what we had thought. Then we hear that it was all in shambles and not perfect at all. It really made me wonder, ‘What am I doing? Why am I getting married? For it to fall apart?’

This information may be particularly significant for those parents who intentionally postpone a divorce and opt to divorce after children become adults. It appears, from this study, that it is not adult status alone that may reduce the impact of mid/late-life parental divorce, but a stable marriage relationship for the adult child may lessen the degree of difficulty adult children face in coping with this family transition. Obviously, though, further detailed investigation would be necessary to confirm this observation.

This study does reveal though, that increased knowledge, in general, of the adult child experience of divorce may be able to help divorcing parents to avoid intensifying the frustration, stress and pain of the adult child by avoiding certain behaviors such as heightened, detailed disclosure.

#### *Unique Characteristics of Adult Sibling Relationship*

There are many unique aspects of experiencing this phenomenon, not only as an adult, but also as a sibling. Many participants also noted, not only the importance of their sibling relationship throughout their parents’ divorce, but also the impact that the divorce had in their sibling relationship(s).

Participants reported seeking support or confiding in siblings before, during, and after mid/late-life parental divorce overwhelmingly because of a sense of shared history. In explaining why one participant spoke with a sister she/he said, “Because she

understood. We had grown up together.” Another participant stressed the unique nature of the sibling relationship in comparison with all other relationships by stating the role that relationship plays not only during the time of the parental divorce, but also during a lifetime by stating: “It’s a shared experience... it’s a shared history. There are no other people in the world that share that and it’s a significant thing.”

Sibling relationships are also unique because they are most often lifelong relationships, just as coping with parental divorce is a lifelong experience. This aspect of the sibling relationship provides a sense of stability and also emphasizes the shared history aspect because siblings not only share a history, but often share future interactions which will later be compiled into this shared history. One participant acknowledged the lifelong aspect as making this relationship extremely significant by asserting why it is an important relationship: “Because we’re all in it together. Because they’re my family. Family is with you forever. You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family.”

Unity together and, often, against the parents or the parents’ decision arose as an important and significant aspect of these sibling relationships. It appears as though sibling relationships may provide more than just an outlet to confide, but that a sense of togetherness provides strength for the adult children and has the potential to further strengthen the sibling relationships as well.

Yes, well I think, after the divorce, we all really banded together and it made all of us close and I can honestly say that I believe, I may be mistaken, but I believe all of us are really best friends with each other.

One participant’s parents appeared to be keenly aware of the potential for their children to stick together and go against them and, as a result, chose to disclose the

decision to separate and possibly divorce to them in smaller groups. In explaining why they were not told the news as a group, this participant acknowledged this by stating, “If it were all of us, it would probably get crazy because we would all unite and go against them.”

Not only did some participants report a sense of unity with their siblings, the majority of participants reported that their parents divorce impacted their relationships with their sibling(s), if only slightly. Participants acknowledged the significance of their parents’ divorce in drawing them closer together and this can be seen in the following excerpts: “I think it changed relationships dramatically, all the way around.” “I think it’s brought us a little bit closer because I think we’re all on the same page.” “Well, I think afterwards we got closer. We talked more. We talked more about the situation – about Dad and Mom. About how different things happened, probably.”

Overall, it appears that there are unique aspects of the adult sibling relationship that develop or arise during mid/late-life parental divorce. Adult sibling relationships are unique because of their lifelong nature which produces a shared history and shared understanding distinct only to those individuals. Parental divorce also seems to bring adult siblings together and strengthen that sibling bond.

#### *Developmental Aspects of Communication Coping*

The data also revealed that there appears to be a developmental aspect to communication coping in the way in which participants discussed the details surrounding their experiences. Those individuals whose parents’ divorce had occurred fairly recently provided more information which included more details. Participants whose parents’

divorce had occurred a significant amount of time in the past often could recall their general feelings, but not the specific details around learning about the divorce, discussions with parents, siblings, and friends, and particular instances were difficult to recall or often withheld. Further, participants varied in the amount of communication they reported having with their siblings about the divorce with participants who experienced the divorce more recently reporting more sibling communication surrounding the topic of divorce.

Methodologically, participants in this study were interviewed anywhere from 0-30 years since their parents' divorce had occurred ( $M = 13$  years). The most obvious explanation is that time has resulted in a difficulty remembering details and may have dulled the strength of the emotions or participants may have intentionally tried to block out the painful memories. Furthermore, participants most likely varied in their coping strategies and the extent to which they have successfully coped with their parents' divorce.

Regarding the amount of communication reported between the siblings a generational/technological standpoint seems to be the explanation based on participant responses. Communication is currently much more accessible via cell phone, email, and instant messaging and, not to mention, more affordable. Communication has never been as inexpensive or more accessible to any other generation than current generations due to advances in technology. The monetary cost associated with communication was the most common topic that arose in explaining the amount of communication between siblings. This may contribute to the amount of communication between siblings as noted by the

following participants. “We talk all the time because we have phone-to-phone for free.” “I probably talk to all of my sisters almost every day because we can talk for free on our cell phones.” A participant who experienced parental divorce approximately 30 years ago reiterated the role that monetary cost plays in sibling communication:

No, I don't think I was any more inclined to talk to anybody on the phone back then than I am now. I don't mind talking on the phone. I guess I still have the idea that it's expensive and I want to save my money.

There are a wide variety of explanations for why there appears to be developmental aspects of communication coping. More research in the area, possibly directly questioning the participants about why they feel they cannot recall certain aspects or feel that they did not communicate with each other at certain points in their lives would be extremely helpful in understanding the adult sibling relationship.

### *Regrets*

A final, but important topic that was prominent during these interviews was what these adult children wished they would have done differently, in retrospect, regarding their experience of mid/late-life parental divorce. The two emergent themes in this area were the desires (a) to not have parented the parent and (b) to have had a stronger relationship consisting of increased amounts and degrees of communication with their father prior to and after the divorce.

Some participants reported that they felt they had to parent their parents. They believed that there was a role-reversal that took place for a period of time in which they were sought out by the parents as a confidant, a mediator, counselor and/or a messenger between the parents. Retrospectively, participants seem to be aware of the negative

repercussions for this type of behavior. Like one participant stated, “It’s very unhealthy to be a marriage counselor to your parents. Role reversal is terrible.”

Another participant appeared to have a newfound understanding of the difficulties brought on by being placed in the middle of the parents during a divorce:

I wish I hadn’t allowed myself to be put in the middle. I thought... it was easier. We did it more for my mom. My dad didn’t really ask us to. We did it more for her sake. Just little things like, ‘Hey, can you ask your dad this for me?’ But, so in our eyes, it was easier. But, we didn’t have anybody to say, ‘You’re making it harder in the long run. You can’t let her do that to you. You can’t let her have you run these errands or talk to your dad. She’s got to just do it herself.’ So I wish we had done that because then that big fight wouldn’t have occurred when it did and maybe it would have sped the process along a little. I don’t know, but I wish I hadn’t allowed myself to be put in the middle.

Participants also expressed regret with a lack of relationship and communication with their fathers. Participant responses included: “I wish we could have known my dad more.”, “I think, even now, I would like to have talked to my dad more.”, and

I probably would have tried to have had more conversations with my father about what was going on because we are very close and all of that, but we never really talked about how he was feeling about the divorce when it was going on.

These two themes are of particular importance to a practical understanding of the adult child experience of mid/late-life parental divorce. Individuals who are faced with mid/late-life parental divorce in the future could better prepare and cope with their parents divorce if armed with this knowledge. Studies such as this, provide specific suggestions to the parents and children of mid/late-life divorce that could potentially aid in a healthier transition of the new family system that is being developed. It is obvious now, if it was not before, that parents need to view their adult child more as their child

and less as a minimally impacted, neutral adult and fathers need to establish a stronger relationship with their child, at least from the perspective of the adult child. Adult children of divorce should also feel more confident to quickly establish boundaries with the parents regarding the extent and amount of information that is disclosed to them in an effort to avoid some of the pitfalls discussed throughout this study.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

As this study began, the goal was to isolate the sibling interactions of adult children of mid/late-life parental divorce, but as the study progressed frustration mounted with the realization that participants in the study could not recall interactions solely between the siblings. Throughout the process of analyzing the data it became apparent that there was a major oversight in the design of this study and, as a result, the findings are incomplete at best and inaccurate at worst. This can be explained through a return to Family Systems Theory, which clearly outlines that the family is a system that must be examined holistically. The initial expectation of isolating sibling interactions failed because families are systems and must be examined within the whole system because the subsystems are interdependent, not independent. This study tried to focus solely on the sibling relationship subsystem at the exclusion of all other subsystems of the family. A system, such as the family, cannot be understood unless all subsystems are taken into account. This revelation explained why the participant talk was inclusive of individuals outside of the sibling relationship, especially the parents.

It is also important to note that the aspect CPM theory that focuses on privacy dilemmas should account more for Systems Theory. Privacy dilemmas are neither experienced, nor understood, strictly within a subsystem, but need to be understood considering the roles of the other people involved because rarely does a privacy dilemma

occur involving only two individuals. Accounting more for the interactions of the whole system would help to better understand privacy dilemmas overall.

Additionally, it should be noted that the nature of the subject matter, divorce, was centralized around an issue that was family- and parent-focused rather than sibling-focused. Unfortunately, the sibling relationship was secondary in understanding what was occurring within the family to cause the family privacy dilemmas. The background of all things discussed with participants was the divorce. Therefore it should have been expected that parents and other individuals would play a major role in their talk about their experience. To better understand the sibling relationship, a topic that originated between siblings or was more centralized the siblings as the major players and as the individuals making the decisions would have been more useful in getting to the heart of the privacy dilemmas between siblings.

Taking into account these retrospective understandings of this study, some interesting and unique aspects of the adult child experience of mid/late-life divorce were still revealed. Before identifying where future research in this area is necessary, some specific limitations to this study should be noted.

### Limitations

Particular limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, the participant pool was extremely homogenous, being a primarily Caucasian, 71% female, and middle-class sample with post-high school education level of some kind. Additionally, all participants were members of an entirely biological family. A more

diverse sample might be needed to describe the experiences of other populations' conceptualizations and experiences as an adult child and sibling of mid/late-life parental divorce. Second, the questions posed to participants during the interview process were broad. More direct questions concentrating on each specific privacy dilemma would have aided in more accurately supporting this aspect of CPM theory and may also have presented a more equal distribution of all three forms of privacy dilemmas.

Finally, it should be noted that the researcher is an adult child of mid/late-life parental divorce herself and that, while this was attempted to be accounted for at all stages of this research process, the influence of this personal connection to the research subject may have slightly impacted the findings of this study in unquantifiable ways. While this can be viewed as a limitation, it also potentially improved the study. This similarity with participants allowed the researcher to establish a relationship with the participants beyond that of an individual who has not experienced mid/late-life parental divorce. Many, but not all, participants were informed of the researcher's shared experience of mid/late-life parental divorce during the interview if the topic arose and it was appropriate to reveal and/or to encourage more open responses if the researcher sensed hesitancy on the part of participants to reveal personal and, often, intimate details of their family's experiences.

#### Future Research

As noted earlier, it is essential this subject matter be analyzed under the lens of Family Systems Theory. Future research would be useful in this subject area, not only

academically, but, practically, because research on this topic could potentially revolutionize the manner in which families and individuals manage coping with mid/late-life parental divorce.

Future research should further examine the experiences of the adult child (and sibling) faced with mid/late-life parental divorce. This research area has been overlooked for far too long by the academic community and a more thorough understanding of these experiences hold the prospective to improve the quality of the communication and relationships of the entire family unit faced with mid/late-life parental divorce. The divorced parents of adult children of divorce should also be examined to obtain knowledge of their understanding of what their adult children experience and their motivations for their actions surrounding issues of their divorce that impact their adult children.

Additionally, this research focused only on individuals who were part of a sibling group. Future research would be beneficial in the area of only-children who experience mid/late-life parental divorce, as their reported experiences may be significantly different than those of individuals with siblings. Along with only-children, research should examine individuals of varied family compositions such as step, adopted, non-traditional families, etc. The individuals in this study were all members of entirely biological families prior to the divorce. Just as individuals of varied family compositions should be understood for their unique experiences, future research should also investigate the role cultural differences play. Many cultures have varied definitions of family and

expectations of family roles and obligations. It is therefore imperative that culture be examined in future research.

Studies like this are only the beginning to increasing our understanding of the adult child of mid/late-life parental divorce.

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APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

Thank you for your participation in this important research program. You have been invited to participate because you have indicated that you (a) have experienced parental divorce after the age of 18 and (b) have one or more siblings who were also 18 years or older at the time of your parents' divorce. Your participation is invaluable and greatly appreciated. Please take a few moments to read through the consent form below and sign it. If you have any questions, feel free to ask!

---

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been invited and agree to participate in the research study being conducted by Jillian Jensen, under the direction of Dr. Patrick Hughes, Texas Tech University, Department of Communication Studies.

I understand that the purpose of this research is to examine the communication of adult siblings who have experienced parental divorce during adulthood, specifically the role that privacy plays during and after this significant family event.

I understand that my participation in the study is completely voluntary. If I, the participant, choose not to be involved at any point throughout the study, I understand that there will be no penalty to me in any way.

I agree to participate in an interview estimated to last one hour, which will be audiotape recorded. While a response to all questions is preferable, I understand it is completely acceptable if I refuse to respond to any question(s) and I am aware that I always have the option to terminate the interview at any point and opt to reschedule, if I so desire.

I am aware that my real name will NOT be revealed and confidentiality of my responses will be maintained by the researcher throughout the entirety of the study. Therefore, none of my responses will be directly linked to me and a pseudonym, that I have the option to select, will be used in place of my name to protect my identity. I am aware that in addition to the principal researcher, Dr. Patrick Hughes, the advisor of this study, and a select group of trusted coders will be the only other individuals to have access to my responses (not linked to my true name) and that the responses I provide will be used solely for this research study. I understand that the cassettes, recordings, transcripts, and codings related to this interview will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of the advisor, Dr. Patrick Hughes, of the principal researcher.

I am aware that there are no foreseeable risks to me, the participant, stemming from this research study. I understand that I will not receive monetary compensation for my participation.

Please initial (appropriate option(s)) below:

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to have this interview audiotape recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I consent to have this interview audiotape recorded over the telephone.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For questions about this study, please contact the principal researcher, Jillian Jensen [(806) 632-2986; jillian.r.jensen@ttu.edu], or her advisor, Dr. Patrick Hughes [(806) 742-3911; patrick.hughes@ttu.edu]. For questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Texas Tech University's Institutional Review Board of Human Services, Office of Research Services, Texas Tech University, 79409 [(806) 742-3884].

This consent form is invalid after October 31, 2007.

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE



APPENDIX C  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### *Introduction:*

- Thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me.
- You are aware of the study, but is there anything that you would like me to clarify or explain?
- **Dropped Call:** If at any point in the interview we get disconnected hang up and I will call you back immediately.
- **Reminder:** I would like to remind you again that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If, at any point, during this interview or study, you wish to withdraw your participation, just let me know. We can reschedule the interview or you can opt to withdraw completely from the study.
- **Pseudonym.** Confidentiality is of greatest importance to me. Your identity will be kept confidential and will not be used to identify you in my research. I would like to give you the opportunity to select a pseudonym (name), in place of your name, to be used in the transcript and printing of the findings instead of selecting one for you before we finish today.
- Today I will be using the tape recorder to record our conversation as mentioned earlier. I estimate our interview to last approximately an hour. It is extremely helpful if you can provide as much detailed information as possible, but if there is ever a question that makes you feel uncomfortable and/or that you do not feel you can answer, that is fine, we can just skip it and come back to it at another time or omit it completely from the interview. If you need me to clarify a question, please ask.
- Do you have any questions for me before we begin the interview and begin recording?

### *Questions:*

1. Please describe the make up of your family.
2. What was your family like?
3. How close would you say you and your siblings were during your childhood?
  - a. Please provide me with some examples of your closeness.
4. Please describe how close you and your siblings currently are.

5. How old were you when your parents' divorce occurred?
6. Describe to me how you found out that your parents were getting a divorce.
  - a. Did one sibling know before the others? If so, what did that sibling do with the information, did they tell the others or did they try to protect the others? Why?
7. Please describe your initial thoughts and feelings.
8. Please describe the circumstances surrounding the divorce.
  - a. Did it come as a shock or surprise to you and your siblings? Please explain why.
9. Describe how the divorce made you feel? Please explain why it made you feel this way.
10. Describe a typical family gathering (i.e. holidays, reunions, wedding) before the divorce.
  - a. Was this a typical interaction for your family? What were daily interactions like?
11. Describe a typical family gathering after the divorce.
  - a. Was this a typical interaction for your family? What are daily interactions like?
12. Can you tell me about an instance when you spoke to one or both of your parents about the divorce?
13. Did you talk to many people about how you were feeling regarding the divorce?
  - a. Who?
  - b. Why did you talk to those people?
  - c. What did you tell them about the divorce?
14. Did you talk with your sibling(s) about the divorce?
  - a. How Often?
  - b. Describe to me what sentiments you all had about what was taking place?
15. Was there ever a time when you intentionally kept information from...
  - a. your siblings?
  - b. your parents?
  - c. that you and your sibling(s) decided to keep from other sibling(s)?
  - d. extended family or strangers?

16. Describe to me how you and your sibling talked about the divorce.
17. How did you and your siblings talk to people outside the family about the divorce?
  - a. Did you share the same amount of details?
  - b. Can you think of a specific instance for each sibling and what they shared with others?
18. Do you feel that the divorce changed your relationship with your siblings in any way?
  - a. Describe for me experiences that lead you to believe this.
19. Do you and your siblings still talk about the divorce?
  - a. Please tell me about a recent conversation you had regarding your parents' divorce?
20. Many people believe that divorce is easier for adult children than young children. Do you agree with this notion? Why or why not?
21. After going through the experience, is there anything you would have done differently?
  - a. If so, what and why?

*Closing Remarks/Debriefing:*

- Those are all the questions I have for today. Was there anything that you would like to share with me or that you feel was important that I may not have asked?
- Do you have any questions for me? At a later time, if you think of anything you would like to tell me that we did not touch on in the interview or have questions, please feel free to contact me.
- Like I said earlier, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. I anticipate this study to be completed by August 2007. At that point, or earlier if you would like me to contact you with the completed findings so that can see what your participation helped to accomplish, I would be happy to.
- Thank you again for your time, I greatly value and appreciate your participation and willingness to share such private information with me.

PERMISSION TO COPY

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Texas Tech University or Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, I agree that the Library and my major department shall make it freely available for research purposes. Permission to copy this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Director of the Library or my major professor. It is understood that any copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my further written permission and that any user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Agree (Permission is granted.)

_____	_____
Student Signature	Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

Jillian R. Jensen	06.01.07
_____	_____
Student Signature	Date