Children and Youth Services Review 107 (2019) 104533

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Children of divorce evaluate their quality of life: The moderating effect of psychological processes

Yoa Sorek, the MYERS-JDC-Brookdale

The Hebrew University, JDC Hill, POB, 3886, Jerusalem 9103702, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Children of divorce
Quality of life
Parental conflict
Psychological processes
Self-blame
Active coping strategies

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, considerable information has been gathered on the negative implications of divorce for children's well-being. However, the implications of divorce on the children's quality of life – which is manifested mostly in positive life aspects – have been little studied. This article addresses this gap by examining risk and resilience factors related to self-reported quality of life of children of divorced parents, with particular emphasis on psychological processes: self-blame for the divorce and parental conflict and active coping with it.

An online survey for one child and one parent was conducted with 122 children aged 7–17 from 86 Israeli families. The data were analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling with mixed models that accounted for the interdependency of the children's data within each family. All the risk and resilience factors were examined from the children's perspective, except parental conflict that was examined also from the parent's perspective.

The findings showed that parental conflict (from both the children and parents' perspective), perceived gap in conflict intensity between marriage and divorce (from the parents' perspective) and high self-blame were negatively associated with the children's evaluations of their quality of life, whereas active coping was positively associated with it. The study also supported three significant models in which psychological processes moderated the linkage between parental conflict and the children's quality-of-life evaluations. The findings are discussed with relation to the literature on the impact of divorce on children's well-being and quality of life, and implications for social policy are suggested.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, together with high divorce rates in Western society, considerable information has been gathered on the negative implications of divorce for the well-being of children, and on the main factors affecting it (see Amato, 2010, 2014). Most of the studies on the difficulties and psychopathologies experienced by children of divorced parents assumed that well-being was achieved given the lack of negative life aspects, as opposed to the quality-of-life approach that became increasingly dominant since the 1990s, according to which well-being is manifested mostly in the presence of positive life aspects (Cummins, 1995, 1998).

Usually, studies in this area examined children's well-being as reported by adults (parents, teachers, or clinicians), or examined them using tools designed by adults, such as tools for measuring externalizing and internalizing problems (Amorós, Samper, Martínez, & Sánchez, 2017; Pálmarsdóttir, 2015). It may be argued, therefore, that these studies have in fact examined adult perceptions and views about children's well-being (Ben-Arieh, 2008). Conversely, according to the recognition approach, a person's quality of life can be measured only according to the way he or she perceives and evaluates it. Therefore, we can only learn about children's well-being and quality of life from their own experiences and views (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2007).

The present study examined how children of divorced parents evaluate their quality of life from their own, subjective perspective. The research relies on the quality-of-life approach (Diener, 1995) and focuses on positive aspects of life, such as a child's happiness and satisfaction from life. The study relies also on the extensive literature on the well-being of children of divorced parents to examine risk and resilience factors affecting their quality of life. Specifically, the risk factors discussed in this paper are the parental conflict and children's self-blame, and the resilience factor is active coping with the parental conflict.

The study was conducted in Israel, which is considered a family-oriented society, and having children out of wedlock is considered less legitimate than in the West (Fogiel-Bijaoui & Rutlinger-Reiner, 2013). divorce rates in Israel are low compared to other Western countries: the crude divorce rate (CDR), defined as the number of divorces during the year per 1000 people in Israel was 1.7 in 2016 as opposed to the OECD average of 2.0 (OECD, 2019). Finally, divorce in Israel has a stratified

E-mail address: yoasorek@gmail.com.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104533
Received 26 May 2019; Received in revised form 6 October 2019; Accepted 6 October 2019
Available online 15 November 2019

pattern: couples in lower socioeconomic positions have a higher risk of divorce and higher education, in general, reduces the risk of divorce (Kaplan & Herbst, 2015).

2. Literature review

2.1. Parental conflict as a risk factor of children's Well-being

The parental conflict is the key stress factor related to children's adjustment difficulties in processes of separation and divorce. Parental conflict was associated with a broad range of children's difficulties, including higher levels of depression and anxiety, externalized behavior problems, lower levels of self-esteem, and lower social and scholastic efficacies (Amorós et al., 2017; Pálmarsdóttir, 2015).

Not all the patterns of parental conflict were found in equal association with children's adjustment difficulties, however (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Parental conflicts over or directly involving the children and those characterized by violence or abuse, including incitement against the other parent were found to relate over time to stronger difficulties in the children's coping with developmental tasks and to severer psychological problems (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Lucas, Nicholson, & Erbas, 2013). Children subjected to years of incitement and dual loyalties were found to be at a higher risk for depression and anxiety (Afifi & McManus, 2010); avoidance and general dissatisfaction with life (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003); and lower self-esteem and happiness (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Harold & Murch, 2005).

Hardly any studies examined the relationship between parental conflict and quality-of-life evaluations by children of divorced parents. Among the few studies in that field was one study, conducted in Spain among 8–12 year-olds, sought to examine this relationship in the case of married parents as well. It revealed that the subjective well-being of children of divorced parents was lower than of children of married parents, and that the subjective well-being of children of divorced parents who reported ongoing parental conflict was the lowest (Orgilés & Samper, 2011). Another study, conducted in the US among 11–15 year-olds, examined the relationship between children's satisfaction with life and stressors related to family life: family structure (married or divorced parents, single-parent families); socioeconomic status; frequency of severe uncontrollable events and the children's perceptions of parental conflict. The findings showed that the latter variable served as the strongest predictor of satisfaction, even more than family structure (Chappel, Suldo, & Ogg, 2014).

The literature indicates that the intensity of parental conflict may vary in time, and that these changes could affect the well-being of children of divorced parents, acting as either risk or resilience factors. It was found, for example, that when the intensity of parental conflict was high prior to the divorce, and it was also chronic and externalized, the possibility given to the children to keep a distance from the daily conflict after the divorce improved their condition (Amato, 2000). For about a quarter of couples, however, the parental conflict not only continues but also exacerbates after divorce, adversely affecting the children's well-being (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007).

3. The psychological processes of children of divorced parents as risk and resilience factors

The children's psychological processes examined in the present study were low self-blame for and active coping with the divorce and parental conflict. The following literature examines the outcome of well-being of children of divorced parents.

Self-blame for the divorce and parental conflict as risk factors. Scholars have attempted to explain why and how parental conflict constitutes a factor of risk for the children's well-being. This was partly because other studies had shown that the presence of parental conflict was not always detrimental to the children's situation; for instance, one study found that among 60% of a sample of children exposed to parental conflict with physical violence, virtually no signs of distress were found (Hughes & Luke, 1998). One explanation rested on studies that found that the way people experience and interpret stressful events is related to the way that they cope and to the outcomes of their psychological well-being (Compas, 1987; Lazarus, 1991). Moreover, studies found significant differences between reports by parents and children on the latter's stressful experience of the parental conflict, highlighting the importance of examining the perceptions of the children themselves (Kitzmann & Cohen, 2003).

Grych and Fincham (1990) suggested a cognitive-contextual conceptualization of the role played by children's interpretation of stressful events with regard to their functioning. They assumed some children would interpret the conflict between divorced parents as threatening and blame themselves. Indeed, several studies have shown that children who blame themselves for the divorce and parental conflict feel threatened and fear abandonment, adjust more poorly to the divorce and suffer greater difficulties such as depression, anxiety, shame, low self-esteem, and externalized behavior problems (Gerard, Buehler, Franck, & Anderson, 2005; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Harold & Murch, 2005).

Children and adolescents' perceptions of self-blame were found to be significant, independent predictors of both internalizing and externalizing symptoms, consistently across a series of multiple regression models (Fear et al., 2009). Various studies also found that self-blame served as both a mediator[1] and a moderator[2] between exposure to the conflict and children's well-being. For example, it was found that perceived self-blame was a salient mediator of overt conflict and that triangulation led to more self-blame, which led to more internalizing problems (Gerard et al., 2005). In other studies, self-blame also mediated the association between children's reports of interparental conflict and internalizing problems (Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000; Kim, Jackson, Conrad, & Hunter, 2008). Finally, another study found that self-blame moderated the effects of interparental conflict on externalizing problems and anxiety in boys and on internalizing problems in girls (Kerig, 1998).

Coping efficacy and active coping as resilience factors. *Coping efficacy* is the belief in one's ability to cope with the demands and feelings involved in a stressful event. Studies that examined the perceived coping efficacy of children of divorced parents revealed that a positive perception of coping efficacy with regards to the difficulties attending divorce was related to positive adjustment to these difficulties (Kerig, 2001) and to lower depression levels (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). Moreover, children who believed in their ability to cope with parental conflict tended to be hopeful and employ a variety of coping strategies. In contrast, children who had low expectations of their ability to cope effectively tended to feel helpless and avoid attempts to cope (Compas, 1987; Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

Another major construct examined in the literature is *active coping*, which refers to actions initiated by the children to cope with the difficulty they feel as a result of interparental conflict. This action may be designed to improve the way they feel or to improve things in general (Grych et al., 1992). Studies that examined children's active coping with difficulties experienced following divorce revealed that children who reported active coping and believed that the strategies they had adopted had been effective had lower levels of anxiety, depression, aggression and other externalized behavior problems (Gerard et al.,

[1] A mediation model is one where an independent variable is related to a mediating variable, and the latter is related with the dependent variable. Thus, there is an indirect relationship between the independent and the dependent variables, mediated by the mediating variable.

[2] A moderation model is one where a third variable affects the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Thus, the relationship between the independent and dependent variables varies with different values of the moderator variable.

2005; Sandler et al., 2000; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). Sandler et al. (2000) combined the two constructs and showed that the perceived coping efficacy mediated the relations between the children's active coping and the psychological difficulties.

Children's active coping has been little studied as a moderator between parental conflict and the child well-being (Shelton & Harold, 2007). Various studies found that the use of active coping strategies by adolescents served both as a variable mediating the relation between parental conflict and well-being (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002), and as a moderator (Nicolotti, El-Sheikh, & Whitson, 2003; Shelton & Harold, 2007). For example, Nicolotti and colleagues (2003) found that the use of active coping strategies to cope with parental conflict shielded girls against symptoms of depression and low self-esteem; it also protected boys and girls from developing health problems.

We did not find any studies that examined the relation between active coping by children of divorced/conflicted parents and their quality-of-life (as opposed to well-being) evaluations. Only few studies examined the relations between other types of psychological processes of children from various types of families and their perceived quality of life. It was found that adolescents' perceived quality of life was positively related to their psychological capital, defined as the combined perceptions of personal resilience, hope, optimism and self-efficacy (Afzal, Atta, & Malik, 2016). Other studies found that the presence of high self-efficacy, as reported by adolescents from different social groups, was associated with higher satisfaction with life (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004; Suldo & Huebner, 2006).

4. Goals and hypotheses

This present study is part of a broader research project that examined several risk and resilience factors related to the self-reported quality of life of children of divorced parents. In this study we hypothesized that:

(1) The more intense the parental conflict became since marriage until the completion of the survey, the more it is intense in the present, and the more the children were felt caught in the middle, the lower their evaluations of their quality of life.
(2) the children's psychological processes and their evaluated quality of life will be related:
   a. The higher the children's reported self-blame in divorce and parental conflict, the lower their evaluated quality of life; and
   b. The more active their reported attempts to cope with the conflict, the higher their evaluated quality of life.
(3) The interaction between children's psychological processes and conflict intensity will predict the evaluated quality of life:
   a. A stronger negative relationship would be found between conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when their active coping is lower than when it is higher; and
   b. A stronger negative relationship would be found between conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when their self-blame is higher than when it is lower.

5. Method

5.1. Participants and procedures

We conducted a cross-sectional survey at one point in time using self-completion internet questionnaires for a child and one parent. During the recruitment process, a concerted effort was made to reach families through public, private and third sector services that work with families going through divorce. A call for participants was issued via a poster distributed in different ways, although most participants were recruited via social media. The call addressed mothers and fathers, heterosexual and homosexual families alike. The only inclusion criteria were that the parents were divorced, and the children were minors. There was no exclusion criterion.

The information was collected from July 2015 to July 2016. In the course of that year, 318 parents contacted the researcher and expressed their consent to have their children participate in the study. In 219 of the families (69%), the other parent was opposed to participation. Among their reasons was the fear that filling out the questionnaire would make the children experience difficult emotions towards their parents or towards the divorce, which they may not have experienced before. When both parents agreed, the researcher contacted the child/ren and had them sign an informed consent form. Children from 13 families (4%) refused to participate. In other words, out of all the families that contacted the researcher over one year, the children of only 27% eventually participate. It would appear, therefore, that the main difficulty in recruiting participants was the opposition of one of the partners and the strict gatekeeping applied, rather than the children's refusal.

Parents were told that there was no preference as to which of them completed the questionnaire. Once we received the consent forms, we sent the participants online questionnaires. The final sample consisted of 122 participants in Israel, from 86 heterosexual families, recruited mostly via Facebook and WhatsApp. In 56 families, one child participated, and in 30 families two or more participated. For 103 children, the mothers completed the questionnaires; for 19 children, the fathers. Because the number of fathers who participated in the study was very small, we omitted the data on them from the study and only retained information about their children. Confidentiality and anonymity where maintained and informed consent was obtained from both parents as well as the child. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Of the children, 45% were boys. Their average age was 12.9 (range = 7–17; SD = 2.57). Most were Israeli-born and secular, and they generally reported that they were not worried by their families' financial situation (31%) or only occasionally so (48%) (see Appendix A, Table 1). No age differences were found by the children's gender ($t(120) = 1.31$, $p = .194$).

The mothers' average age was 43 (range = 34–54; SD = 4.3). They had been divorced for an average of 6.5 years (max = 16; SD = 3.5). Most were Israeli-born, college-educated and secular. Some 65% reported that they were divorced and 28% that they were remarried or in

Table 1
Correlations of Dependent and Independent Variables by Children's Reports (N = 122).

	M (SD)	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.7	0.8
1. OLS	8.10 (2.27)	0.57***	0.71***	0.67***	−0.26	−0.24	−0.36	0.42***
2. HLTW	7.44 (2.43)		0.60***	0.63***	−0.23	−0.21	−0.27	0.43***
3. PWI-SC	7.81 (1.48)			0.56***	−0.24	−0.30	−0.35***	0.39***
4. SLSS	3.75 (0.80)				−0.44***	−41***	−0.45***	0.45***
5. Child's perception of conflict intensity	2.37 (0.94)					0.40***	0.54***	−0.30
6. Self-blame	1.84 (0.94)						0.49***	−0.28
7. Child's feelings of being caught between parents	2.03 (1.10)							−0.29
8. Active coping	3.17 (1.32)							–

Note: All variables are at the individual child level; *** $p < .001$.

a relationship. About 70% lived only with their children and 28% with a partner and their children. Interestingly, most reported below (37%) or far below average income (34%). About half (54%) reported that their financial situation at the time of completing the questionnaire was worse than when they had been married, while some 7% reported improvement (see Appendix A, Table 1).

The characteristics of the sample we obtained were non-representative of the population of children of divorced parents in Israel. For example, it does not include any representative of the Arab minority (20% of the population) but only Jews. Moreover, whereas only 45% of Israeli Jews consider themselves secular, with the rest defining their way of life as traditional to ultra-Orthodox (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018), this sample includes mainly secular Jews. Finally, most mothers in the sample are educated and middle class, a group in which the frequency of divorce is relatively low (Kaplan & Herbst, 2015). This non-representativeness may be due to the strict gatekeeping procedure used during the recruitment, and our insistence on active consent by both parents, as was the case in other studies as well (e.g. Courser, Shamblen, Lavrakas, Collins, & Ditterline, 2009; Shaw, Cross, Thomas, & Zubrick, 2015).

5.2. Measures

Intensity of parental conflict was examined by the perceptions of mothers and children. Regarding mothers, we examined the perceived gap in conflict intensity between the period of their marriage and the time of completing the questionnaire using two items from Lumer (1998) Hebrew questionnaire: "How would you define the level of tension and conflict between you and your ex-husband during the period of your marriage?" and "How would you define the level of tension and conflict between you and your ex-husband today?" Intensity was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = "*There were no conflicts and tension between us*", to 5 = "*There were very many conflicts and a very high level of tension between us*"). The gap in conflict was defined as the difference between the scores, so that the new variable ranged between −4 (decreased conflict) and +4 (increased conflict).

Regarding children, we used a variation of two measures from the Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict scale (CPIC; Grych et al., 1992). The original scale contained 51 statements relating to nine aspects of the perceived parental conflict: frequency, intensity, settlement of conflict, content, threat, coping ability, self-blame, children's feelings of being caught between the parents, and conflict stability. The original scale had 4–7 statements for each aspect, but to make things easier for the children, in the current study we selected only seven aspects (excluding conflict content and stability) and 1–2 items for each. We selected mainly statements that somewhat overlapped in the original scale. For instance, we included Item 16: "My parents are often cruel to one another", but excluded Item 24, which had a similar but somewhat narrower content: "When my parents are having an argument, they say mean things to one another".

The first measure from the CPIC we used in the current study examined children's subjective evaluations of the intensity of the parental conflict regardless of their involvement. It was composed of the original scales of frequency, intensity, settlement of conflict, and threat. The second measure examined the extent to which the children felt caught between the parents. It was composed of the original scales of: coping ability, self-blame, and the children's feelings of being caught between the parents.

The original instruments used a three-point scale, but since it was decided to remove certain items, we used a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) to ensure more varied, responses from the children. The instruments were translated into Hebrew especially for this study. Back and forth translation was used to ensure reliability. The internal consistencies found in this study: intensity of parental conflict, $\alpha = 0.80$, and the children's feelings that they were caught between the parents, $\alpha = 0.64$.

The children's psychological processes. The study examined two aspects of the children's psychological processes that touch on the parental conflict: self-blame and active coping. To examine self-blame, three items were used (e.g. "When my parents argue or fight, I feel guilty"), and to examine the extent of their active coping with the parental conflict, a single item was used ("When my parents fight, I can do something to make myself feel better")[3] – all from the CPIC (Grych et al., 1992). Here, too, the children were requested to reply using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = *really disagree* to 5 = *really agree*). The internal consistency of self-blame was found to be $\alpha = 0.71$.

Quality-of-life evaluations were assessed using four measures that are commonly used together for that purpose, as they are both unidimensional and multidimensional and refer to both the cognitive and the affective aspect (Gross-Manos, Shimoni, & Ben-Arieh, 2015). Combined, they provide a full picture of the quality of life. We used a validated Hebrew translation of these instruments. In what follows, we refer to all four measures collectively as the quality-of-life measure.

Overall Life Satisfaction (OLS). This measure asks children how satisfied they are with their life as a whole, on a scale from 0 ("completely dissatisfied") to 10 ("completely satisfied") (Rees, Goswami, & Pople, 2013). It represents the cognitive component related to the children's self-evaluations of their lives – all their perceptions, evaluations and ambitions (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976), According to the Good Childhood Report (Rees et al., 2013), cognitive assessments are stable over time.

The advantages of using a unidimensional measure are brevity and openness, given that a general question allows people to define the concept for themselves (Rees, Goswami, & Bradshaw, 2010). The global model assumes that satisfaction with life is captured best by items that are context-free (Gilman & Huebner, 2000). However, this abstractness might be a drawback for children because they may not understand the concept (Casas et al., 2015).

Happy Last Two Weeks (HLTW). This measure is also a global one-item measure that asks the child how happy he or she was in the last two weeks, with 0 indicating "extremely unhappy" and 10 indicating "extremely happy". The measure introduces two aspects: the timeframe and an affective aspect of happiness. Generally, measures of affect are expected to be less stable than measures of life satisfaction (Gross-Manos et al., 2015; Rees et al., 2013).

Student Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS). Developed by Huebner (1991), this measure includes seven agree/disagree statements related to general satisfaction with life, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = "highly disagree" to 5 = "highly agree"). For example, "My life is going well"; "I wish I had a different life". The measure was found to be reliable in studies conducted by the Children's Society in England (Rees, Bradshaw, Goswami, & Keung, 2010). As a multidimensional measure, it is more time-consuming to use but tends to be more specific, statistically reliable, and stable, and can thus facilitate a more reliable statistical analysis of patterns and differences (Rees et al., 2013). In our study, the internal consistency was $\alpha = 0.87$.

Personal Well-Being Index – School Children (PWI-SC). Another way to measure the children's subjective perception is based on items of an adapted measure, the PWI-SC (Cummins & Lau, 2005). The measure was developed in Australia by Cummins and colleagues (Cummins, Eckersley, van Pallant, Vugt, & Misajon, 2003) as part of an index of psychological well-being and includes seven items relating to satisfaction with life. The children were asked, "How satisfied are you with the following things in life?", such as "Your freedom and independence" and "The way you look".

Although initially designed for adults, it was tested among

[3] Although children were also asked the next item, "When my parents fight, I can do something to make them stop", this item is not included in the analysis as 66% of the children answered it negatively, and it showed no relation to their self-reported quality of life.

Table 2
Relationships between Conflict Intensity and Children's Satisfaction with life (N = 122).

Measure	OLS *B* *(SE)* *T*	HLTW *B* (*SE*) *T*	PWI-SC *B* (*SE*) *T*	SLSS *B* (*SE*) *T*
Child's perception of conflict intensity	−0.61 (0.20) t(94.16) = −3.02** **(p = .003)**	−0.13 (0.34) t(80.70) = −0.39 **(p = .698)**	−0.14 (0.19) t(80.61) = −0.74 **(p = .463)**	−0.37 (0.08) t(79.87) = −4.66*** **(p < .001)**
Gap in mother's perception of conflict intensity at questionnaire completion and during marriage	−0.33 (0.21) t(62.45) = −1.60 **(p = .114)**	0.10 (0.25) t(51.99) = 0.39 **(p = .698)**	0.11 (0.16) t(52.51) = 0.67 **(p = .505)**	−0.15 (0.07) t(50.52) = −2.25 **(p = .029)**
Child's feeling of being caught between parents	−0.51 (0.22) t(97.34) = −2.39* **(p = .019)**	−0.84 (0.33) t(81.58) = −2.54* **(p = .013)**	−0.40 (0.17) t(76.60) = −2.32 **(p = .023)**	−0.21 (0.08) t(80.79) = −2.79** **(p = .006)**

Note: Gap in mother's perception is a family-level variable; the other variables are at the individual child level; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

adolescents in Romania and Spain (Casas, Sarriera, Abs, Coenders, Alfaro, Saforcada, & Tonon, 2011), and yielded fine psychometric results. Each item of the PWI-PC is rated on an 11-point Likert scale (from 0 = *very dissatisfied* to 10 = *very satisfied*). In our study the internal consistence was α = 0.89.

5.3. Data analysis

The data were analyzed with the help of SPSS, version 25. Due to the nature of the data, involving several children per mother in some cases, the hypotheses were examined from a nested perspective. The statistical analyses thus employed hierarchical linear models, using mixed models that took into account the dependency of the children's data within each family (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). To begin with, we examined the mixed models for background characteristics to see if we needed to control for them in testing the hypotheses.

The hypotheses were then examined using hierarchical linear mixed models for the four dependent variables measuring quality-of-life evaluations, and the independent variables, controlling for children's ages and time since the divorce. For each hypothesis, we constructed a nested model according to its variables. That is, four models were calculated regarding the four dependent variables and conflict intensity, and another four models were calculated regrading the four dependent variables and children's psychological processes. To examine the moderating variables, the independent and the moderating variables were standardized, and their interactions defined by the products. The hypotheses were examined using hierarchical linear mixed models: the children's ages and time since the divorce served as control variables and for each model, an independent and a moderating variable were entered along with the interaction between them. Interactions found to be significant were interpreted and described using simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991; Dawson, 2014). In these simple slopes, high and low values of the independent variable were defined at +1SD above the mean, and −1SD below. Power analysis revealed that for regression analyses with five predictors, α = 0.05, a moderate effect size of $f^2 = 0.15$, and a power level of 0.90, with the total required sample size being 116 participants (G*Power 3.1.9.2; Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007).

6. Results

6.1. Distribution of variables

The data showed that quality-of-life measures were on the whole high. The mean OLS was 8 out of 10 (SD = 2.27), whereas HLTW was somewhat lower although still high, 7.5 out of 10 (SD = 2.43). PWI-SC averaged close to 8 out of 10 (SD = 1.48), and on the agree/disagree scale (SLSS) the mean was nearly 4 out of 5 (SD = 0.80).

The data also showed that the children's perception of the conflict intensity, their self-blame and feelings of being caught between the parents were quite low (means of 2.37, 1.84, and 2.03 respectively, out of 5; SDs = 0.94, 0.94, and 1.10, respectively). Conversely, the degree of active coping was moderate (averaging about 3 out of 5, SD = 1.32).

The mothers' perception of the parental conflict at the time of completing the questionnaire was rather low (M = 2.27, SD = 0.89, range 1–5) whereas for the period of marriage, it was scored as moderate to high (M = 3.51, SD = 1.19, range 1–5). Thus, on average, they felt that conflict intensity had diminished since the marriage period (the gap in conflict: M = −1.24, SD = 1.33, range −4 to +4).

6.2. Correlations between variables

Table 1 presents the correlations between the research variables, applying the Bonferroni criteria for multiple comparisons. The table shows that, in general, there are negative correlations between the quality of life measures and the children's perceptions of conflict intensity, self-blame, and being caught between the parents. There are positive correlations between active coping and the quality of life measures.

6.3. Examination of research hypotheses

For all the hypotheses, the children's age and the time elapsed since divorce served as control variables. All the hypotheses were examined with the help of mixed models.

H1: Relations between intensity of parental conflict and children's evaluated quality of life. According to the first hypothesis, the more intense the parental conflict, the lower the children's assessment of their quality of life. The study examined the relationships between three dimensions of conflict intensity and four measures of the children's evaluated quality of life. Four regression models were examined (Table 2). The Bonferroni Principle for multiple comparisons was applied for each dependent variable separately.

We found general satisfaction with life to be explained by the children's perception of conflict intensity and their feeling of being caught between the parents; HLTW is explained by the children's feelings of being caught between the parents, whereas SLSS is explained by the children's perception of conflict intensity, and their feeling of being caught between the parents. No significant results were found for PWI-SC and in all models the gap in mothers' perception of conflict intensity between the time of questionnaire completion and during marriage was nonsignificant. In all cases, the relationship was negative so that the

Table 3
Relations between Children's Psychological Processes & Satisfaction (N = 122).

Measure	OLS *B* *(SE)* *T*	HLTW *B* *(SE)* *T*	PWI-SC *B* *(SE)* *T*	SLSS *B* *(SE)* *T*
Self-blame in divorce and conflict	−0.49 (0.22) t(70.84) = −2.23 **(p = .029)**	−0.56 (0.26) t(60.66) = −2.12 **(p = .038)**	−0.40 (0.15) t(72.81) = −2.72** **(p = .008)**	−0.30 (0.08) t(69.48) = −3.85*** **(p < .001)**
Active coping with conflict	0.89 (0.21) t(70.54) = 4.19*** **(p < .001)**	0.86 (0.25) t(59.28) = 3.42** **(p = .001)**	0.47 (0.15) t(73.00) = 3.15** **(p = .002)**	0.27 (0.08) t(69.72) = 3.43*** **(p < .001)**

Note: All variables are at the individual child level; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

more intense the conflict, the lower the children's perception of their quality of life. Thus, the first research hypothesis was corroborated.

H2: Relations between the children's psychological processes and their evaluated quality of life. According to the second hypothesis, the children's psychological processes and their evaluated quality of life are related. In other words, the higher the children's reported self-blame in divorce and parental conflict, the lower their evaluated quality of life; and the more active their reported attempts to cope with the conflict, the higher their evaluated quality of life. The findings presented in Table 3 show that self-blame is negatively related to quality of life on both the PWI-SC and SLSS, whereas active coping is positively related with all the evaluations of quality of life. Thus, the second and fourth research hypotheses were corroborated.

H3: The interaction between children's psychological processes and conflict intensity as a predictor of the evaluated quality of life. According to the third hypothesis, a stronger negative relationship would be found between conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when their active coping is lower than when it is higher; and a stronger negative relationship would be found between conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when their self-blame is higher than when it is lower. To examine the moderating effect, the measures of conflict intensity were defined as independent; the measures of children's psychological processes as moderating; and children's evaluations quality of life as dependent variables. Thus, 24 models were evaluated: four outcome variables × three independent variables (child's perception of conflict intensity, mother's perception of the gap in conflict intensity, and child's perception of being caught between parents) × two moderating variables (self-blame and active coping).

Due to the multiple models examined, only the significant findings are presented below. This warrants caution when interpreting the results. The examination of self-blame as a moderating variable between mothers' perceived gap in conflict intensity between their marriage and at questionnaire completion and the children's quality of life on the SLSS is presented in Table 4 and Fig. 1. Interpretation of the significant interaction with simple slopes revealed that for high self-blame, a negative relationship was found between mother's perception of conflict intensity and children's evaluated quality of life (B = −0.36, t = −3.29, p = .001). No significant relationship was found for low self-blame (B = 0.05, t = 0.42, p = .674). In other words, a lower degree of self-blame may serve as a children's resource for quality of life, protecting them from the negative repercussions of an intensified conflict.

The examination of the children's active coping as a moderating variable between their perception of the conflict intensity and their general satisfaction with life is presented in Table 5 and Fig. 2.

Interpretation of the significant interaction with simple slopes revealed that for low active coping there was a negative relation between children's perceived conflict intensity and evaluated quality of life (B = −0.77, t = −3.36, p < .001). No significant relationship was

Table 4
Relationship between Mother's Perceived Gap in Conflict Intensity and Child's Self-Blame and Children's Evaluated Quality of Life on the SLSS (N = 122).

Measure	Quality of life agree/disagree scale (SLSS)			
	B	*SE*	*t*	*P*
Child's age	−0.03	0.07	t(86.61) = −0.42	**.675**
Time since divorce	−0.17	0.08	t(67.66) = −2.08	**.042**
Mother's perception of gap in conflict intensity	−0.15	0.08	t(62.31) = −1.85	**.069**
Self-blame	−0.20	0.08	t(86.96) = −2.42	**.018**
Mother's perception of gap in conflict intensity × self-blame	0.20	0.07	t(86.97) = −2.76**	**.007**

Note: Higher gap scores represent increased conflict from marriage to the present; time since divorce and gap in mother's perception are family-level variables, other variables are at the individual child level; *p < .05, **p < .01.

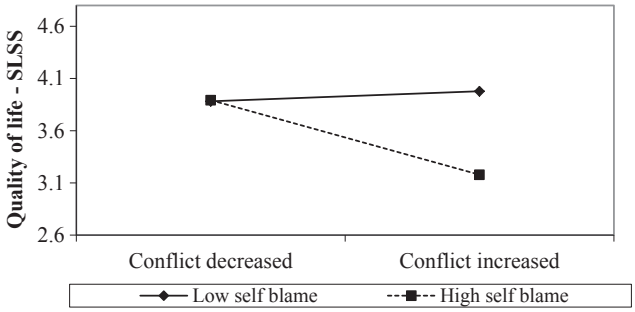

Fig. 1. Self-blame as a moderating variable between mothers' perceived gap in conflict intensity and children's evaluated quality of life.

Table 5
The relationship between children's perceived conflict intensity and active coping and their OLS (N = 122).

Measure	General satisfaction with life, OLS			
	B	*SE*	*t*	*P*
Child's age	−0.60	0.19	t(71.51) = −3.07**	**.003**
Time elapsed since divorce	−0.35	0.21	t(44.17) = −1.68	**.100**
Child's perception of conflict intensity	−0.31	0.21	t(70.10) = −1.48	**.143**
Child's active coping with conflict	0.75	0.21	t(68.38) = 3.56***	**.001**
Child's perception of conflict intensity × active coping	0.47	0.17	t(67.63) = 2.69**	**.009**

Note: Time since the divorce is a family-level variable, other variables are at the individual child level; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

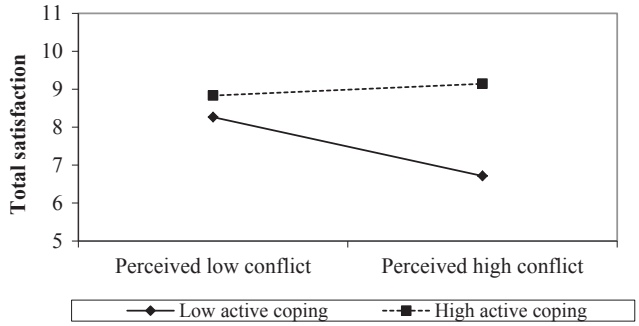

Fig. 2. Children's active coping with the conflict as a moderating variable between their perceived conflict intensity and OLS.

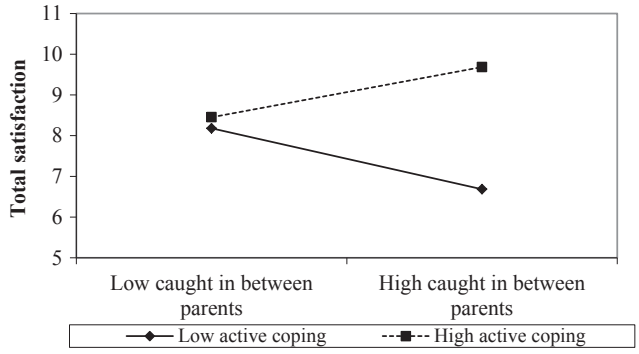

Fig. 3. Active coping as a moderating variable between children's perception of being caught between the parents and general satisfaction with life.

found for high active coping (B = 0.15, t = 0.50, p = .619). In other words, a high degree of active coping may serve the children as a resource protecting their quality of life from the negative repercussions of a highly intense parental conflict.

The examination of active coping with the conflict as a moderating variable between the children's feelings of being caught between the parents and their general satisfaction with life is presented in Fig. 3 and Table 6.

Interpretation of the significant interaction with simple slopes revealed that for low active coping, a negative relationship was found between the children's feeling of being caught between the parents and their evaluated quality of life (B = −0.75, t = −3.80, p < .001). No significant relationship was found for high active coping (B = 0.62, t = 1.71, p = .090). In other words, high active coping with the conflict serves the children as a resource protecting them from the negative repercussions on their quality of life ensuing from their feeling of being caught between the parents.

Table 6
The relationship between the children's perception of being caught between the parents and their active coping, and their general satisfaction with life (N = 122).

Measure	General satisfaction with life, OLS			
	B	*SE*	t	*P*
Child's age	−0.70	0.19	t(71.33) = −3.61***	**.001**
Time elapsed since divorce	−0.37	0.20	t(51.14) = −1.83	**.074**
Child's perception of being caught between the parents	−0.07	0.22	t(70.42) = −0.30	**.766**
Child's active coping with the conflict	0.82	0.19	t(71.68) = 4.20***	< **.001**
Child's perception of being caught between parents × active coping	0.68	0.19	t(72.00) = 3.59***	< **.001**

Note. Time since divorce is a family-level variable, other variables are at the individual child level; *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The fifth research hypothesis was therefore partly supported. A stronger negative relationship was found between conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when their active coping with the conflict was lower than when it was higher. Similarly, a stronger negative relationship was found between mothers' perceived gap in conflict intensity and the children's evaluated quality of life when self-blame for the divorce was higher than when it was lower. Nonetheless, note that in the examination of the hypothesis, four dependent, three independent and two moderating variables were used. Of all the possible models, three were found to be significant.

7. Discussion

This study is one of a handful that examine how children of divorced parents evaluate their quality of life with reference to various risk and resilience factors. The study revealed that the more intense the parental conflict is perceived on different measures, the lower the children's evaluation of their quality of life. Since parental conflict can grow more or less intense with time, and since this change can have significant implications for the well-being of children of divorced parents, we have also examined these implications in time. The findings show that the more the intensity of conflict exacerbated since marriage to the time of study, the lower the children's evaluation of their quality of life

Similar findings emerged from studies examining the well-being of children of divorced parents: the existence of parental conflict was associated with a broad range of child difficulties, including higher levels of depression and anxiety, externalized behavior problems, and lower levels of self-esteem and of social and scholastic efficacy, compared to children whose parents were not in conflict (Amorós et al., 2017; Pálmarsdóttir, 2015). Moreover, the higher the intensity of parental conflict since separation, the lower the children's well-being (Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007).

The study revealed that the more the measure of parental conflict indicated higher children's involvement, it was associated with more measures of quality of life. Children's perception of conflict intensity, which does not necessarily attest to their involvement, was associated with two quality-of-life measures; and children's feeling of being caught between the parents was associated with all quality-of-life measures.

In common with these findings, different studies have shown that children more exposed to and more involved in the parental conflict may suffer more harm. Additionally, the more the conflict revolves around the children, the more violent and abusive it is, the more it involves incitement against the other parent, and the more the children feel caught between the parents – the more the conflict is associated with severe maladjustment over time (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Lucas et al., 2013). On the other hand, parental conflict that remains between the parents and does not directly involve the children was found to be less harmful. Various studies have shown that when parents in conflict do not involve the children in loyalty disputes, the children's functioning and well-being are similar to those of children whose parents are subject to a low-intensity conflict or none at all (Buchanan et al., 1991; Kelly, 2003).

To some extent, our findings are also consistent with the few studies that examined how children of divorced parents evaluated their quality of life. For instance, a study that examined the interrelatedness of parental conflict and children's quality of life among children of both married and divorced parents found the lowest subjective well-being of children of divorced parents among those who reported ongoing conflict (Orgilés & Samper, 2011). Another study among adolescents found that the presence of conflict served as the key factor of stress and the strongest predictor of their satisfaction with their quality of life, even more so than family structure (Chappel et al., 2014).

We also found that high self-blame in divorce and parental conflicts was negatively associated with the overall quality of life, whereas active coping was positively associated with it. These findings are

consistent with studies that found that children with high self-blame in divorce and parental conflicts who felt threat and fear of abandonment adjusted more poorly to divorce and had more difficulties such as externalized behavior problems, depression, anxiety, shame and low self-esteem (Harold & Murch, 2005; Gerard et al., 2005; Grych et al., 2003). Studies examining how children coped with difficulties due to divorce showed that among those who reported active coping and evaluated the strategies they used as effective, there were lower levels of anxiety, depression, aggression and externalized behavior problems than among children who reported helplessness (Gerard et al., 2005; Sandler et al., 2000; Wadsworth & Compas, 2002).

Our findings are broadly consistent with the few that found a positive association between the children's psychological processes – regardless of family structure – and their evaluations of their quality of life. One such study found that adolescent reports of personal resilience, hope and optimism predicted their subjective well-being (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). However, the psychological processes examined in these studies differed from those we used, nor did they refer to active coping with difficulties or self-blame.

In addition, our study showed that when the children's self-blame was high, if the mothers perceived the conflict as having grown in intensity since the divorce, the children's quality of life was lower. On the other hand, it appears that that when the children's self-blame was low, the mothers' perception of the gap in conflict intensity between the period of their marriage and at their questionnaire completion showed no association with the children's evaluations of their quality of life on the agree/disagree scale. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that a low degree of self-blame serves children as a resource protecting them from the negative repercussions on their quality of life following increased intensity of the parental conflict.

To some extent, these findings are consistent with other studies, which showed that the extent to which children of divorced parents feel threat and self-blame in the parental conflict served as *both* a mediating and a moderating factor. For example, perceived self-blame was a salient mediator of overt conflict and triangulation, particularly for internalizing problems (Gerard et al., 2005). In other researches, self-blame mediated the association between children's reports of interparental conflict and internalizing problems (Grych et al., 2000; Kim et al., 2008). Another study found that self-blame moderated the effects of interparental conflict on externalizing problems and anxiety in boys and on internalizing problems in girls (Kerig, 1998).

Our findings are innovative in several aspects. First, the significant moderating model that we found contains a measure of the growing intensity of parental conflict since divorce, as perceived by mothers, and does not examine the subjective extent of the children's exposure to the conflict or its perceived intensity. This is unlike other moderating models found in various studies. Furthermore, the moderating model in our study is related to both adolescents and young children, unlike the model of moderation found in another study, which showed it to be significant only with regard to younger children of elementary-school age (Rogers & Holmbeck, 1997).

We also found that when the children's active coping is low, the more intense they deem the parental conflict, the lower their general satisfaction with life. When the children's active coping is high, no association is found between their perception of the conflict intensity and their general satisfaction with life. In other words, it is reasonable to assume that high degree of active coping with the conflict serves the children as a resource protecting them from the negative repercussions on their quality of life that stem from intense conflicts.

Moreover, we found that when children's active coping is low, the more caught they feel between the parents, the lower their general satisfaction with life. When children's active coping is high, no association is found between their perception of being caught between the parents and their general satisfaction with life. In other words, it appears that high degree of active coping with the conflict serves the children as a resource protecting them the negative repercussions on their quality of life that stems from their perception of being caught between the parents.

These two moderating models found in our study are to a certain extent consistent with the findings of Nicolotti et al. (2003) that the use of strategies to actively cope with parental conflict protects girls against symptoms of depression and low self-esteem, and girls and boys alike against health problems due to exposure to the parental conflict.

8. Limitations and future directions

Alongside its contributions, the study also presented a number of limitations. It is recommended that future studies examining how children of divorced parents evaluate their quality of life adopt further measures, as elaborated below. One limitation relates to the sample obtained, which was small and unrepresentative. Future studies should preferably rely on large samples that more faithfully represent the population of children of divorced parents (in terms of socioeconomic status, demographics, intensity of parental conflict and so forth), and include the mothers of all the children as well as an adequate percentage of fathers. A larger, more representative sample would make it possible to ground the testing of hypotheses in an analysis of comprehensive models. Our reliance on a small, non-representative sample was due to the extreme difficulty of enlisting child participants, among other things, because of a series of gatekeepers that prevented their participation. Hopefully, future studies would find alternative, creative ways to enlist children.

Another limitation is the fact that the study was conducted as a cross-sectional survey, at a single point in time. Studies are needed to track both the changing well-being of children of divorced parents over time and the relative contribution to the well-being variable obtained from personal, familial and social predictors.

A third limitation is that specific items were selected from the CPIC (Grych et al., 1992). Although this was done to enable children and adolescents to fill out the entire questionnaire, and minimize missing data, it reduced the validity of the scale. Moreover, while some survey items were especially translated and retranslated for the purpose of this study, studies still need to validate them in Hebrew. Fourth, measures of mothers' perceived conflict and of children's active coping were composed of single items of unknown validity. It is recommended that reliable and valid scales are used in future studies. Finally, note that interpretation of the significant moderation effects should be done with caution, as only three out of 24 models were significant. Further studies are needed in this area, with various populations to provide a deeper understanding of the moderating effects.

9. Practice and policy recommendations

The findings provide insights into the development of practical work with children of divorced parents and their parents: they indicate the importance of strengthening the resilience factors and attenuating the risk factors affecting a child's subjective well-being: children should be trained in the use of effective strategies to cope with the difficulties accompanying divorce – especially parental conflict – and to reduce self-blame. This could be done, for example, using evidence-based programs that help children acquire these strategies, such as the Children of Divorce Intervention Program (CoDIP; Pedro-Carroll, 2005) or the Children of Divorce Coping with Divorce (CoD-CoD) online program (e.g. Boring, Sandler, Tein, Horan, & Vélez, 2015).

At the same time, it is vital to implement a policy to reduce parental conflicts, particularly children's involvement in them. This could be achieved by implementing evidenced based programs include New Beginnings (e.g. Tein et al., 2018). Another policy measure to reduce the intensity of parental conflict is increased use of alternative dispute resolution approaches, found to contribute to mitigating conflict and to better child adjustment and well-being (e.g. McIntosh, Wells, Smyth, & Long, 2008).

Finally, there is extensive research evidence about the contribution of professional therapeutic support of children and parents in separation and divorce processes to the children's adjustment and functioning over both the short and long term (e.g. McIntosh & Deacon-Wood, 2003; Pollet, 2009; Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008). It is therefore important to ensure that these are available and accessible to every family.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104533.

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