

# The Association Between Parental Relationships and the Marital Views and Relationships of College Students

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## Introduction

Between 43% and 46% of marriages in the United States will end in divorce (Lebow, 2019). This percentage does not take into consideration married couples who separate long-term without legally divorcing. Marriage rates are also on the decline, which makes it difficult to determine the true extent of parental separation. Research has suggested divorce and marital discord has negative effects on the psychological well-being of children, and that these effects have been shown to last into children’s adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). Some research suggests that bad parental relationships can result in children having negative views toward marriage and family life, which demonstrates the impact parents have on the development of their children (Axinn, 1996). The present study looks into several factors of parental relationships and examines potential associations with college student’s marital views and romantic relationships. Research found that adult children of parents who are divorced are less likely to view marriage as a long-term commitment and are more likely to get divorced themselves (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Feng,1999). Other research has found that adult children attempt to learn from their parents’ relationship mistakes and will seek drastically different relationships (Jamison & Lo, 2021). It is known parental conflict can lead to long-lasting, negative effects on children's psychological well-being and academic success as they enter adulthood (Bannon et al., 2018). This study looks at ways parental conflict may influence romantic relationships and romantic views and attitudes of college students. Regarding the parental marital status, it was hypothesized that young adults with divorced parents have less traditional and less favorable views of marriage as compared to those with married parents. It was also hypothesized that higher levels of parental conflict would be associated with less traditional views of marriage and less relationship satisfaction in current romantic relationships of participants. In order to test these hypotheses, students reported on different aspects of their parent’s relationships as well as their own personal views on marriage and their current relationship satisfaction if they are in a romantic relationship. The goal of this study is to expand on current research by examining specific associations between different aspects of parental relationships and romantic lives and views of college students.

## Method

**Participants**  
Participants for this study were college students ( $N = 106$ ;  $M_{age} = 20.11$  years,  $SD = 5.57$ , 73.58% female, 83.96% White) completed self-report survey instruments measuring parental relationship status, quality, and conflict as well as participant relationship status, satisfaction, and marital views and attitudes.

**Measures**  
Current parental relationship quality was measured by participants rating their agreement to four items (i.e., “my father is happy in his current relationship” Willoughby et al., 2012). The participants scored their responses on a 5-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*. This section utilized an existing survey that was reworded to look at current relationship quality for the purpose of this study. Higher participant scores on this section indicate higher current parental relationship satisfaction.

Marriage quality of parents using a 3-item survey (Willoughby et al., 2012). The survey lists three statements,–"my father was/is happy in his marriage," "my mother was/is happy in her marriage," and "I would like my marriage to be like my parents'." The participants scored their responses on a 5-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*.

Conflict frequency, intensity, and parental stability were measured using 6-item, 7-item, and 4-item subscales of the Children’s Perception of the Interparental Conflict Scale (Grych et al., 1992). Participants were asked to respond true, false, or sort of true to a series of statements such as “I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing” (Grych et al., 1992). For each statement, the response will receive a 0 = *false*, 0.5 = *sorta true*, or a 1 = *true*. A composite score was then calculated for each participant by adding the score for each question response in each section.

Personal marital attitudes of participants was measured with a 2-question scale (Stackman, et. al., 2016). The first question was: “What do you think about the idea of marriage?” participants were asked to rate their response to each statement on a scale from 1-5, with responses ranging from 1 = *strongly favorable*, to 5 = *strongly unfavorable*. The second question is: “How interested are you in getting married?” (Stackman et al., 2016), participants were asked to rate their response to each statement on a scale from 1-5, with responses ranging from 1 = *very interested*, to 5 = *very opposed*.

## Method Continued...

**Measures Continued**  
Relationship satisfaction of participants was measured through the completion of the 32-question Couples Satisfaction Index with 8 sections scored differently (Funk and Rogge, 2007). This contained statements such as “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship”. Response options were: 0 = *Extremely Unhappy*, 1 = *Fairly Unhappy*, 2 = *A Little Unhappy*, 3 = *Happy*, 4 = *Very Happy*, 4 = *Extremely Happy*, 5 = *Perfect*.

Traditional marital views of participants were measured with six statements (e.g. “Divorce is usually the best solution when a couple can’t work out their marital problems”) (Fuwa, 2014). The participants were asked to rate their response to each statement on a scale from 1-5, with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

## Results

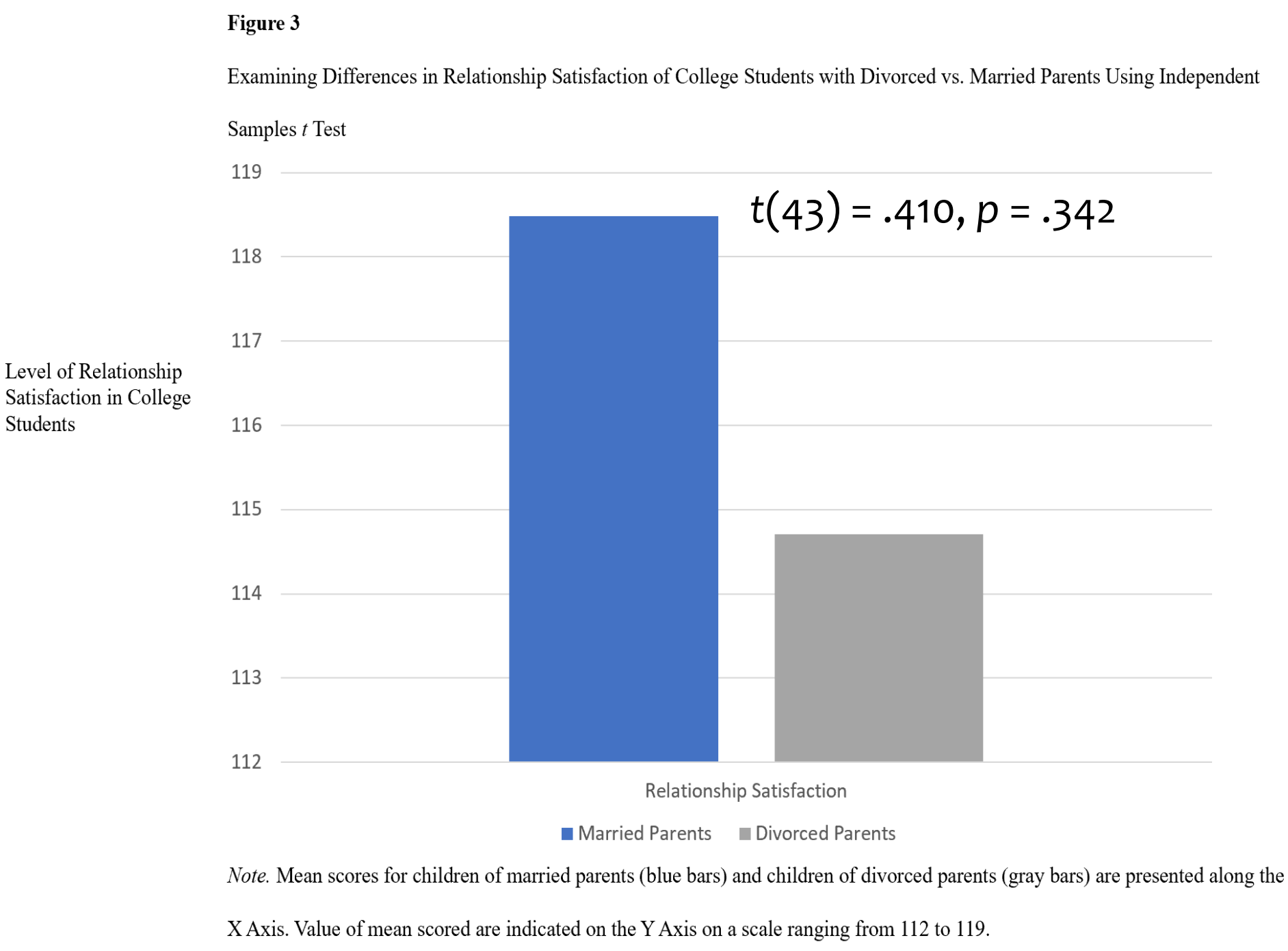
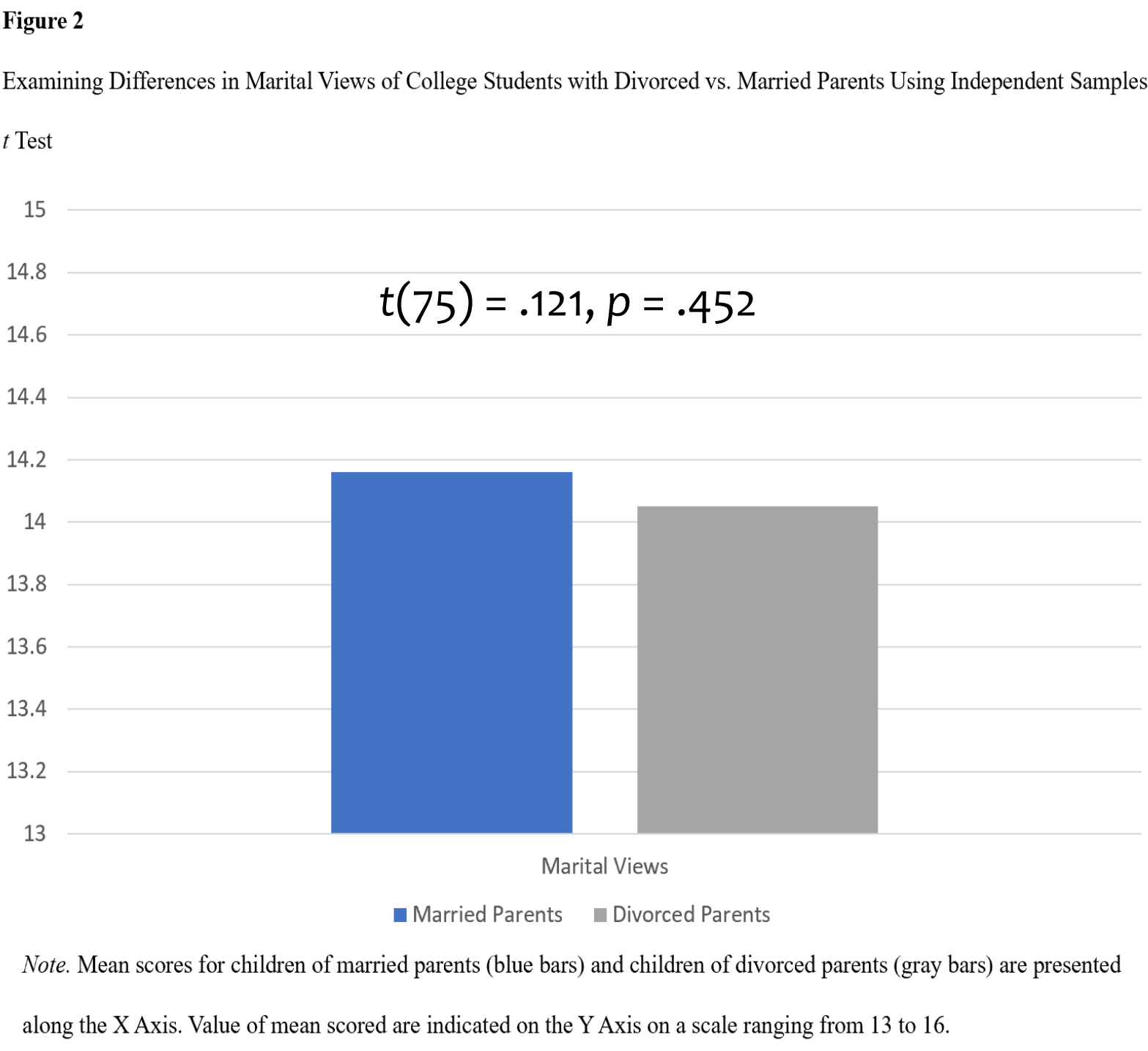
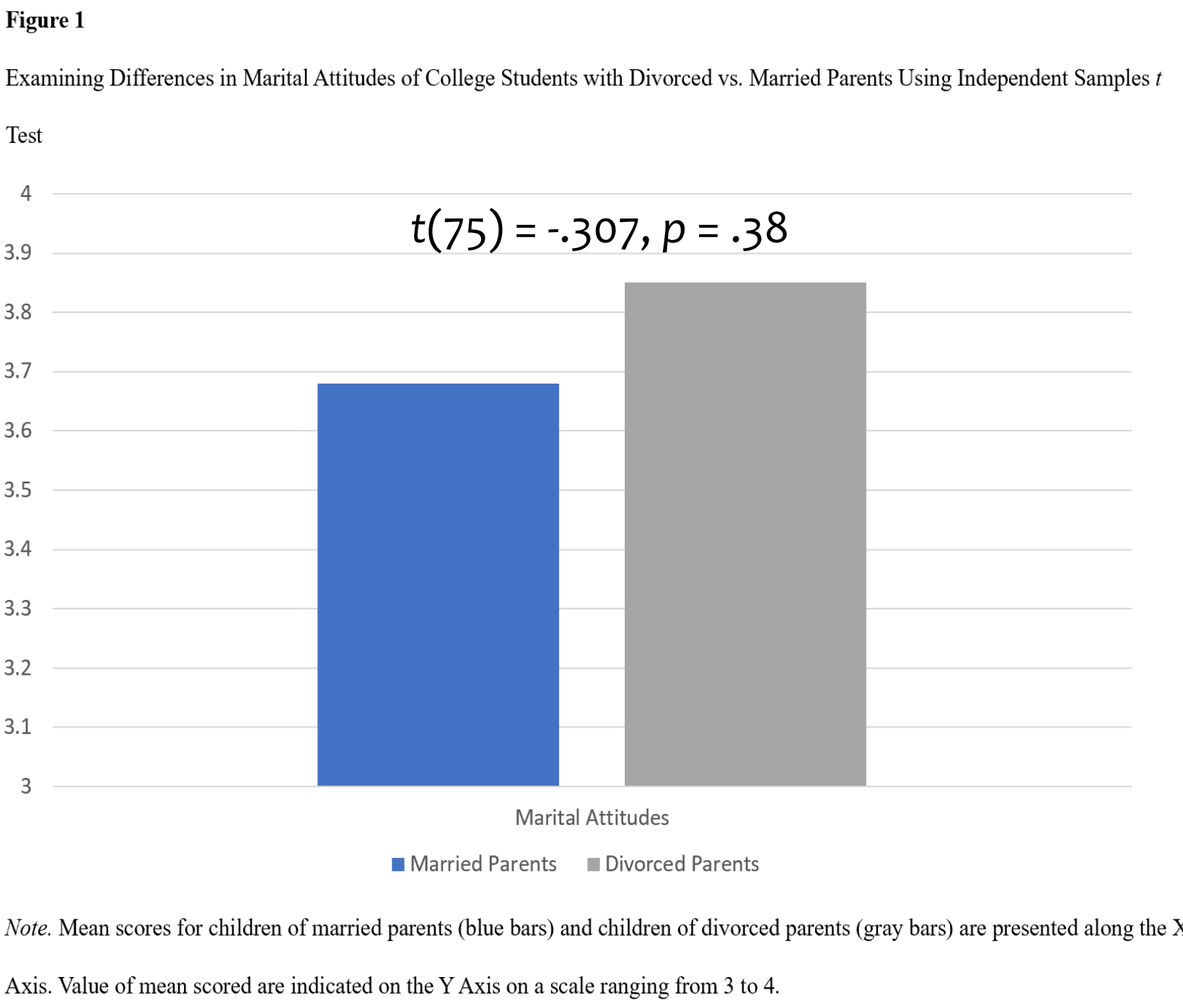
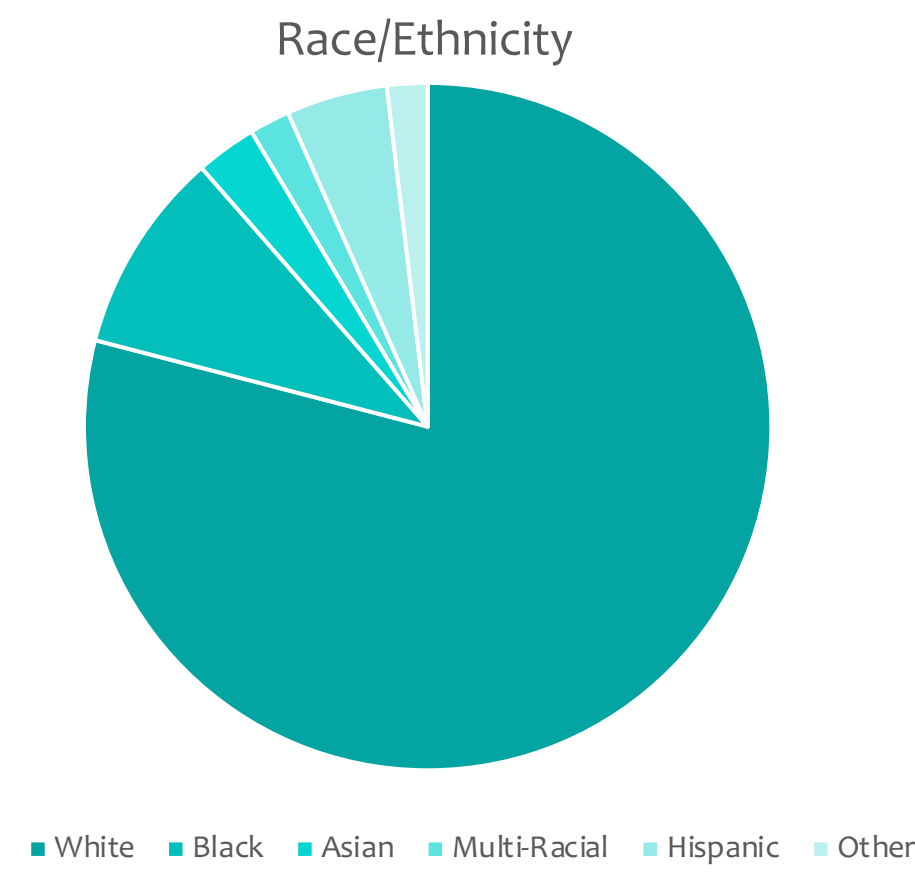
Higher current parental relationship quality as well as parental marital quality was generally correlated with more traditional marital views (see Table 1). More parental conflict was generally correlated with less traditional marital views and poorer current parental relationship quality (see Table 1). Lower levels of parental conflict were associated with higher marriage quality of parents (see Table 1). Higher marriage quality of parents was also correlated with higher relationship satisfaction in college students (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations Between Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Marital Attitudes	-				
2. Marital Views	-.37**	-			
3. Current Parental Relationship Quality	-.13	.38**	-		
4. Parental Conflict	.31	-.45**	-.46**	-	
5. Relationship Satisfaction	-.24	-.13	.08	-.07	-
6. Parental Marriage Quality	-.18	.21*	.61**	-.55**	.26*

Note. \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . \*\* =  $p < .01$ . \* =  $p < .05$ .

Figure 1. Ethnic Breakdown



An independent sample  $t$  tests was utilized to compare differences in parental marital status and marital views and attitudes of college students. No significant difference was found in how children of divorced parents and children of married parents viewed marriage (Figure 1). A second independent sample  $t$  test was used to look at potential differences in traditional marital views of college students with divorced vs. married parents. This was also determined to have no significant difference (Figure 2). The final  $t$  test was utilized to determine whether differences exist between the relationship satisfaction levels of children of divorced parents and children of married parents. The results suggested no significant difference was present (Figure 3).

## Discussion

Findings indicated that an association exists between parental marriage quality, and more traditional marital views in college students. Higher parental marital quality was also associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction in the romantic relationships of college students. Higher current relationship quality of parents was associated with more positive marital attitudes in college students. In contrast, higher levels of parental conflict are associated will more negative marital attitudes. These findings suggest that current parental relationships quality may impact how college students view traditional marriage, and how positively college students view marriage. These findings also suggest that parental marriage quality may impact college students in their future romantic relationships. These findings also suggest that parental conflict may impact how college students feel about the concept of marriage. Differences between the views and attitudes toward marriage of college students with divorced vs. married parents were also considered. The findings suggested there was no significant difference when focusing on divorce and marriage. However, the averages for both marital views and marital attitudes were less than half of the total possible. This suggests that college students are still interested in potentially getting married as well as the idea of marriage.