



REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS E INVESTIGACIÓN  
EN PSICOLOGÍA Y EDUCACIÓN



ISSN: 1138-1663; eISSN: 2386-7418

UDC / UMinho

2022, Vol. 9, No. 2, 267-284.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17979/reipe.2022.9.2.9352>

# Emotional security and family relationships of Spanish college students

## Seguridad emocional y relaciones familiares de estudiantes universitarios españoles

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## Abstract

This study is grounded on Systems Theory and Emotional Security Theory, and aims at extending past work by examining relations among children's emotional security in the family system and the quality of family relationships among college students, a population scarcely addressed by the Emotional Security Theory. Participants were 236 female and male students attending a public Spanish University ( $mean_{age} = 20.13$  years old). We used the Security in the Family System Scale (SIFS), the Family Stress Scale, the Family Satisfaction Scale, the Bidirectional Parent-Adolescent Relationships Scale (BiPAR), and measures of destructive and constructive interparental conflict. The variables "living with family" and "parental divorce" were also studied. Results showed that parental divorce related to higher family stress, less interparental conflict resolution and worse bidirectional relationships with fathers. There were not significant differences in any of the variables under analyses between students who lived with their families while at college compared to those who did not live with their families. Emotional security in the family explained 52% of the variance of family satisfaction. This study has theoretical implications as it applies Emotional Security Theory to study young adults from divorced and intact families and who either live or not with their families while attending college. Our results agree and support this Theory. It also has practical implications for mental health and counselling services pointing to potential risk and protective family variables in college students.

**Keywords:** family satisfaction; interparental conflict; divorce; family stress; young adulthood

## Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como base teórica la Teoría Sistémica y la Teoría de la Seguridad Emocional, y su objetivo es ampliar estudios previos al analizar las relaciones entre la seguridad emocional en el sistema familiar y la calidad de las relaciones familiares de los estudiantes universitarios, una población poco estudiada desde la Teoría de la Seguridad Emocional. Participaron 236 hombres y mujeres que estudiaban en una universidad pública española ( $media_{edad} = 20.13$  años). Se usó la Escala de Seguridad en el Sistema Familiar (SIFS), La Escala de Estrés Familiar, La Escala de Satisfacción Familiar y la Escala de Relaciones Bidireccionales Padres-Hijos (BiPAR), así como medidas de conflicto interparental constructivo y destructivo. También se consideraron las variables "vivir con la familia" y "divorcio de los padres". Los resultados indicaron que el divorcio de los progenitores se relacionó con mayor estrés familiar, menos resolución constructiva de los conflictos y peores relaciones bidireccionales con los padres. No se hallaron diferencias significativas entre los estudiantes que vivían con sus familias y los que no. La seguridad emocional explicaba el 52% de la varianza de la satisfacción familiar. Este trabajo tiene implicaciones teóricas al aplicar la teoría de la Seguridad Emocional al estudio de jóvenes adultos de familias intactas y con padres divorciados, y que vivían o no con sus familias mientras estudiaban en la Universidad. Los resultados se ajustan y sustentan dicha Teoría. Igualmente tiene implicaciones prácticas para los servicios de apoyo al señalar variables familiares de riesgo y protectoras de los universitarios.

**Palabras clave:** satisfacción familiar; conflicto interparental; divorcio; estrés familiar; jóvenes adultos

Theories and research have stressed the great impact that relationships in the family have on child development (Gilbert, 2017). The role that family relationships and interactions play in young adults is less documented (Keepports & Pittman, 2017; Parra et al., 2015). Research shows that family is important for young adults. Independence from their families of origin continues its way since adolescence but family still has a great influence (Keepports & Pittman, 2017). A positive and supportive family climate is paramount for their adjustment (Parra et al., 2015). Parental divorce, family conflict, parental expressiveness and even relationships with the extended family may affect young adult adjustment (Keepports & Pittman, 2017; Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017).

In South European countries, like Spain, children leave their family home later than in North Europe or USA (Parra et al., 2015). In Spain, 39.7% males and 25.9% females between 25-34 years of age still live with their parents (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE, 2014). In year 2015, the percentage of Spanish college students aged between 18 and 24 who were still living with their parents was 59.3% (CTXT / Observatorio Social "la Caixa", 2017). Other studies refer figures of 85% Spanish college students who do not move from their community to attend college (Sanmartín, 2018). In year 2020, 64.5% of Spanish young adults were living with their families (Pérez-Díaz et al., 2021). College students are partially or totally dependent on their parents, at least financially, even when they do not live at home (Parra et al., 2015; Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017). This semi-autonomy is also reported to happen in other cultures, but economic and other reasons interweave to explain low mobility from home among Spanish college students: family ties, language differences across Spanish regions, or a broad offer of Universities with not much reported differences in their quality (Fundación CyD, 2008).

Most approaches to college students consider family variables and its impact on individual adjustment, stress, academic achievement or mental health measures (Kallad & Jabr, 2016). Also, family variables seem of interest in the transition to college (Burke et al., 2016). But, in this research we are interested in the relationship between family variables, and we will concentrate in family emotional security, which has been less studied in this population (Keepports & Pittman, 2017).

## Theoretical background

Our guiding theories are General Systems Theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) applied to the study of families, and Emotional Security Theory (EST) (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Systems Theory applied to the family assumes that each family member may influence other family members

and is affected by the others (Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). Family members relate to each other resulting in a unique wholeness (López-Larrosa & Escudero, 2003). Grounded in Family Systems Theory, Olson and his colleagues have contributed to the theoretical development and measurement of family dimensions (Olson et al., 1989). In their Circumplex model, they identify two central dimensions, cohesion and adaptability. Cohesion refers to the closeness between family members and the degree of autonomy that they experience inside their family. Adaptability is the capacity of the family to change its roles and rules under developmental or situational stresses. In this study, we will use two of the instruments developed by Olson and his colleagues, one instrument measures satisfaction with the family and refers to satisfaction with family cohesion and adaptability. The other instrument measures family stress, referring to the frequency of affective problems, lack of organization in family chores or unexpected events (Sanz, 2008a).

Family satisfaction refers to an evaluation that the family members make of the way the family system operates in terms of family cohesion and adaptability. According to Sanz (2008b), the Circumplex model hypothesizes that family satisfaction is more relevant than the way the family system objectively operates. If the family system overcomes stressful situations with the mutual support of its members, this relates to higher family satisfaction. When family members are satisfied with their family, they exchange their feelings and validate each other through their daily routines. The degree of family satisfaction is a predictor of its functioning from the perspective of its members. Family satisfaction has been found to partially mediate the relationship between college students' perceived stress and depressive symptoms (Hsia, 2015).

Stress arises when environmental or family demands and the capacity that the family as a whole and its members have to cope with these demands are unbalanced (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017). Families evolve through time and, in this process, changes may occur that affect or threaten the family balance, for instance, when family breaks up or ongoing family conflict may occur. As a result of these events, the family functioning and well-being are threatened, which leads to family stress. Studies about family stress in college students show that stressful events lead to higher family stress, health problems and may compromise academic achievement (Charles et al., 2004).

Emotional Security Theory (EST) (Cummings & Davies, 2010) emphasizes that children and adolescents need to feel safe in their families. Children and adolescents feel secure when they perceive that the relationships between their parents are solid and when the family members are emotionally available for them, even when facing stressful events (Cummings & Davies,

2010; López-Larrosa et al., 2016). One undoubtedly stressful event is destructive interparental conflict (IPC), including disagreements, physical and verbal aggression, that may become recurrent, thus threatening children's emotional security in the family (Cummings & Davies, 2010; Forman & Davies, 2005; López-Larrosa et al., 2016). Destructive interparental conflict directly affects children's emotional security and may indirectly affect parent-children relationships because parents are less available for their children (Cummings & Davies, 2010; López-Larrosa, 2009). Children and adolescents may feel threatened by their parents destructive interparental conflict thus activating their social defense system (Davies & Martin, 2013). In a recursive or circular loop, when the relationship between parents and children is not good, children and adolescents are less adapted to their families, so both family subsystems (parental and filial subsystems) disengage (Iraurgi et al., 2010). From a system perspective, when children and adolescents disengage from their families as they feel threatened by interparental conflict, relationships with their parents deteriorate and, as their relationships deteriorate, they feel less secure in their families.

But not all interparental conflict is destructive (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Constructive conflict happens when parents reach agreements and validate and support each other (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Reaching agreements, which means that conflict is resolved, is a paramount ingredient of constructiveness. When children and adolescents are not threatened by interparental conflict, as it often happens when conflict is constructive, children and adolescents feel secure in their families. When they feel secure, they may show more proximity to their parents, and good parent-children relationships help children feel secure in their families. Studies have found that good quality relationships with parents during college years related to fewer anxiety and depressive symptoms in women (Lindell et al., 2020).

Emotional Security Theory (EST) has been mostly applied to study children and adolescents, and has been little studied in young adults and college students. So, we propose to apply EST to the study of Spanish college students who, as indicated above, tend to stay with their families while they are attending college. We may consider if there are differences in college students' emotional security between those staying with their families and those who move away. To our knowledge, this has not been explored before although there is a previous study that compared Spanish college students' family satisfaction, family relationships and family stress (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017). That study found that there were no differences in family satisfaction and students' relationships with either parent between those living with their families and those who did not; but, there were differences in family stress. College

students who did not live with their families were more stressed (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017).

The relationships between college students' intra-family relationships and family dimensions may also be different for those whose parents are divorced and those whose parents are not divorced. In year 2021, divorce and separation rates in Spain were 1.9 per 1,000. Fifty-seven per cent of the couples who divorced or separated had children, but there is no information about the ages of their children (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE, 2021). No effect of parental divorce has been found on Spanish college students' emotional security in the family (Rodríguez-Rivas, 2021). But American studies of college students reported a strained relationship with fathers after divorce (Bulduc et al., 2007), and less supportive and more negative interactions with fathers (Welsh, 2018). Spanish college students whose parents were divorced, had higher family stress, less family satisfaction and worse relationships with their fathers and mothers compared to students whose parents were not divorced (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017). These results have implications for students as parental divorce may compromise adjustment to college (Graham, 2013). So, in this study we will consider parental divorce and take into account time since divorce, although previous research has not found a relationship between time since divorce and family satisfaction, family stress or relationships with parents (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017).

Our first objective was to explore among college students the relationship between living or not living with family and having divorced parents, and family dimensions indexed by family stress, family satisfaction and emotional security in the family, and intra-family relationships indexed by interparental conflict and parent-child relationships. Our second objective was to explore if time since divorce happened correlated with family dimensions and intra-family relationships. Our third objective was to study the relationship between family dimensions and intra-family relationships, and to determine the relationships between family stress, emotional security and intra-family relationships with family satisfaction, controlling for living arrangements (with family or not) and parental divorce.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 236 college students attending a public University in Northwest Spain. Most Universities in Spain are public. In this region, there are three public Universities. Tuition fees in public Universities in this region are the cheapest in Spain (Ministerio de Educación,

Cultura y Deporte, 2016) so, most students regardless their socio-economic status (SES) attend public Universities.

Participants were 156 women and 80 men whose ages ranged between 18 and 25 years old ( $mean = 20.13$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) (see Table 1). The general proportion men/women in public Universities in this region is more women than men, 54.3% women and 45.7% men (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2016).

In Spain, by the time data collection took place, students enrolled in different faculties which specialize in specific studies from the first year on college. Participants were enrolled in studies in Social Sciences, Health and Engineering, specifically they were enrolled in Education (21.2%), Speech therapy (22%), Law (13.1%), Sociology (17.4%), Computer science (13.1%) and Civil Engineering (13.1%).

Approximately half of the students were first year students and half were third year students, half were living with their parents and half were living away from home during the academic year. Parental divorce rate was 18% for the whole sample ( $n = 42$ ). The average time parents have been divorced was 9.22 years ( $SD = 6.24$ ).

**Table 1**

*Socio-demographics of the participants*

Year	Gender		Live with family		Parents are divorced		Total
	Female <i>n</i> (%)	Male <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	No <i>n</i> (%)	Yes <i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)
1st	76 (62.3%)	46 (37.7%)	51 (41.8%)	71 (58.2%)	103 (84.4%)	19 (15.6%)	122 (51.69%)
3rd	80 (70.2%)	34 (29.8%)	62 (54.4%)	52 (45.6%)	91 (79.8%)	23 (20.2%)	114 (48.30%)
Total	156 (66%)	80 (34%)	113 (48%)	123 (52%)	194 (82%)	42 (18%)	236 (100%)

## Instruments

**Security in the Family System Scale (SIFS)** (Forman & Davies, 2005; López-Larrosa et al., 2016).

SIFS measures children's perceived security or insecurity in the family. In this study, we used the security subscale, comprised of six items, for instance "I feel I can count on my family to give me help and advice when I need it". A Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) is used to answer. The score is calculated by adding the scores of the six items. The internal consistency and test-retest coefficient of the original version was .85-.82. The internal consistency of the Spanish version, which was translated and back-translated by experts, was  $\alpha = .83$  (López-Larrosa et al., 2016). In this study, the internal consistency was  $\alpha = .90$ . Security in the family is one of the family dimensions measured in this study.

**Family Stress Scale** (Sanz, 2008a)

This scale measures the children's perceived frequency of stressful situations in the family. It has 20 items, for instance, "affective problems of the family members". A Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (never) to 5 (very often) is used to answer. By adding each item's score, the total score is calculated. In a previous study with college students in the same Spanish region, internal consistency ranged between  $\alpha = .80$  and  $\alpha = .82$  (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017). In this study, internal consistency was  $\alpha = .84$ . Family stress is one of the family dimensions measured in this study.

**Family Satisfaction Scale** (Sanz, 2008b)

This scale measures children's contentment with 10 family dynamics. Five items refer to family cohesion, defined as family closeness and perceived autonomy in the family, for instance, satisfaction with "closeness of the family members". Five items refer to family adaptability, defined as the capacity of the family system to change roles and rules, for instance satisfaction with "the capacity of your family to be flexible or adaptable". A Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (very unsatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) is used to answer. By adding each item's score, the total score is calculated. Reported internal consistency is  $\alpha = .90$  and test-retest coefficient is  $\alpha = .95$  (Sanz et al., 2002). In this study, the internal consistency of the scale was  $\alpha = .92$ . Family satisfaction is one of the family dimensions measured in this study.

**Conflict and resolution**

In order to measure interparental destructive conflict, we developed three questions based on the conflict properties of the Children's perceptions of Interparental conflict scale (CPIC) developed by Grych et al (1992). These questions explore intensity, frequency and stability of interparental conflicts, i.e, "how strong are your parents' disagreements?" In order to measure resolution, we developed one question based on CPIC's resolution subscale that explores "When your parents have disagreements do they reach agreements?" All four questions are answered using a Likert-type scale with anchors 0 (nothing) to 10 (a lot). The score of destructive conflict is calculated by adding the scores of the three questions about intensity, frequency and stability of interparental conflict. In this study, the internal consistency of this measure of destructive conflict was  $\alpha = .81$ . Conflict and resolution are measures of intra-family relationships in this study.

**Bidirectional Parent-Adolescent Relationships Scale (BiPAR)** (Gómez Baya et al., 2018).

BiPAR measures the perceived bidirectional relationships that parents and children have

as rated by children. It has 20 items, with 10 items exploring bidirectional relationships with the mother and 10 items exploring bidirectional relationships with the father. Items are worded the same and they just change in their reference to father or mother, “I feel well when I am with my mother” or “it is easy for me to talk to my father”. A Likert-type scale with anchors 1 (never) to 5 (almost always) is used to answer. The two subscales of perceived bidirectional relationships with father and perceived relationships with mother are calculated by adding the scores of the items in each subscale. The instrument has been reported as having good psychometric properties, with internal consistency values that range between  $\alpha = .85$  and  $\alpha = .90$  (Gómez-Baya et al., 2018). In our study, internal consistency for BiPAR father was  $\alpha = .96$  and the internal consistency of BiPAR mother was  $\alpha = .91$ . BiPar measures intra-family relationships in this study.

## Procedures

The University’s Academic Board of the Psychology Department approved the study. Our understanding is that this research qualified for exempt status under 45 CFR §46.104, since the procedure was conducted in an educational setting and the participants cannot be identified by the recorded information, consistent with § 46.111(a)(7).

In order to get a broader sample of the college students, we chose studies in social sciences, health and engineering. All the courses offered in these areas last four years. We chose first year undergraduate students and third year undergraduates because it makes a difference for interpreting living away from home responses. For example, first year students would be newly away from home whereas third year students would have been more familiar with living away from home. Also, first year students are newcomers at the University while third year undergraduate students have more experience at University but they still have one more year to graduate. Besides, some fourth year undergraduates would be on placement for their practicum during data collection and they would not have been available.

In order to collect the data, we contacted twenty-seven academics who taught in either first or third year courses. We emailed academics and explained the scope of the study, the duration of data collection, issues about confidentiality and the volunteer character of their participation and their students’. Twelve academics allowed data collection. We collected data in six Year 1 courses and six Year 3 courses. Students were informed about anonymity and confidentiality and they were asked their consent to participate. Those who volunteered were not paid for their participation. Data collection happened at the beginning of the second semester of the 2017-2018 academic year.

## Data analyses

Data analyses were run with IBM SPSS 22. In the variables family satisfaction, family stress, emotional security and bidirectional relationships with father and mother there were no missing values. In the measures of destructive conflict and resolution there were 7 missing values, which meant 3% of the sample. List-wise deletion was used for missing data. Preliminary mean difference analyses were performed to determine if first year students and third year students differed in emotional security, family satisfaction, family stress, bidirectional relationships with mother and father, destructive conflict and conflict resolution. There were not significant differences between first year and third year students ( $F(1,234) = 2.68, p = .10, F(1,234) = 1.95, p = .16, F(1,234) = 0.82, p = .36, F(1,234) = 2.56, p = .11, F(1,234) = 0.45, p = .50, F(1,237) = 3.28, p = .07, \text{ and } F(1,227) = 0.46, p = .49, \text{ respectively}$ ). Chi-square tests were run to determine the relationships between having divorced parents and staying or not with parents while in college and being a first or third year student. There were not differences between being in first or third year and either live with parents or not,  $\chi^2(1) = 3.70, p = .053$ . There were not differences between being in first or third year and having divorced parents,  $\chi^2(1) = .85, p = .35$ .

In order to address our first objective, 2x2 ANOVAs were performed considering the independent variables living or not with parents and parental divorce, and the dependent variables family and intra-family relationships. In order to address our second and third objectives, correlation analyses were run to relate time since divorce happened, family and intra-family relationships. Step-wise multiple linear regression analysis was calculated to relate the dependent variable family satisfaction with the independent variables family security, interparental conflict, stress and bidirectional relationships with parents (controlling for parental divorce and living with family). Post hoc power analyses for correlation and linear regression were run with G\*Power version 3.1.9.6 (Cárdenas & Arancibia, 2014).

## Results

As for our first objective referred to differences between those students who lived with their families and those who did not, and those whose parents were divorced and those who were not, 2x2 ANOVAs showed that there were not interaction effects between both independent variables in any of the dependent variables. Having divorced parents was significant for conflict resolution, family stress and relationships with father, while living or not with family was not significant for any of the dependent variables (Table 2). Those students whose parents were not divorced had higher means in conflict resolution ( $M = 6.39, SD = 2.95$ )

and relationships with their fathers ( $M = 40.89$ ,  $SD = 8.43$ ), and lower means in family stress ( $M = 37.50$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ) compared to those whose parents were divorced ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 3.30$ ,  $M = 35.90$ ,  $SD = 15.14$ , and  $M = 41.40$ ,  $SD = 10.35$ , respectively).

**Table 2**

Results of 2x2 ANOVAs for living with parents/having divorced parents and family and intra-family variables

Variables		ANOVA	$\eta^2_p$	Power
Destructive conflict	Live with family	$F(1, 225) = 1.58$	.007	.24
	Parental divorce	$F(1,225) = 1.16$	.005	.19
	Interaction	$F(1,225) = 1.70$	.008	.25
Resolution	Live with family	$F(1, 225) = 0.06$	.001	.05
	Parental divorce	$F(1,225) = 51.26^{***}$	.18	1.00
	Interaction	$F(1,225) = 0.07$	.001	.05
Family satisfaction	Live with family	$F(1, 232) = 0.17$	.001	.07
	Parental divorce	$F(1,232) = 3.06$	.01	.41
	Interaction	$F(1,232) = 0.51$	.002	.11
Family stress	Live with family	$F(1, 232) = 0.20$	.001	.07
	Parental divorce	$F(1,232) = 6.02^{**}$	.02	.68
	Interaction	$F(1,232) = 2.95$	.01	.40
Security	Live with family	$F(1, 232) = 0.26$	.001	.08
	Parental divorce	$F(1,23) = 3.44$	.01	.45
	Interaction	$F(1,232) = 0.46$	.002	.10
Relationships with mother	Live with family	$F(1, 232) = 0.10$	.001	.06
	Parental divorce	$F(1,232) = 0.51$	.002	.11
	Interaction	$F(1,232) = 1.95$	.008	.28
Relationships with father	Live with family	$F(1, 232) = 0.87$	.004	.15
	Parental divorce	$F(1,232) = 9.30^{**}$	.040	.86
	Interaction	$F(1,232) = 2.70$	.012	.37

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

As for our second objective, there was not a significant correlation between time since parental divorce happened and emotional security in the family, family stress, family satisfaction, bidirectional relationships with mother and father, and conflict resolution,  $p < .05$ . But there was a negative significant correlation between destructive conflict and time since divorce happened so, the more time have passed since divorce happened, the lower the destructiveness of interparental conflict ( $r(39) = -.42$ ,  $p = .001$ , post hoc power = .86).

When considering the relationships between family variables and intra-family relationships (Table 3), correlation analyses revealed that emotional security in the family had significant positive correlations with family satisfaction, resolution and bidirectional relationships with either parent; and negative correlations with family stress and destructive conflict. Family stress had significant positive correlations with destructive conflict; and negative correlations with emotional security in the family, family satisfaction, conflict resolution, and

bidirectional relationships with either parent. Family satisfaction showed positive correlations with emotional security in the family, resolution and bidirectional relationships with either parent; and negative correlations with family stress and destructive conflict. Destructive interparental conflict had significant positive correlations with family stress; and negative correlations with emotional security in the family, family satisfaction and bidirectional relationships with either parent. Interparental conflict resolution had significant positive correlations with family satisfaction, emotional security in the family and bidirectional relationships with either parent; and negative correlations with family stress. Bidirectional relationships with either parent had significant positive correlations with emotional security in the family, family satisfaction and conflict resolution; and negative correlations with stress and destructive conflict. Bidirectional relationships with father and mother had a significant positive correlation. Post hoc power ranged between .99 and 1.

**Table 3**

*Pearson correlations between family variables*

Family variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Security	-					
2. Family stress	-.49**	-				
3. Family satisfaction	.71**	-.53**	-			
4. Destructive conflict	-.31**	.49**	-.34**	-		
5. Resolution	.35**	-.25**	.39**	-.11	-	
6. Bidirectional relationships with mother	.64**	-.44**	.56**	-.24**	.27**	-
7. Bidirectional relationships with father	.37**	-.43**	.41**	-.19**	.23**	.42**

\*\* $p < .01$

**Table 4**

*Step-wise multiple linear regression analysis*

Model	Variables	$r$	$r^2$	$r^2_{\text{adjusted}}$	Change in $F$	$\beta$
1	Security	.72	.52	.52	246.05**	.72
2	Security Stress	.76	.58	.57	31.12**	.58 -.27
3	Security Stress Bidirectional relationship with father	.78	.61	.60	16.18**	.54 -.21 .19
4	Security Stress Bidirectional relationship with father Bidirectional relationship with mother	.78	.62	.61	5.43**	.47 -.20 .16 .13

*Note.* Independent variables: family security, interparental conflict, stress, and bidirectional relationships with parents; dependent variable: family satisfaction (controlling for parental divorce and living with family). Post hoc power = .99.

\*\* $p < .01$ .

When controlling for living arrangements (with family or not) and parental divorce (Table 4), step-wise multiple linear regression analysis showed that family security together with family stress and bidirectional relationships with parents explained 61% of the variance in family satisfaction.

## Discussion

This study extends past work on the role of families among young adults by examining relations among children's emotional security in the family system and the quality of family relationships while students were in college.

Our results agree with figures that point out that more Spanish college students stay with their families when attending college than move away (CTXT / Observatorio Social "la Caixa", 2017; Sanmartín, 2018); and this happened for first and third year students, and it was not affected by parents being divorced. So, the reason why participants stayed at home or moved away did not seem to relate to parental divorce, and may have to do with the reasons already claimed such as economy, family ties, language differences across Spanish regions, or a broad offer of Universities with not much reported differences in their quality (Fundación CyD, 2008). According to our results, staying at home or moving while in college did not relate to any of the family and intra-family variables addressed in this study. In a previous study, those students who moved away had higher family stress (Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017), so there seems to be some inconsistency in these results that may need further consideration.

Results have also emphasized the importance of considering emotional security and interparental conflict in college samples, either when parents are divorced and when they are not divorced. When parents were divorced, conflict resolution was significantly lower among divorced parents and, in agreement with previous studies, family stress was higher and relationships with fathers had lower scores compared to those whose parents were not divorced (Bulduc et al., 2007; Viqueira & López-Larrosa, 2017; Welsh, 2018). But the destructiveness of interparental conflict decreased as time since divorce increased, even when parents might not reach agreements, which is a valuable information considering the deleterious effect of post-divorce destructive conflict (López-Larrosa, 2009). Destructive interparental conflict significantly related to family stress, which may account for the differences between participants whose parents were divorced compared to those whose parents were not divorced. Destructive conflict also related to lower scores in bidirectional relationships with either parent, agreeing with studies that state that, when the relationship between parents and children is not good, children

and adolescents are less adapted to their families, so both family subsystems (parental and filial subsystems) disengage, and a loop of recursive relationships takes place in a systemic mode (Iraurgi et al., 2010; Rivett & Buchmüller, 2018). But, this also has a positive version. Thus, as interparental conflict resolution increased, so did the score of relationships with either parent; and emotional security in the family and family satisfaction also increased. These results are supported by the Emotional Security Theory (Cummings & Davies, 2010) which has mostly applied to children and adolescents. Nonetheless, according to this study, the theory applies to young adults: the increase in destructive interparental conflict related to decreases in emotional security, while increases in constructiveness, indexed by interparental conflict resolution, related to increases in emotional security and vice versa. Also, the new formulation of the theory (Davies & Martin, 2013) indicates that destructive interparental conflict increases insecurity in the attachment system. In this study, increases in destructive interparental conflict related to decreases in the bidirectional relationships with parents, while increases in security related to increases in bidirectional relationships with parents and vice versa.

According to Sanz (2008b), family satisfaction is related to family stress. In this study, lower family stress predicted family satisfaction. But the variable that most contributed to participants' family satisfaction was emotional security in the family, emphasizing the relevance of emotional security, as a positive family climate is paramount for young adults' adjustment (Parra et al., 2015). The degree of family satisfaction is a predictor of its functioning from the perspective of its members (Sanz, 2008b), and it has been identified as a partial buffer from college's students internalizing problems (Hsia, 2015). We may hypothesize that emotional security and family satisfaction may be relevant protective variables of college students' mental health that need further consideration in future research, especially in Spanish samples who stay with their families at least during the college years.

The limitations of this study have to do with the sample composition as data collection happened in just one University. The fact that our design only addressed family variables did not let us identify individual dimensions such as adjustment to college, academic results or individual mental health indicators. Future studies should increase the sample size and the number of participant Universities. The design should also consider individual measures such as adjustment to college or mental health. Another limitation is that all of the data were based on the report of college students, which may possibly have inflated relations among the variables due to mono-method, mono-reporter variance.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to our knowledge about family relationships and parent-child relationships in a developmental stage in which those dimensions are not often addressed: young adulthood (Parra et al., 2015). It has theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical implications are applying Emotional Security Theory to Spanish college students considering participants' living arrangements and parental divorce. Emotional Security Theory has been mostly applied to children and adolescents, but theoretically is a lifespan construct, so should apply to college students (Cummings & Davies, 2010). According to our results, it seems to be equally applicable to those college students who either live or not with their families, and to those whose parents are either divorced or not.

As for the practical implications, results point to relevant family dimensions that may need to be addressed by counselling and mental health services working with college young adults such as emotional security in the family, interparental conflict, family satisfaction, family stress and bidirectional relationships with parents. For instance, previous studies have reported that good quality relationships with parents during college years related to fewer anxiety and depressive symptoms in women (Lindell et al., 2020). In this study we have reported the significance of emotional security in family satisfaction, and previous studies have informed of the mediation of family satisfaction for stress and depressive symptoms in college students (Hsia, 2015).

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Date of receipt: October 27, 2022.

Revision date: December 1, 2022.

Date of acceptance: December 2, 2022.

Date of publication: December 15, 2022.