

A Correlational Study of Post-Divorce Adjustment and Religious  
Coping Strategies in Young Adults of Divorced Families

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Divorce studies conclude that there is a large amount of stress associated with divorces (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992; Sun, 2001). Commonly, the stress induced by parental verbal and physical aggression triggers child adjustment problems in divorced families. Likewise, previous studies suggest that the severity and intensity of the divorce has an effect on the outcome of post-divorce adjustment in children (Sun, 2001). Varying levels of parental conflict also correlate with the degree of maladjustment found in children of divorced families (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Researchers note that the degree of parental conflict during the divorce corresponds highly to the amount of distress experienced during the post-divorce period (Sun, 2001).

Children of divorced parents often experience psychological, social, and academic impediments (Sun, 2001). Studies conducted by Wang and Amato (2000) correlate the child's internal locus of control, high self-esteem, positive responses to stressors, availability of social resources, and adaptability with positive post-divorce adjustment. In general, people who possess the ability to respond positively to negative life consequences and stress, adapt more positively to large stressors, such as divorce (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

Various studies also show the positive effect of religion on negative life consequences such as psychological distress and general stressors (Mosher & Handal, 1997; Fabricatore & Handal, 2000). Mosher and Handal (1997) observed a negative relationship between religiosity and psychological distress in adolescents. They found that as adolescents' scores on the Personal Religiosity Inventory decreased, their scores on the Flanagan's Life Satisfaction Questionnaire and Langner Symptom Survey produced unfavorable results. Therefore, lower religiosity correlates with higher distress levels and lower adjustment levels in adolescents. Their study provides evidence of the strong positive relationship between religion and positive adjustment in

adolescents. By using a comprehensive measure of religion, the researchers were able to obtain more holistic results. Other researchers measured only one aspect of religiosity, such as religious attitudes (Swindell & L'Abate, 1970) and religious involvement (McClure & Loden, 1982).

Likewise, Fabricatore and Handal (2000) found that personal spirituality reduced negative effects of stress on life satisfaction. Fabricatore and Handal hypothesized that stressors have either a positive (eustress) or a negative (distress) effect (2000). The researchers not only differentiated between eustress and distress, but also small hassles, such as excessive work and traffic problems. The type of stress one experiences shapes that person's life satisfaction and psychological adjustment. When calculating the relationship between personal spirituality and stress, Fabricatore and Handal observed that people who have a direct connection with God are less likely to become negatively affected by everyday stressors.

Several theorists researched specific religious-based coping strategies, termed religious coping mechanisms (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000, Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988). Religious coping comprises the various ways people use their religion and faith to manage stressful situations. Thus far, researchers have identified five religious coping styles: Collaborative, Self-Directing, Deferring, Surrender, and Active Surrender (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000).

Pargament (1988) noted that religion might play an important role in how individuals cope with stress. He states that religion provides individuals with "guidance, support, and hope," as well as "emotional support" (Pargament et al., 1988, 91). In his original study, Pargament identified the three main religious coping strategies: Collaborative, Self-Directing, and Deferring. Each of these styles differs in the amount of activity and responsibility put forth by the individual (Pargament et al., 1988).

Pargament et al. (1988) states that the Collaborative style is the most common religious coping style. Here, neither the individual nor God plays a passive role in the problem solving process. They both work together to resolve the individual's problems. God provides an active voice that influences the decisions of His followers (Pargament et al, 1988). In the Self-Directing style, the individual advocates actions to solve his or her problems. Individuals who use this style of coping view themselves as people whom God granted problem solving abilities and resources (Pargament et al., 1988). With the Deferring Style, God executes the actual problem solving strategy. Deferring individuals rely on God to provide a divine sign to tell them which problem-solving approach should be used.

Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000) later suggested that differences in coping styles reflect differences in religious motivation, dogmatic beliefs, and degree of commitment. They hypothesized that Pargament et al.'s three religious coping mechanisms could not account for all denominational differences. Factor analyses confirmed their hypothesis that more than three categories of religious coping strategies existed. The results of the factor analyses yielded five categories instead of three. The new categories, Surrender and Active Surrender, identified people who surrender their will to God (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000). The Active Surrenderer vigorously seeks God's will and enforces it in his or her life. On the other hand, the Surrenderer, merely submits his or her entire life to God (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000). In these categories, both the individual and God play an active role in the problem solving process. The individual relinquishes his or her desires and follows God's will.

In each of the five religious coping styles, individuals rely on God to aid in their life struggles. Each style varies in its degree of divine activity, yet all acknowledge God's existence and presence in the problem solving process. Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000) suggest that

the variation in religious coping techniques correlates with the individual's degree of religious commitment (2000). Their studies concluded less committed Christians tend to use Self-Directed and Deferring methods, where committed Christians utilize the Collaborative and Surrendering coping techniques (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000, Pargament et al., 1988).

In creating the Surrender Scale, Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch (2000) correlated the results of their pilot study with subject characteristics such as subjective well-being and locus of control. Collaborative, Self-Directing, and Surrendering strategies correlate with an internal locus of control, where Deferring mechanisms correlate with an external locus of control (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000). Correlations revealed that Collaborative and Surrendering individuals possess the highest subjective well-being, due to increased intrinsic motivation (Pargament et al., 1988, Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000).

In much the same way, researchers found that children who have attained positive post-divorce adjustment are also intrinsically motivated and have a positive subjective well-being (Wang, & Amato, 2000). Previous divorce studies deduce that coping mechanisms such as adjustability, adaptability, and an internal locus of control also correlate with positive post-divorce adjustment (Wang, & Amato, 2000). Additionally, prior research suggests that religiosity, as well as adequate problem solving techniques, have an impact on the level of stress in a person's life. Research would then suggest that the use of Collaborative and Surrendering religious coping styles would reduce the effect of stressors, leading to positive adjustment in stressful situations, such as divorce.

Numerous studies measured the relationship between religiosity and overall stress and adjustment (Mosher, & Handal, 1997, Fabricatore, & Handal, 2000). Likewise, additional studies observe the relationship between divorce and stress and adjustment (Wang, & Amato, 2000).

However, there is limited information regarding a combination of the effect of religious coping on specific stressors and adjustment problems created by divorce. The following study proposes to determine the relationship between the religious coping devices and post divorce adjustment. Given prior research, a positive correlation should emerge between religious coping mechanisms and post-divorce adjustment in young adults who have divorced parents. Likewise, divorce severity should play a role in post-divorce adjustment scores.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Volunteers consisted of 14 college age men and women (11 women and 3 men,  $M = 19.1$  years,  $SD = 1.2$ ), ranging in age from 17-22, whose parents experienced a divorce. All potential volunteers were selected by convenience through their psychology classes or by word of mouth. The researcher selected potential volunteers based on their parents' marital status. Parental post-divorce periods ranged from one to 16 years ( $M = 9.4$  years,  $SD = 4.3$ ). Twelve volunteers identified themselves as Caucasian; two marked other. All sample participants attended the same small, Christian liberal arts college in a mid-sized, Midwestern city. Eleven of the volunteers identified themselves as Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran, one as Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and one as Methodist. Some volunteers received one extra credit point in their psychology classes as compensation, however, all volunteers received a piece of candy for their participation.

### *Instruments*

All instruments used in the study consisted of paper and pencil, self-report surveys that required the respondent answer items individually. Additionally, all instruments were adapted forms of previously published surveys.

#### *Child Divorce Adjustment Inventory*

The Child Divorce Adjustment Inventory (CDAI) measures the degree of adjustment the respondent experienced after their parents' divorce (Saylor, 1994). The CDAI measures the volunteer's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors related to the divorce. The total set of 25, five-point Likert scale responses constituted the CDAI score. Volunteers circled a number ranging from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree) to represent their agreement with each item (Saylor, 1994). Eight of the 25 items required reverse scoring. Possible scores ranged from 25 to 125. For this inventory, a high score indicated positive divorce adjustment, where as a low score indicated negative adjustment. For use in the study, the researcher modified the wording of CDAI items to reflect past divorce experiences. For example, the item, "I wish I were able to spend more time with my father," was changed to "After the divorce, I wish I was able to spend more time with my father." Wording alterations did not displace the intention of the item; they merely adjusted the CDAI's temporal relativity. Scoring methods remained the same for the adapted form of the CDAI. Due to the recentness of the CDAI, no reliability or validity measurements were available.

#### *Religious Coping Scale*

A combination of Pargament et al.'s Religious Coping Scale and Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch's Surrender to God Coping Scale assessed the respondents' degree of religious coping (Pargament et al., 1988 Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000). Each questionnaire utilized a

five-point Likert scale response format, which requires the respondent to circle a number, ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). The volunteer's response corresponds to the degree of coping described in the statement (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000). Coping mechanisms present in the Religious Coping Scale include, Deferring, Collaborative and Self-Directing coping styles (Pargament et al. 1988). Wong-McDonald and Gorsuch's (2000) Surrender to God Coping Scale measured the Surrendering and Active Surrendering coping mechanisms.

Reliability ratings for Pargament et al.'s assessment received Cronbach's alpha scores of 0.93, 0.91, and 0.89 ( $p = 0.05$ ), demonstrating high internal consistency. Factor analysis results for the original Religious Coping Scale yielded three subgroups, reflecting each of the three coping styles measured. The Surrender to God Coping Scale yielded Cronbach's alpha reliability ratings of 0.96- 0.94 ( $p = 0.05$ ). When combined with Pargament et al.'s Religious Coping Scale, factor analysis ratings for the combined scale showed items on the Surrender to God Scale composed one primary factor. Overall, five factors were observed, reflecting the five coping styles (Wong-McDonald, & Gorsuch, 2000).

The combined scale used in the study yielded a 26-item format. This scale requires the respondent to circle a number, ranging from one to five, corresponding to their degree of agreement with the item. For use in the study, the wording of the scale was slightly altered to better illustrate the concepts for the sample population. A rewording of some items added relevancy for the sample population. Likewise, temporal cues were added to make the test relevant to the time of the divorce. For example, the item "I have conversations with God" was changed to "During the divorce, I talked to God through prayer." The underlying concept of the item remained intact; however, the wording reflected the conservative nature of the population.



### *Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale*

The Children's Perception of Interparental Conflict Scale (CPIC) accounts for divorce severity (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992). Through the 49-item scale, the volunteers express their perceptions of their parents' marital conflict. Respondents answer true, sort of true, or false to statements regarding their parents' divorce related behaviors. Three points were allotted for true answers, two for sometimes true and one for false. The CPIC included 13 reverse scored items. Possible scores ranged from 49 to 147. A high score on the CPIC represented high divorce severity, where a low score indicated low severity. Confirmatory factor analyses validated a three-factor model of CPIC items. Factors included Conflict Properties, Threat, and Self-Blame categories. Cronbach's alpha reliability ratings of internal consistency yielded scores ranging from 0.78-0.90 ( $p = 0.05$ ). Test retest reliability ratings yielded scores ranging between 0.68 and 0.76 (Grych, Seid, & Fincham, 1992).

The researcher modified the CPIC so it could be used to assess past divorce conflict, instead of present parental conflict. For example, the item "I never see my parents arguing or disagreeing" was rephrased to read, "During the divorce, I never saw my parents arguing or disagreeing." Again, the alterations did not alter the integrity of the original items.

### *Procedures*

Before the study began, the researcher recruited perspective volunteers who had divorced parents and asked if they would like to participate in a psychological research study. Upon acknowledgement of their interest, perspective volunteers received an informed consent form. Once the researcher explained to the volunteers the purpose of the form, volunteers proceeded to read and sign the informed consent form. The researcher then read a set of standardized instructions and distributed the assessments.

The volunteers received a packet of questionnaires, containing the CDAI, CDIC, the Religious Coping Scale, and a sheet to record pertinent demographic information, such as church affiliation, number of years parents have been divorced, sex, and age. The order of the questionnaires was counterbalanced to control for fatigue effects and progressive error. The demographic information sheet remained last for all of the packets. Volunteers individually completed the questionnaires in groups no larger than three.

When completed, the volunteers returned their packets to the researcher. Upon completion the assessments volunteers received a piece of candy and were thanked for their participation. After the results were tabulated, each of the volunteers received a debriefing sheet and the results of the assessment via intercampus mail. Anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout the duration of the study.

### Results

Pearson product-moment correlations revealed relationships between the CDAI, the Religious Coping Scale, and the CPIC. Significant relationships appeared between all three scales. A positive relationship between the Religious Coping Scale and the CDAI emerged ( $r = .56, p < .05$ ). Scores on the CDAI ranged from 55 to 110 ( $M = 84.6, SD = 16.3$ ). Likewise, scores on the Religious Coping Scale ranged from 34 to 128 ( $M = 67.9, SD = 27.5$ ).

A negative relationship between the Religious Coping Scale and the CPIC surfaced ( $r = -.55, p < .05$ ). According to these statistics, the severity of the divorce related to a decrease in religious coping in this sample. Scores on CPIC ranged from 55 to 133 ( $M = 98.9, SD = 21.6$ ). Finally, correlations suggested a negative relationship between the CDAI and the CPIC

( $r = -.719, p = < .01$ ). This correlation proposes that the severity of a divorce negatively impacts the adjustment of the offspring. An additional negative correlation emerged between the CDIC and the number of years the volunteer's parents were divorced ( $r = -.57, p < .05$ ).

### Discussion

The numerous findings supported past research. First, a negative relationship between divorce adjustment and divorce severity occurred, as did in Sun's study (2001). Additionally, the positive correlation between religious coping and divorce adjustment were consistent with other research in the general area. Correlations suggest that religious coping reduced the amount of stress, as did the correlations in previous studies (Fabracitore, & Handal, 2000; Mosher, & Handal, 1997).

Pearson product-moment correlations of the data rejected the null hypotheses. As hypothesized, the use of religious coping mechanisms positively correlated with the level of post-divorce adjustment in young adults who have divorced parents. The results of this pilot study appear promising. However, due to the small number of participants, caution must be taken when interpreting the results. Additionally, the sample population lacks diversity. Only three males participated, as did two non-Caucasian people, and three non-Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod members. On the other hand, the sample contained a wide variability range in years the volunteers' parents had been divorced. The negative correlation between divorce severity and number of years the volunteer's parents were divorced suggests that this variability might have confounded the results. In the future, tighter controls should be placed on the number of years post-divorce.

Additional limitations include the need for a divorce adjustment scale that contains reliability and validity ratings. The CDAI contained face validity; however, other reliability and

validity checks have never been calculated. Finally, future researchers should reverse the Religious Coping Scale's scoring method to eliminate correlation confusion. The scale's current design yield's negative correlations in the data, however, conceptually the correlations are positive.

Future research calls for researchers to study a number of additional correlations. Due to lack of diversity, correlations between denomination and religious coping usage could not be tabulated. However, additional studies that have larger samples could investigate this relationship. Furthermore, future researchers could investigate sex differences in this subject area. Future researchers may want to examine the relationship between religious coping and other stressors, such as the death of a parent, school adjustment, and sexual or emotional abuse.

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