

# Relations among Parental Divorce, Identity Status, and Coping Strategies of College Age Women

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Relations among parental divorce, identity status, and coping strategies were examined in a sample of emerging adult women. Two hundred forty college age women between the ages of 18 and 23 were asked to report whether they had experienced parental divorce and were administered the Coping Strategies Inventory and the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status-II. Correlational analyses indicated that identity diffusion in the interpersonal domain was associated with emotion focused coping strategies, whereas identity achievement in both sets of domains was associated with greater use of problem focused coping strategies. Structural equation modeling analyses indicated that, for both the ideological and interpersonal identity domains, divorce was positively related to emotion focused coping and negatively related to both diffusion and foreclosure. Tests of mediation did not produce any significant mediating pathways for either domain. These findings are discussed in relation to current research and practice implications for intervening with emerging adults.

Parental divorce is difficult and arduous for children and adolescents (Howarth, 1993; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). Some research (e.g., Case, 2000; Servaty & Hayslip, 2001) has focused on aspects of positive psychosocial functioning that

have the potential to help adolescents and emerging adults handle family member losses such as those that occur as a result of divorce (Oltjenbruns, 1991). One such construct is coping, which is defined as “efforts to master conditions of harm, threat, or challenge when a routine or automatic response is not readily available” (Monat & Lazarus, 1997, p. 8). Coping strategies may be categorized either as problem focused or as emotion focused. According to Monat and Lazarus (1997), individuals who utilize problem focused strategies use confrontation, information inquiries, and conscious self-restraint; whereas emotion focused strategies are utilized in an attempt to feel better about a situation by thinking or acting in a manner that promotes emotional relief from stress.

Previous research on adolescents and emerging adults has addressed relations between coping strengths and parental divorce (Duran-Aydintug, 1997; Gonzalez et al., 1995; Grossman & Rowat, 1995;). Non-normative changes such as divorce tax individuals’ abilities to cope (Martinson & Campo, 1991). Indeed, there is compelling evidence that adolescents and emerging adults who experience parental divorce may experience periods of denial, anger, and readjustment to the divorce (Kressel, 1980). However, there are large individual differences in coping responses employed following parental divorce. Some people are capable of using these experiences to grow psychosocially and establish effective coping skills, whereas others utilize maladaptive coping strategies and lead destructive lifestyles (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 1998).

### Parental Divorce, Coping, and Identity Development: Review of the Literature

There is an extensive literature on outcomes of divorce for young adults. Irion, Coon, and Blanchard-Fields (1988) found that adolescents from divorced families, compared to those from intact families, experienced more stress, felt less in control, and utilized methods of coping that were less mature and were maladaptive when they handled stress. In addition, Evans and Bloom (1996) found that female adolescents whose parents were divorced reported lower self esteem and less secure attachment when compared to female adolescents whose parents were still together. Farber, Primavera, and Felner (1983) questioned clinical directors of college counseling centers regarding adjustment and coping among 18 through 23 year old emerging adults who had experienced parental divorce. Compared to students from intact families, young adults from divorced families were found to be more depressed, anxious, and insecure. Farber et al. also noted that college students were similar to their younger age counterparts in terms of their reactions to parental divorce.

There may be reason to believe that identity status may partially explain the individual differences observed in coping strategies following parental divorce. Identity formation involves, among other things, making choices, and committing to roles. Eriksonian (1968, 1980), and neo-Eriksonian theories (e.g., Marcia,

1980) hold that these choices and role commitments are reached through sifting through a range of life choices in key areas such as interpersonal relations and ideological beliefs and values. Indeed, a consolidated sense of identity, which reflects identity commitments and consistency of self across situations, has been shown to be related to well-being and inversely related to distress (Schwartz, 2007). Given the close associations between coping and distress (Dumont & Provost, 1999), it follows that a consolidated sense of identity should be related to constructive coping strategies, and negatively related to avoidant or destructive coping strategies.

Marcia (1980) identified exploration and commitment as the two defining dimensions of identity development, where exploration represents the deliberate search for a set of goals, values, and beliefs; and commitment represents accepting one or more sets of goals, values, and beliefs as one's own. Marcia then bifurcated exploration and commitment into "present" and "absent" and crossed these dimensions to derive four identity statuses. These four statuses are achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. The most mature status is identity achievement, which is characterized by successful exploration of identity choices and subsequent commitments to one or more such choices. Individuals in moratorium are currently in the process of exploration but have yet to commit to choices. Foreclosure represents commitment to a set of goals, values, and beliefs without much prior exploration. The least mature status, diffusion, represents the relative absence of both exploration and commitment.

Indications of successful resolution of the identity crisis are reflected in comfort with oneself, a sense of direction in life, a feeling of self-sameness and continuity, and confidence that significant others value and support the self (Erikson, 1968, 1980). Because individuals in the achieved and moratorium statuses tend to engage in balanced thinking and thoughtful decision-making (Berzonsky, 1989), individuals in these statuses may be most likely to cope effectively following parental divorce. In contrast, foreclosed individuals, whose identities are often fragile and rigid (Schwartz, 2001), and diffused individuals, who often use avoidant coping mechanisms (Berzonsky, 1992), may be less able to cope effectively following parental divorce. There has been only limited research to date investigating coping strategies and personal identity formation among individuals who have experienced parental divorce or other forms of loss (Servaty & Hayslip, 2001; Crase, 2000). Parental divorce can affect emotional development and may hinder an individual's ability to successfully progress into adulthood (Davies, 1991). As a result, it is important to identify psychosocial mechanisms that can help to modulate the deleterious effects of parental divorce on young people.

Understanding the role of identity status among emerging adults who have experienced parental divorce is important for various reasons. In general, identity development begins in childhood, peaks in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and is a life-long process (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Lerner, 2002). Identity develop-

ment is specifically important among emerging adults because it lays the groundwork for future interpersonal relationships and psychosocial development (Grotevant, 1998). Identity also creates a foundation for an agentic self that is capable of directing its own activities despite challenges imposed by the outside context (Côté & Levine, 2002; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005). It might be reasonable to expect, then, that individuals who have experienced parental divorce and are identity achieved would utilize adaptive coping strategies, whereas those in less mature statuses (particularly diffusion) would be expected to utilize more maladaptive coping strategies.

There has been previous research relating psychosocial development of emerging adults to the presence or absence of fathers in the home. For example, Oshman and Manosevitz (1976) used the Ego Identity Scale and found that father or stepfather's presence was associated with higher levels of identity synthesis among college-aged men. Their findings underscore the importance of the father's presence in the home—which is often undermined by divorce—on the personality development of emerging adults. Jones and Streitmatter (1987) also examined the identity development of adolescents and concluded that for male adolescents, the diffused status reflects lower levels of maturity. Female adolescents scored higher in identity achievement and moratorium. When Jones and Streitmatter examined parental marital status and identity development of their sample, they found that less mature, more foreclosed adolescents were found in intact families.

### The Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to investigate relations among parental divorce, personal identity, and coping strategies in emerging adult women. In our sample, we had only 24 men in our total sample of 278 students. Consequently, we decided to exclude men from the sample and focus exclusively on college age women. Some have argued that the effects of divorce appear to be minimal as adolescents reach early adulthood and may, for women at least, spur identity development in occupational and interpersonal domains (Imbimbo, 1995). Previous research (e.g., Harvey, Orbuck, Weber, Merbach, & Alt, 1992; Murphy, 1991) also indicates that parental divorce elicits grief and requires effective coping strategies that may affect psychosocial development among college age youth. The following research hypotheses were examined:

(1) Ego identity status will be related to coping among emerging adult women. Specifically, identity achieved college age women will use more problem focused coping strategies and identity diffused and foreclosed college age women will use more emotion focused coping strategies.

(2) (a) Parental divorce will relate to both identity status and coping strategy. Specifically, college age women from divorced families will report more

maladaptive coping strategies and less mature identity development than college age women from intact families.

(b) There will be a mediational relationship between coping strategy and identity status in relation to divorce. Specifically, either coping strategies will mediate the relationship between divorce and identity formation, or identity status will mediate the relationship between divorce and coping strategy.

## METHOD

### Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from four general studies classes at a large public university in the southeastern United States. Two hundred seventy eight women and men completed the measure distributed in these classes. Students excluded from the final sample were 24 men, 12 students over the age of 23, and two participants who themselves had been divorced. Men were excluded because they comprised only 8.6% of the sample and would not have contributed meaningfully to the results. Individuals over 23 were excluded because they may no longer be emerging adults (and their experiences may be different from those of younger participants). Divorced participants were excluded because previously married individuals may differ markedly from unmarried university students. This yielded a final sample of 240 college age women between the ages of 18 through 23 years ( $M = 20.90$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ), 82 who had experienced parental divorce and 158 from intact families. Participants from divorced families reported a range of 1–21 years since their parents had divorced.

Respondents identified themselves as non-Hispanic White (79%), non-Hispanic Black (16.9%), or other (4.1%). Religious affiliations included Protestant (50.8%), Catholic (27.1%), Jewish (8.8%), other (3.3%), and none (10%). All grade levels were represented: 38% seniors, 27.3% juniors, 31.4% sophomores, and 3.3% freshmen. The mean annual family income, as reported by participants, was \$64,996.

### Procedure

Participants were given a packet consisting of a cover letter explaining the study, a consent form, and three scales to complete. Participants completed all measures in approximately 50 minutes. In the demographic information section of the survey, participants were asked to specify whether or not they had experienced parental divorce and, if so, at what age they experienced this loss and with which parent they resided after the divorce. Following introductory questions about loss, all participants were asked to respond to the coping scale. Participants from divorced fami-

lies were asked to complete the measure in light of the ways they coped with their parents' divorce. Participants who had not experienced parental divorce were asked to respond to the coping scale based on their use of coping strategies with regard to any loss they had experienced in general.

## Measures

*Identity status.* The Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status II (EOM-EIS-II; Bennion & Adams, 1986) was used to assess identity status. This 64-item measure utilizes a six point Likert scale and assesses the endorsement of each identity status in ideological (occupation, politics, religion, and philosophical lifestyle) and interpersonal (friendship, dating, sex roles, and recreation) content domains. Cronbach's alphas in the current study ranged from 0.52 to 0.84, with a median of 0.64. The EOM-EIS-II can be scored in either continuous or categorical fashion (Adams, 1999; Schwartz, 2004). Continuous scoring was used in this study to evaluate the extent to which identity status measures would be related to parental divorce and coping style.

*Coping strategies.* The Coping Strategies Inventory—Short Form (CSI-S; Tobin, Holroyd, Reynolds, & Wigal, 1989) was used to measure the extent to which participants used various coping mechanisms to deal with loss and its ramifications. The 40-item measure consists of eight primary scales (problem solving, cognitive restructuring, express emotions, social support, problem avoidance, wishful thinking, self criticism, and social withdrawal). The CSI was originally constructed as a 72-item, self-report, Likert scale to replicate the qualitatively scored Ways of Coping Checklist developed by Folkman and Lazarus in 1980 (Tobin et al., 1989). The problem solving cognitive restructuring, express emotions, and social support subscales were found to assess problem-focused coping, whereas the problem avoidance, wishful thinking, self criticism, and social withdrawal subscales were found to index emotion-focused coping (Tobin et al. 1989). These two broad forms of coping correspond to those proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). In the structural equation models estimated for this study, the subscales were collapsed into latent variables corresponding to those identified by Lazarus and Folkman. Cronbach's alphas for the individual coping subscales in the current study ranged from 0.69 to 0.87, with a median of 0.78.

*Parental divorce.* Participants were asked to indicate whether they had experienced parental divorce and, if so, indicate their age at the time of the divorce, as well as to note with which parent they primarily resided after the divorce. The divorce variable was coded such that a "yes" response was labeled as 1 and a "no" response was labeled as 0. Participants also were asked to report their age, gender, race, religious affiliation, college classification, yearly family income level, and marital status.

## RESULTS

### Tests of Hypotheses

*(1) Identity status will be related to coping among emerging adult women.*

Tables 1 and 2 present bivariate correlations between identity status by domain and coping styles of college age women in both intact and divorced families.<sup>1</sup> For identity diffusion in the ideological domain, only one correlation with coping style was significant, but for interpersonal diffusion, 6 of 16 significant correlations with coping styles were significant. These effects demonstrate that diffusion in the interpersonal domain was associated with poor problem focused coping, whereas the effects for diffusion in the ideological domain were less pronounced. Foreclosure and moratorium demonstrated minimal associations with coping strategies.

Ideological achievement was significantly correlated with 7 of the 8 coping styles, and interpersonal achievement was associated with 5 of the 8 coping styles. Ten of the significant correlations occurred for problem focused coping variables, compared to only two for emotion focused coping (one of these was negative). Consequently, it seems reasonable to infer that identity achievement is probably promoting problem focused coping. However, given the cross-sectional design used in the present study, this inference is only suggestive, and further research will be required to establish directionality.

*(2) Hypothesis 2*

*(a). Divorce will relate to both identity status and coping strategy.*

*(b). There will be a mediational relationship between coping strategy and identity status in relation to divorce. Specifically, either coping strategies will mediate the relationship between divorce and identity formation, or identity status will mediate the relationship between divorce and coping strategy.*

Descriptive statistics for all study variables, separately by family form, are displayed in Table 3. Both foreclosure subscales differed significantly by family form, with individuals from divorced families reporting significantly lower foreclosure scores than individuals from intact families (both  $ps < 0.001$ ). None of the other identity status subscales, and none of the coping subscales, differed significantly by family form.

To evaluate Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we estimated two pairs of competing structural equation models—one pair for ideological identity status variables and another pair for interpersonal identity status variables. Although the means in Table 3 suggest the absence of mean differences except for on indices of foreclosure, it should be noted that analyses conducted using structural equation modeling—especially those involving latent variables—are far more powerful than analyses of

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<sup>1</sup>Eleven of the 64 comparisons in the strength of correlations were significant. Specific differences observed can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

TABLE 1  
Correlations between Identity Status and Coping Styles in Emerging Adult Women from Divorced Families\*

Coping Style	Identity Status (Ideological)				Identity Status (Interpersonal)			
	Diffused	Foreclosed	Moratorium	Achieved	Diffused	Foreclosed	Moratorium	Achieved
Problem Solving	0.01	-0.11	-0.17	0.12	-0.38***	-0.22 <sup>a</sup>	-0.02	0.09
Cognitive Restructuring	0.06	0.01	0.02	0.01	-0.05	0.00	0.01	-0.05 <sup>a</sup>
Express Emotions	-0.12	-0.13	-0.06	0.23	-0.38***	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.06	0.20
Social Support	-0.19	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.24**	0.33***	-0.50***	-0.28***	-0.30***	0.31***
Problem Avoidance	0.29**	0.31***	0.23	-0.24	0.23	0.37***	0.14	-0.07
Wishful Thinking	-0.18	0.07	-0.06	-0.01	-0.02	0.10	-0.01	0.03
Self Criticism	-0.14	-0.06	-0.06	-0.08	-0.03	0.01	-0.01	-0.06
Social Withdrawal	-0.14	0.10	0.28***	0.34***	0.23	0.14	0.01	-0.03

Note. *n* approximately 70. Sample sizes vary slightly across cells because of missing data.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformation of the difference between correlation coefficients for participants from intact and divorced families was significant at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 2  
Correlations between Identity Status and Coping Styles in Emerging Adult Women from Intact Families\*

Coping Style	Identity Status Score (Ideological)				Identity Status Score (Interpersonal)			
	Diffused	Foreclosed	Moratorium	Achieved	Diffused	Foreclosed	Moratorium	Achieved
Problem Solving	-0.10	0.09	0.02	0.22***	-0.17**	0.09 <sup>a</sup>	0.01	0.33***
Cognitive	-0.05	-0.08	-0.04	0.23***	-0.11	-0.07	-0.01	0.25*** <sup>a</sup>
Restructuring	-0.16	0.08	-0.09	0.34***	-0.15	0.17 <sup>a</sup>	0.02	0.31***
Express Emotions	-0.11	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	-0.09	0.30***	-0.20*** <sup>a</sup>	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.00 <sup>a</sup>	0.28***
Social Support	0.02	0.03 <sup>a</sup>	0.03	-0.05	0.08	-0.10 <sup>a</sup>	0.03	-0.04
Problem Avoidance	-0.08	0.15	0.06	0.18**	-0.05	0.25***	0.04	0.14
Wishful Thinking	0.02	0.10	0.13	-0.03	0.16**	0.13	0.17**	-0.11
Self Criticism	-0.06	0.04	0.00 <sup>a</sup>	-0.07 <sup>a</sup>	0.00	0.07	0.05	0.05

Note. *n* approximately 154. Sample sizes vary slightly across cells because of missing data.

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformation of the difference between correlation coefficients for participants from intact and divorced families was significant at the 0.05 level.

TABLE 3  
Mean Identity Status and Coping Strategy Scores by Family Form

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Intact (M, SD)</i> ( <i>n</i> = 158)	<i>Divorced (M,SD)</i> ( <i>n</i> = 82)	<i>F Ratio</i>	$\eta^2$
<b>Identity Status</b>				
Ideological Diffusion	23.39 (5.32)	22.67 (5.27)	0.93	0.00
Ideological Foreclosure	21.37 (6.14)	17.21 (5.92)	23.79***	0.09
Ideological Moratorium	25.74 (6.37)	24.85 (5.26)	1.10	0.01
Ideological Achievement	33.44 (4.73)	34.11 (4.89)	1.01	0.00
Interpersonal Diffusion	20.86 (5.31)	19.53 (4.86)	3.34	0.01
Interpersonal Foreclosure	19.83 (6.49)	15.99 (6.28)	18.17***	0.07
Interpersonal Moratorium	25.48 (5.12)	25.85 (4.98)	0.28	0.00
Interpersonal Achievement	34.14 (5.73)	34.22 (5.01)	0.01	0.00
<b>Coping Strategies</b>				
Problem Solving	2.65 (0.87)	2.71 (0.86)	0.19	0.00
Cognitive Restructuring	2.89 (0.86)	2.87 (0.76)	0.03	0.00
Expressing Emotions	3.12 (0.92)	3.08 (0.89)	0.14	0.00
Seeking Social Support	3.24 (1.11)	3.39 (1.07)	0.87	0.00
Problem Avoidance	1.90 (0.65)	2.03 (0.68)	1.87	0.01
Wishful Thinking	2.88 (0.85)	2.99 (0.89)	0.83	0.00
Self-Criticism	1.39 (0.62)	1.58 (0.83)	3.47	0.02
Social Withdrawal	1.93 (0.71)	2.05 (0.75)	1.28	0.01

variance conducted on observed means (Hancock, Lawrence, & Nevitt, 2000; Schwartz, Adamson, Ferrer-Wreder, Dillon, & Berman, 2006). Separate pairs of models were estimated for each domain cluster because identity status is assumed to function differentially across domains rather than as a global construct (Goossens, 2001; Pastorino, Dunham, Kidwell, Bacho, & Lamborn, 1997). For each domain cluster, we estimated one model in which the identity status variables mediated the link between divorce and coping, and another model in which coping mediated the link between divorce and identity status. These models were compared using the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC; Keith, 2006), and the model with the smaller value was retained. The model that we retained was then evaluated using standard model fit criteria: the chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ), which tests the null hypothesis of exact fit to the data; the comparative fit index (CFI), which evaluates the extent to which the specified model fits the data better than a null model with no paths or latent variables; and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), which evaluates the extent to which the variance-covariance matrix implied by the model deviates from the variance-covariance matrix observed in the data. Good model fit is represented by a CFI of 0.95 or higher and a RMSEA of 0.05 or lower, with 0.90 representing the lower bound for an acceptable CFI value and 0.08 representing the upper bound for an acceptable RMSEA value (Kline,

2006; Quintana & Maxwell, 1999). The chi-square statistic is reported but is not used in interpretation, because it is possible for a model to fit the data adequately but not meet criteria for retaining the null hypothesis of exact fit.

Within each domain cluster, once a best-fitting model had been identified, we then tested whether the relationships of divorce to identity status would be mediated by coping strategy, or vice versa. We used the Asymmetric Distribution of Products test (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002) to test for mediation. This test computes the product of the two unstandardized path coefficients that comprise the mediating pathway, as well as the 95% confidence interval for this product. If this confidence interval does not include zero, then mediation is assumed. It is worthy of note that MacKinnon et al. acknowledge only partial mediation, given that the direct effect is rarely—if ever—reduced to zero.

For the ideological identity domains, a model with coping posited as mediating the link between divorce and identity status (AIC = 182.19) provided a better fit than did a model with identity status posited as mediating the link between divorce and coping (AIC = 195.77). This model is presented in Figure 1 and provided an acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(49) = 72.19, p < 0.001$ ; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04.

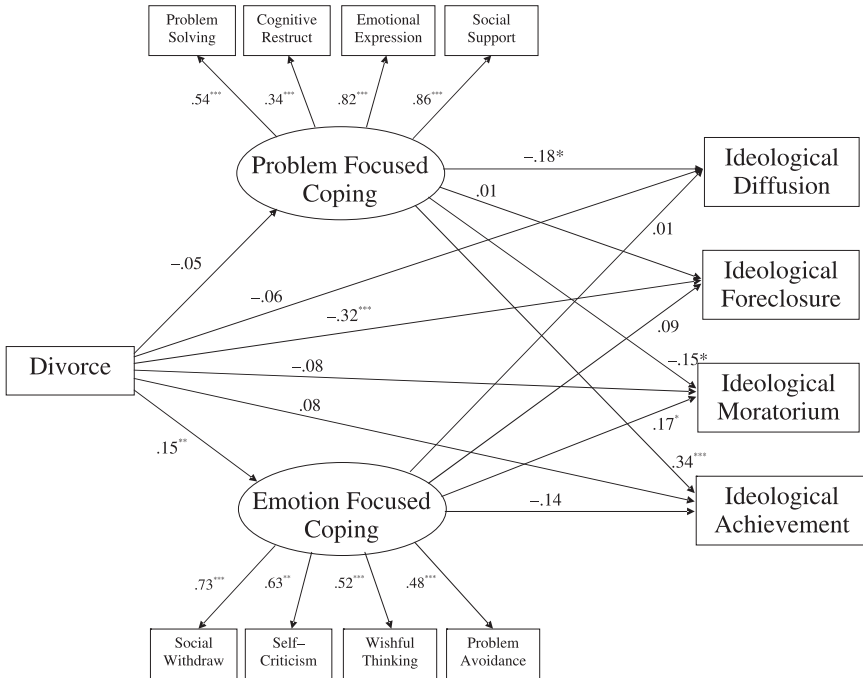


FIGURE 1 Divorce-Coping-Ideological Identity Model.

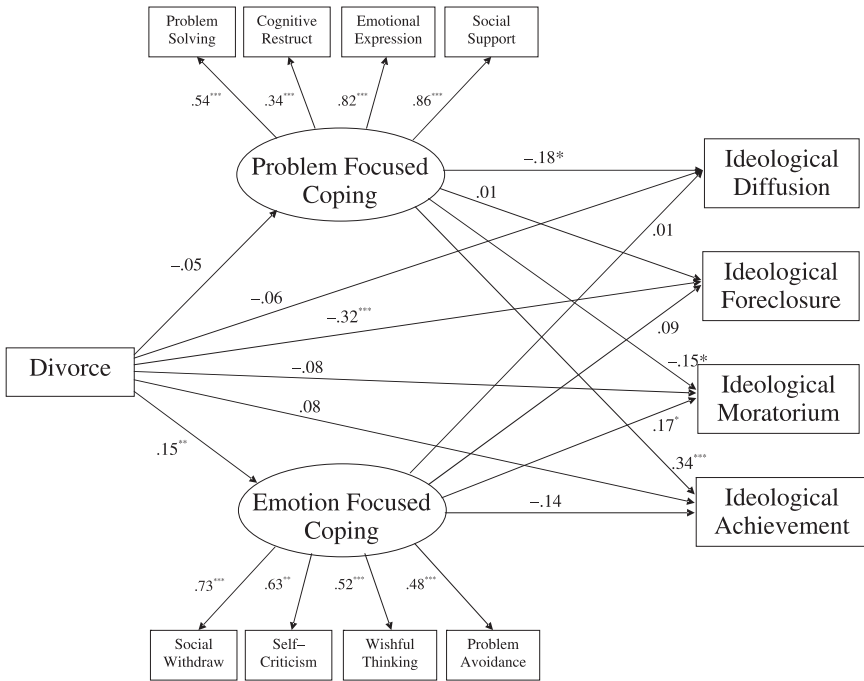


FIGURE 2 Divorce-Coping-Interpersonal Identity Model.

Divorce was positively related to emotion focused coping and negatively related to foreclosure. Emotion-focused coping was also positively related to moratorium. However, tests of mediation did not produce any significant mediating pathways.

For the interpersonal identity domains, a model with coping mediating the link between divorce and identity status (AIC = 191.38) again provided a slightly better fit than did a model with identity status mediating the link between divorce and coping (AIC = 191.70). This model is presented in Figure 2 and provided an acceptable fit to the data,  $\chi^2(47) = 77.38, p < 0.005$ ; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.05. Divorce was positively related to emotion focused coping and negatively related to both diffusion and foreclosure. Again, tests of mediation did not produce any significant mediating pathways.

## DISCUSSION

Much has been written about the identity struggles and coping strategies used by adolescents and emerging adults. However, few studies have examined relations

among parental divorce, identity formation, and coping for this age group. Given that our sample was overwhelmingly female, we dropped the small number of men from the sample and focused on the women. Consequently, this study examined the relations between identity formation, coping among young adult women from divorced and intact families.

It was hypothesized that identity achieved women would utilize more problem focused coping strategies than women who were identity diffused or foreclosed who would use more emotion focused coping strategies. The findings suggested that the hypothesized relationship between identity achievement and problem focused coping is more evident in the interpersonal domains than in the ideological domains. The relations found in this study between identity status and coping strategies suggest that college-age women who are able to discuss their thoughts and feelings about future choices with supportive others are able to move into more mature identity statuses over time, whereas those who withdraw from others are less likely to be identity achieved. This pattern did not appear related to family form. Consequently, it is possible that adolescent and emerging adult women may be helped in their identity struggles, and perhaps during the process of coping with parental divorce, by being able to cognitively process information, by expressing themselves, and by receiving support from family members and peers. These findings are consistent with those obtained in previous research (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Marwit & Carusa, 1998; Mullis, Brailsford, & Mullis, 2003).

The second hypothesis proposed that college age women who have experienced divorce would experience more maladaptive coping strategies and less mature identity development than college age women from intact families. Although support for this hypothesis is limited, findings suggest that the college-age women from divorced families are less likely to be foreclosed than are college age women from intact families. Parental divorce experienced by college-age women may have had a destabilizing effect, leading to a relinquishing of identity commitments associated with foreclosure. Because neither identity achievement nor moratorium scores differed significantly by family form, however, it is not known whether this destabilization prompted these women to explore a more self-directed sense of identity. In any case, the present results, as well as those from previous research, would suggest that, whereas strong and close relationships with parents may predispose adolescent and emerging adult women toward foreclosure (Archer & Waterman, 1994), divorces may disrupt this reliance on family and may spur more individuation (or confusion).

The present findings are consistent in some ways, but not others, with previous research regarding adolescent and emerging adult women who have experienced loss due to divorce (Evans & Bloom, 1996; Grossman, Shea, & Adams, 1980). For example, Grossman et al. (1980) found that college students from divorced families were more likely to report being identity achieved than were college students from intact families. Our results point to less foreclosure, but not necessarily more

achievement, among emerging adult children of divorce. It is important for future research to examine these effects in greater depth, so that the extent to which divorce leads to individuation versus confusion can be ascertained.

Differences between divorced and intact families were also found in the coping styles. Those women who had experienced parental divorce were more likely to employ avoidant coping mechanisms such as wishful thinking. What this suggests is that the college women who have experienced parental divorce tended to employ less adaptive coping strategies consistent with a destabilized sense of self. In these cases, interventions may be needed to promote use of identity strategies may help to create an agentic sense of self that may partially compensate for the stability lost through bereavement or divorce. If the destabilization associated with family member loss leads to diffusion, adolescent and young adult women may be poorly equipped to capitalize on self-advancement opportunities available in the university environment or through other social institutions (cf. Schwartz et al., 2005).

For Hypothesis 2, we also sought to determine if either coping strategies mediate the relations between divorce and identity formation, or alternatively, whether identity formation mediates the relationship between divorce and coping strategies. Although findings from analyses of variance suggested relations between divorce, identity, and coping, the more powerful structural equation models did not yield any mediation effects for identity and coping for our sample of college age women. Whether our sampling and/or measurement failed to identify these mediation effects is unclear. Further research is needed, including both male and female participants and those with more immediate experiences of loss due to divorce.

Although the relationships obtained here among parental divorce, identity formation, and coping strategies are consistent with theoretical expectations and with previous research, a number of important limitations should be considered when generalizing these findings. Most notably, the sample was taken from a mainly White, Protestant, college-age population characterized by relatively high socioeconomic status. Consequently, generalization to other populations should be attempted with caution. Although there is evidence that identity processes and their correlates are consistent across ethnic groups (Côté & Schwartz, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2005), it would be beneficial for future research on loss, identity and coping to utilize participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic brackets, religious affiliations, and educational backgrounds.

Secondly, although we focused on college-age women because of the small number of men in our sample, it is important to empirically explore the relationships among divorce, identity status, and coping strategies in college-age men as well. It would be interesting and empirically useful to explore whether the patterns of identity and coping observed in men who had experienced parental divorce versus those who had not, were similar to the patterns observed in the present study for emerging adult women. As a result, it may be important to sample from courses

(e.g., business, natural sciences) in which men are likely to be more strongly represented.

Third, because the measure of coping used in the present study was specific to the divorce experience and its aftereffects, retrospective bias may have been an issue. Even though age at the time of parental divorce in this study did not seem to affect the results of this study, future researchers may want to select samples so as to restrict the range of ages at time of parental divorce. Recall of losses that occurred at an early age may not be as clear as recall of more recent family member losses. Individuals may remember fewer details as time passes, and the coping strategies utilized to deal with the loss may change over time as well. The salience of the divorce experience itself may differ depending on the age at which the parental divorce occurred.

Finally, although participants from divorced families were asked to refer to their parents' divorce when completing the coping measure, it was not clear what experiences the participants from intact families were thinking about when they completed the coping measure. There may have been considerable individual differences in the losses that these participants were rating on the coping instrument.

## Conclusion and Practical Implications

Despite these limitations, the present results may have important implications for practice and intervention settings. First, understandings of coping strategies and identity status among college-age women who have experienced parental divorce may help clinicians and other professionals to more effectively help this population deal with their bereavement. The experience of parental divorce may engage college-age women in making choices that would not have been considered before the divorce. As a result, the destabilizing effects of parental divorce may provide opportunities for clinicians, university counselors, and other practitioners to assist emerging adults in exploring identity options and developing an agentic sense of self. Emerging adult women who experience parental divorce may appear to "drift," that is, delay or avoid exploration of identity. This may suggest a need to provide support or scaffolding to encourage exploration. This could be part of academic advising, career counseling, or therapeutic intervention. Further, such students may need assistance in practicing more direct coping strategies as a means of reducing use of avoidant coping strategies. Practitioners could be trained to recognize that the impact of loss may be long term and that intervention efforts may be needed at critical developmental junctures throughout adulthood. Qualitative studies investigating the specific identity experiences of young adult women from divorced families may be especially informative to practitioners.

The examination of relations between the experience of parental divorce, identity formation, and coping has both provided support for and extended the current literature. The use of family systems theory with Erikson's identity formation the-

ory provides important theoretical grounding for this line of research (cf. Perosa, Perosa, & Tam, 2002). Multivariate considerations of relations between identity formation of emerging adults and their experiences of parental divorce adds depth to our understanding of the complexities involved in understanding differential psychological outcomes among college-age women.

The current study of the impact of parental divorce on two indices of emerging adult adjustment—identity status and coping strategies—provides compelling evidence that developmental trajectories in emerging adulthood may be vulnerable to disruption. The present results might then be used to guide future studies that delimit time since the parental divorce occurred and isolate type of family member loss. The results of this study may also find use in intervention programs designed to promote adaptive identity processes (e.g., identity exploration) in emerging adult women whose sense of self has been destabilized by parental divorce.

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