2010

Broken vows and the next generation: Recognizing and helping when parental divorce is a spiritual trauma

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Recommended Citation

Mahoney A, Warner H, Krumei E. Broken vows and the next generation: Recognizing and helping when parental divorce is a spiritual trauma. Couns Spiritual. 2010;29(2):99-126. PMID: 26113882; PMCID: PMC4478045.

Published as:

Mahoney, A., Warner, H., & Krumrei, E. J., (2010). Broken vows and the next generation: Recognizing and helping when parental divorce is a spiritual trauma. Counselling and Spirituality, 29, 99-126. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26113882/

Broken Vows and the Next Generation:

Recognizing and Helping when Parental Divorce is a Spiritual Trauma

"My family was very religious growing up and when the divorce happened, I lost that religious framework in my life. I saw my family as a sacred entity and then it was shattered."

"I felt the vows that they made before their families and God were violated and they now meant nothing."

"I am Catholic and I believe in God. I went through a divorce when I was 5 years old with my real dad and now I am going through another with my mom and step father at age 20. I believe God has a plan but it is hard to convince yourself that at such tragedy." (Warner, 2007).

As these quotes from college students vividly illustrate, parental divorce can shatter a child's beliefs in the sanctity of his or her family, and faith can become an added source of suffering at a time when solace is needed. National surveys also highlight that parental divorce can drive wedge between youth and organized religion. For example, youth whose parents divorce less often attend religious services and participate in religious classes, bible study groups, or church activities compared to youth from intact families (Milevsky & Leh, 2008; Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). Likewise, youth from divorced families often switch to a different religious denomination or describe themselves as not belonging to any religious denomination compared youth who parents remain married (Lawton & Bures, 2001). Further, most youth live through parental divorce without depending on their religious community. For example, according to the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Children of Divorce

(NSMSL), about 75% adolescents of divorced parents recalled that no one from their church, neither clergy nor lay people, had reached out to them when the divorce occurred (Marquardt, 2005). Many adolescents may also distance themselves from their religious community to avoid feared or actual criticism on religious grounds about their parents' divorce (Zhai et al., 2007). These processes may contribute to the fact adolescents' self-image often shifts from being "religious and spiritual" to "spiritual but not religious" after parental divorce (Zhai, Ellison, Stokes & Glenn, 2008). Thus, parental divorce can precipitate a second silent, yet quite painful, dissolution - namely a schism between the child and his or her religious community of origin.

At the same time, youth's spirituality can be an important asset in managing parental divorce related challenges. For example, Greeff and Merwe (2004) interviewed parents and adolescents about what helped them be resilient in the face of their family's divorce and faith was identified as an important coping resource in 51% of the 98 families. In addition, in the NSMSL, 84% of American youth whose parents had divorced agreed that "when I have needed help God has been there for me" compared 86% of adolescents whose parents had a happy marriage (Marquardt, 2005). Similarly, youth from both groups in this study tended to feel just as close to God (Zhai et al., 2007) and to view God in equally positive ways (Marquardt, 2005), suggesting that the interior spiritual lives of adolescents whose parents do and not divorce are quite similar. In sum, although parental divorce often disrupts youths' bond with organized religion, children of divorce experience a connection to God similar to those from intact families and are just as likely to sustain a private sense of faith.

Clearly, religious institutions face challenges in helping to ensure that faith facilitates healing, not intensifies pain, when parents divorce. Although there are no easy answers, a recent

line of research is bringing to light the spiritual dimensions of divorce (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, in press; 2008; 2009; Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). This paper elaborates a conceptual model based on this work, enriched by illustrative quotes from youth. We aim to help adults recognize and help when parental divorce is experienced as a spiritual trauma. We close by offering practical guidelines to help adults engage in sensitive, yet direct, spiritual dialogues with youth about parental divorce. Our basic premise is that parents and members in the religious communities have a unique opportunity to reach out to youth who experience parental divorce as a spiritual trauma. Pastoral counselors and other mental health professionals may also better serve youth whose parents have divorced by directly addressing, not overlooking, the spiritual dimensions of this family transition.

Impact of Parental Divorce on Children's Mental Health

Before focusing on spiritual facets of parental divorce, we discuss both sides of the psychological effects of parental divorce to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes about this topic. On one hand, parental divorce clearly increases the risk for youth to experience feelings of anxiety and depression, and to more often seek mental health services compared to peers from intact families (i.e., biological parents, continuously married to same spouse; e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991a; Emery, Beam, & Rowen, in press). This risk persists into adulthood even after beyond the impact of other childhood difficulties (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Emery et al., in press). Even a parental divorce that occurs when offspring are adults increases the risk of psychological distress compared to when families of origin remain intact (Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). On the other hand, most individuals whose parents divorce do not display serious psychological disturbance. For instance, although roughly 20% of youth from divorced families exhibit serious

mental health difficulties compared to 10% of youth from intact families, about 80% of youth of divorce do not display problems at the level usually seen by mental health professionals (Emery et al., in press). Restated, the majority of children of divorce are indistinguishable from peers from intact families in requiring mental health services. Yet parental divorce has an undeniable negative impact on many children's lives (Marquardt, 2005). To better understand the unique psychological suffering that divorce can trigger, Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000) asked youth about painful feelings about divorce, including ongoing feelings of loss and abandonment, angst related to events such as graduation when both parents would be present, and a general sense that the divorce had made their life harder (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). Consistent with Marquardt's observations (2005), these researchers found that most young adults from divorced families felt their lives had been touched by such suffering.

Taken together, research on the psychological effects of parental divorce on youth highlights the importance for adults to: (1) recognize that most youth whose parents divorce experience unique sources of psychological pain due to the event (e.g., deep feelings of loss) and yet most do not display serious mental health problems, and (2) reach out to each child as an individual whose own story needs to be made visible, not ignored, and listened to with sensitivity, not presumptiveness, about the impact of divorce on him or her. Armed with this knowledge, parents and members of religious communities should feel more responsibility to initiate dialogues with youth of divorce so the child has others with whom to share his or her painful feelings about the parents' broken marriage, while not alienating the child by presuming that he or she is psychologically broken and requires professional counseling.

Non-Religious Explanations for Youth Adjustment to Parental Divorce

Exposure versus Coping

Exposure to parental divorce. Why do some children seem less scathed by the divorce of their parents while others become entrenched in divorce-related struggles? Most efforts to explain such differences have centered around five theoretical perspectives that do not address religion: the loss of the noncustodial parent, the adjustment of the custodial parent, interparental conflict, economic hardship, and the cumulative effect of stressful life changes (Amato, 1993). Yet these theories only weakly predict children's post-divorce adjustment based on comprehensive efforts to gauge their power (i.e., meta-analysis of multiple studies; Amato, 1993; Amato & Keith, 1991b; Amato, 2001). Why do these factors explain only a small part of the picture? One reason may be that these five theories each deal with a child's mere *exposure* to parental divorce. Research on other stressful events suggests that children's psychological adjustment depends heavily on the *processes* children use to interpret and cope with a stressor. In other words, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the methods used to respond to a life stressor better predict adjustment than the occurrence of a stressor. As applied to divorce, this suggests that the shift from being a member of an intact family to a divorced family is less relevant for adjustment than the resources youth have to survive what can be an excruciating transition in their family's history.

Non-religious coping with parental divorce. For several decades, psychologists have worked to better understand how adults cope with major stressors. A widely accepted model of coping initially proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) is founded on the premise that people of all ages are goal-directed. This means that people are not merely passive targets of adversity. Rather, people proactively interpret and take offensive steps to deal with hardships that strike the

aspects of their lives that matter most to them (Pargament, 1997). Accordingly, Lazarus and Folkman divided coping processes into two major stages of: 1) making an interpretation of the event, and 2) trying out ways to respond. In the first stage, a life event is experienced as stressful depending how much the individual appraises the event as threatening, harming, or challenging to his or her deepest, most significant aspects of life. It is easy to imagine that children who do not see their parents' divorce coming, perhaps because their parents rarely argued (i.e., low conflict divorces), would interpret the divorce as very stressful because the divorce destroys deep-seated assumptions they held about the stability their family unit. In contrast, children who grew up in families marked by chronic and intense parental hostility (i.e., high conflict divorces) might interpret a divorce as less stressful because they assumed the event might eventually happen.

In the second stage of coping, people engage in activities to protect themselves and try to maintain part or all of the aspect of life that is under threat. For example, children of divorce may engage behaviors to try to get parents to reconcile or they may take sides to preserve a close bond with at least one parent. In some situations, people may find it necessary to re-evaluate and transform their understanding of what is most significant to them, especially when stressful events irrevocably shatter a previously highly valued aspect of life (Pargament, 1997). As applied to parental divorce, some youth may rework their underlying assumptions of their parents' marriage or marriage in general. For example, they may reject the premise that a life long marriage is attainable and adopt the position that permanent commitment is an unrealistic expectation of a marriage. Alternatively, they may set unrealistically high standards about what kind of relationship must exist to exchange marital vows. Paradoxically, both of these assumptions seem to increase the long range likelihood of getting divorced or avoiding marriage altogether (Emery

et al., in press). The challenge, then, becomes finding a way to reconcile a parental divorce to one's identity in ways that preserve an adaptive view of oneself and relationships.

Parental Divorce as a Spiritual Trauma: A Conceptual Framework

Background on Research on Religious/Spiritual Coping and Youth

In the past two decades, researchers have used the model of coping just described to better understand non-religious coping strategies that youth may use to deal with various stressful events. Remarkably, however, empirical studies are scarce that directly assess whether religion is involved in the ways that youth cope with stressful life events, such as medical illnesses, natural disasters, racial discrimination, family crises, or peer or academic problems (Mahoney, Pendleton & Ihrke, 2005). Although higher overall religious involvement tends to predict better youth adjustment, much work remains to reveal specific religious/spiritual coping strategies that either mitigate or worsen youth's adjustment after a stressor occurs. To elaborate, considerable evidence has accumulated that adolescents who more often attend religious services or generally view religion as important in their lives tend to engage in less negative behaviors, such as lower rates of delinquency, substance use and risky sexual behavior, and to engage in more positive behaviors, such as volunteer work (Smith, 2005). Yet these findings tell us little about practical or specific ways that religion and spirituality can facilitate or undermine effective responses to specific stressors like parental divorce (Mahoney et al., 2005).

In order for adults to engage in sensitive and thorough conversations with youth about their experiences of faith and parental divorce, it is important to have a clearer picture of the myriad of concrete ways that religion and spirituality can come into play, for better or worse, in this family crisis. We now delineate our framework of experiencing parental divorce as a spiritual

trauma and religious/spiritual coping with parental divorce. Our discussion draws especially on a unique study of 274 students at midwestern state university whose parents had divorced within the past five years and whose general religious involvement and denomination were typical of other American college students (Warner et al., 2009). To our knowledge, Warner et al. (2009) represents the first attempt to take an in-depth look at spiritual interpretations of parental divorce and spiritual efforts to cope with the event.

General Definitions of Religion, Spirituality, and Religious/Spiritual Coping

We begin by offering our approach to defining spirituality, religion, and religious/spiritual coping. We conceptualize spirituality as a "search for the sacred" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). At the center of our definition of "the sacred" are concepts of God, the divine, and the transcendent, although virtually any aspect of life can become part of the sacred via its association with, or representation of, divinity (Mahoney, Pargament & Hernandez, 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). "The search" element of spirituality refers to discovering, conserving, and transforming one's understanding of the sacred (Pargament, 1997; 2007). These three stages form a cycle that repeats itself over the life span, an unfolding that is shaped by diverse beliefs, experiences, rituals, and communities within and outside of religion. Religion is defined as "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 2007). Religion is the only major social institution whose prime mission is to promote spirituality. Yet like other multifaceted institutions, religion can promote a myriad of psychosocial functions that may or may not overlap with spirituality (e.g., social support or coercion to adhere to certain rules of conduct). Although some researchers disassociate spirituality from religion, our definitions preserve what makes religion distinctive from other cultural forces, namely spirituality, and what makes spirituality

distinctive from non-spiritual strivings, namely the sacred.

"Religious/spiritual coping" integrates the sacred into the two steps of Lazarus and Folkman's model of coping that we highlighted earlier. Specifically, Pargament (1997) theorized that stressors can be interpreted in sacred terms (i.e., religious/spiritual coping appraisals) and that unique sacred pathways are available to cope with stress (i.e., religious/spiritual coping processes). Using Pargament's theory of religious/spiritual coping as a foundation, Mahoney, Krumrei and Pargament (2008) developed a conceptual model to facilitate the understanding and assessing of the role adults' spirituality's plays when they live through a divorce. Mahoney et al.'s model also readily applies to parental divorce as we elaborate below. But first we note that Pargament (1997) has previously used "religious coping" to refer to "a search for significance in times of stress in ways related to the sacred." We chose to use the term "religious/spiritual coping" here because some youth may draw on spiritual beliefs or practices to cope with parental divorce that are deeply shaped by their involvement in organized religious groups, while other youth may rely on these methods even if they dissociate themselves from organized religion. For more elaboration on our choice of language in the context of the history of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, see Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, and Shafranske (2010).

Religious/Spiritual Coping Appraisals of Parental Divorce as a Spiritual Trauma

Assumptions. When should an event like parental divorce be framed as a traumatic event? Consistent with prior research, we adhere to Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006, p. 3) view that the terms "trauma, crisis, major stressor, and related terms are essentially synonymous expressions to describe circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual's assumptive world." Such events profoundly disrupt one's ability to understand,

predict, or control one's life. The more pervasive the implications of the event, the more traumatic it is. Parental divorce is a good example of a potentially traumatic event, particularly for youth raised in families or subcultures with strong expectations that marriage should be permanent, regardless of the sacrifices parents must make. Parental divorce, of course, violates this expectation. Further divorce brings with it major disruptions in a child's life across multiple domains including economic, residential, educational, and social dislocation; these changes have life-long implications for assumptions the child makes about their and other peoples' place in the world (Emery, in press; Marquart, 2005).

Of particular interest here are the ways that parental divorce can challenge or invalidate certain *spiritually-based* assumptions about how the world operates. Extending Calhoun and Tedeschi's view of trauma, we propose that parental divorce can be a spiritual trauma when this event severely disrupts the individual's spiritual orienting system, which refers to a generalized set of spiritual beliefs, practices, and relationships. Further, we extend Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) premises that appraisals of divorce will shape the degree to which it is experienced as traumatic. Thus, parental divorce would be experienced as a spiritual trauma depending on how much a child negatively appraises parental divorce as threatening and damaging to the core religious and spiritual values he or she holds. To set the stage for further discussion about these pernicious appraisals, we first review the meaning of another concept -- sanctification.

Sanctification refers to perceiving an aspect of life as having divine character and significance, and two sanctification processes have been identified and applied to marriage in recent studies (Mahoney et al., 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Theistic sanctification of marriage refers to viewing marriage as a manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experience of

God. For example, over three quarters of married men and women on the verge of having their first child thought that God played a role in their getting married to their spouse and felt God's presence in their marriage (Mahoney, Pargament & DeMaris, 2009). Non-theistic sanctification occurs without reference to a specific deity and takes place when marriage is imbued with divine qualities such as boundlessness, ultimate value, and transcendence. To illustrate, most married wives and husbands said that during their first pregnancy their marriage was sacred to some degree and connected the couple to something greater than themselves. National data also indicate that most American husbands and wives view their marriage as sanctified to some degree (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Parents presumably pass along to their children the notion that concepts of God, the divine, and transcendence can extend to many life endeavors with marriage being one of the highly valued sacred strivings. In turn, parental divorce is an event that could shatter the web of beliefs woven around a sacred marriage and render the event as additionally threatening or traumatic (Mahoney et al., 2008; Mahoney et al., 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005).

Appraising parental divorce as a sacred loss and desecration. In our model, we have identified two interpretations of parental divorce that constitute a serious challenge or invalidation of religious and spiritual expectations of marriage and that would intensify the perceived threat and damage by the divorce: sacred loss and desecration (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2004). That is, divorce can take on a powerful spiritual meaning because it is seen as adversely impacting a sanctified aspect of life. Sacred loss appraisals occur when one perceives the loss of something once viewed as a manifestation of God and/or invested with sacred qualities. To illustrate, approximately 30% of college students in Warner et al. (2009) said the following items about their parents' divorce were "somewhat" to "very true": "I lost something I

thought God wanted for me"; "Something that gave sacred meaning to my life is now missing"; "Something that gave sacred meaning to my life is now missing"; and "My life lacks something that once gave me a sense of spiritual fulfillment." Desecration appraisals refer to perceiving a sanctified aspect of life as having been violated (Pargament et al., 2005). To illustrate that parental divorce can be seen as a desecration, about a quarter of Warner et al.'s participants agreed with the following items: "Something that was sacred to me was destroyed;" "A sacred part of my life was violated;" "Something sacred that came from God was dishonored;" and "Something from God was torn out of my life."

Both sacred loss and desecration appraisals involve the dissolution of a perceived point of connection between the human and transcendent reality, yet the two types of interpretations differ in an important respect. Desecration appraisals incriminate someone or something as responsible for violating the sacred. In contrast, sacred loss appraisals do not necessarily involve attributions of blame since a loss can be perceived as accidental, inevitable or outside human or divine control. Nevertheless, the two types of appraisals go hand in hand when it comes to parental divorce. Specifically, how strongly each student viewed their parent's divorce as a sacred loss was nearly identical to how much they saw it as a desecration ($r = .91$; Warner et al., 2009). This is captured in a comment that one participant made to open-ended questions (italics added): "My family was very religious growing up and when the divorce happened, I *lost* that religious framework in my life. I saw my family as a sacred entity and then it was *shattered*."

Of course, many youth may not experience parental divorce as a sacred loss or desecration. This may be because they did not accept the premise that their parents' marriage was sacred. In the words of one college student, "In my situation, nothing sacred was lost because my

parent's marriage was not sacred." Another individual wrote: "My parents (both Mormon again or so I've heard), claim their marriage was literally made in heaven. It was a marriage made in hell. So though I value marriage short of the point of calling it sacred, nothing was lost in the particular case of my parents," and a third relayed: "My parents were not really a blessing to my life when they were together. So I didn't feel like a violation had happened." Nevertheless, a third of college students in Warner' s study, who attended a state university and were not generally more religious than American college students, did interpret parental divorce in a negative spiritual light. Presumably the prevalence of such beliefs would be higher in more religious devout subcultures.

Psychological impact of sacred loss and desecration appraisals. The next question is whether viewing parental divorce as a sacred loss and desecrations intensifies distress associated with the event. Three lines of reasoning suggest this could be the case. First, assumptions that people make about sanctified aspects of life represent critical ingredients of their worldview (Mahoney et al., 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For example, many religious groups teach that marital bonds should everlasting and deserving of absolute commitment, sacrifice and reverence. Youth may also come to believe that sanctified relationships hold a special power and will be guarded by divine forces that will prevent their loss or harm. Even if only held implicitly, threats to such assumptions can be psychologically powerful. Thus, parental divorce may be terribly upsetting because it unravels religious and spiritual assumptions about marriage, as the words of this participant suggest: "The sacred things that were lost because of my parents' divorce were (1): A marriage, any marriage no matter whose it is, is sacred; and (2): A parent's, or parents', duty to his/her/their children to keep them out of harm's way. A divorce is one of the worst things a child can go through, psychologically, and parents' divorcing without a real reason

is telling the children that they are not important enough to protect."

Second, the sacred may be central to the stories that youth are taught to live by. Narrative theorists have described how people lend meaning to their lives by structuring their experiences into "macronarratives," encompassing life stories, and "micronarratives," smaller stories (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001, p. 48). Narratives that are interwoven with a sacred dimension may be particularly compelling. In the case of marriage, youth may adopt a storyline for their lives that includes finding a soul mate and then engaging in a religious ceremony that transforms this bond into an eternal, transcendent union that reflects a larger spiritual plan for their lives. A parental divorce may render this script void, a nullification all the more poignant if individuals are unable to find religious teachings that help them rework the old sacred story line and construct a new tale. A case in point is this college student's comment about her parents' divorce: "It's like learning that Santa is not real. The sacred marriage is a myth now a days."

Third, research indicates that people work harder to preserve and protect, and derive greater benefits from that which they perceive as sacred. For example, husbands and wives who sanctify their marriages tend use better communications skills to deal with conflict and report greater marital commitment and satisfaction (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999). Similar findings regarding the investments and benefits associated with sanctification have emerged for major life strivings, parenting, physical well-being, and the environment (Mahoney et al., 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Thus, sanctification appears to raise the psychological and spiritual stakes tied to an aspect of life. Yet while family members reap rewards when the parents' marriage is sanctified, they have more to lose if the marriage fails.

Consistent with the above lines of reasoning, two initial studies indicate that adults and

college students who view a divorce through a negative spiritual lens report greater distress. Specifically, the more divorcing adults viewed their own divorce as a sacred loss and desecration, the greater their experience of depression, post-traumatic anxiety, anger, and spiritual distress (Krumrei, 2008; Krumrei et al., 2009). Similarly, the more college students recalled that they experienced their parents' divorce as sacred loss and desecration when it happened, the more they reported current depression, anxiety, and painful feelings about the divorce (paternal blame, self blame, loss and abandonment, seeing life through filter of divorce, intrusive thoughts; Warner et al., 2009).

Negative Religious/Spiritual Coping Processes: Spiritual Struggles with Parental Divorce

Overview. As mentioned above, events experienced interpreted as a sacred loss or desecration can disrupt an individual's spiritual orienting system; this is his or her generalized set of spiritual beliefs, practices, and relationships. One sign that a spiritual orienting system is under stress is the emergence of spiritual struggles where individuals fight to conserve or transform a spirituality that has been threatened or harmed (Pargament, 2007). Mahoney et al. (2008) describe how three types of spiritual struggles can be tied to divorce for adults: divine, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Here we apply these same three struggles to parental divorce. It may be noted that prior research using a 100-item, multidimensional measure of religious coping (i.e., the RCOPE) has identified several "negative" religious/spiritual coping strategies linked to poorer functioning (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998) that include in our discussion of spiritual struggles.

Divine spiritual struggles. Divine spiritual struggles center on an individual's relationship, thoughts, and feelings toward God. Any traumatic event can pose a threat to views of

God as an all-loving, omnipotent being who ensures that good things will happen to good people. In response to a parental divorce, some children feel abandoned or betrayed by God, feel angry with God or punished by an angry God, or question God's power. For example, a child of divorce may wonder how God allowed a sacred aspect of life to be lost or violated, followed by turmoil for what this means for one's relationship with God. Along these lines, one individual in our study remarked "I am scared to death that God is going to curse me the same way he cursed my parent's relationship." Another more hopefully wrote "Things felt lost before, like my connection with God, but they have all improved now. It was just a rough time then." This latter quote illustrates that painful spiritual struggles can be resolved over time. Other children of divorce feel painfully bewildered and thus passively defer all control over to God, questioning what power they have to succeed in marriage, as the following comment illustrates: "I've vowed that I will never do the same to my children and yet I still fear the chance that the marriage will go wrong. I've decided to leave the whole thing to God in that I don't trust myself to find the 'right' partner for life." Finally, individuals can reappraise God's power, coming to see God as less able to control or intervene than previously assumed.

Intrapersonal spiritual struggles. Intrapersonal spiritual struggles refer to internal questions, doubts, and uncertainties about the spiritual matters. The occurrence of parental divorce sometimes triggers intrapersonal struggles which are further exacerbated by the degree the event is viewed as a sacred loss and desecration. One intrapersonal spiritual struggle focuses on questions about one's ultimate purpose in life. For example, a child of divorce may question whether marriage is necessarily part of a person's spiritual destiny. Another set of intrapersonal struggle center on uncertainty about how to balance desires to gratify human appetites and desires

to be virtuous. In the case of parental divorce, youth may feel confused about what spiritual principles should guide their values about the parameters of marriage. They may harbor doubts about the premise that a sacred marriage demands perseverance despite personal costs and if a monogamous, lifetime commitment can be made. For example, listen to this young man's self-doubts that his parent's divorce raised about his spiritual principles: "I grew up believing the 10 Commandments; my father had an affair which caused my parents divorce. This shook my principles to the bone and to this day I have commitment issues. I fear marriage and commitment because I feel I cannot trust myself with such things." Intrapersonal struggles can also focus on problems coping with strong unresolved emotions tied to struggles with religious systems of belief and practice. Here is a child of divorce struggling with anger stemming from rejecting Catholicism: "I was brought up Catholic and went to a Catholic School all my life - religion was jammed down my throat for years. I guess with my parents' divorce and other events that have happened in my life I have a very negative outlook on things, and feel as though people are hypocrites - and until I think I can let got of a lot of my anger - I will continue to have unsuccessful romantic relationships."

Interpersonal spiritual struggles. Interpersonal spiritual struggles involve spiritual tensions and conflicts with family, friends, congregations, and communities, and may be especially prominent during interpersonal crises. One set of interpersonal spiritual struggles can occur when members of one's social system disagree with one's spiritual interpretation of, or response to, a divorce. Interpersonal disagreements may be especially alienating when youth perceive the sacred in different ways from parents. For example, children of divorce may harbor resentment toward parents for failing to live up to religious teachings about marriage.

Alternatively, children of divorce can feel alienated from a religious institution that condemns divorce as well as in conflict with family members or fellow-believers who want him or her to remain engaged in a religious organization that is no longer meaningful. Related to this, children of divorce are more likely to decrease or stop attending religious services than other children, even though the two groups feel equally close to God (Zhai et al., 2007). Thus, for some, parental divorce means the dissolution of ties within the family and also a religious community, leaving the child isolated to deal with spiritual concerns. The following highlights spiritual struggles with one's faith community and how they can be interwoven into struggles with God and the self:

> "I suppose if I had religious beliefs more in line with those of my parents, I would maybe lose respect for them because they violated the sanctity of marriage. I do not, however, have those beliefs. I haven't believed in the Christian God for a very long time even though my entire family is devoutly religious (Irish catholic). My Dad was clinically depressed and tried to commit suicide. My Mom couldn't deal with it so they divorced. I blame God and I blame myself to this very day. As an adolescent I held myself personally responsible for my Dad leaving. I still feel like it was in my power to help him and I failed him."

Psychological impact of spiritual struggles and divorce. Studies have shown clear and consistent links between spiritual struggles and indicators of distress. For instance, Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies of religious/spiritual coping and reported that divine spiritual struggles were consistently tied to greater psychological maladjustment. Furthermore, divine struggles have been longitudinally related to poorer medical and psychological functioning (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, 2007). While studied less

often, intrapersonal and interpersonal spiritual struggles also correlate with more distress (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, 2007). Interestingly, little research has involved religious/spiritual coping with stressors that are interpersonal in nature, such as divorce. However, two quantitative studies have verified anecdotal observations previously made in two small scale studies (Blomquist, 1985; Nathanson, 1985) that adults who divorce often experience spiritual struggles (Krumrei et al., 2009; Webb, Ellison, McFarland, Lee, Morton & Walters, 2010). For example, Krumrei et al. (2009) found that 71% of adults going through a divorce experienced some type of spiritual struggle over their divorce. Further, higher levels of spiritual struggles were strongly tied to greater depression and post-traumatic anxiety symptoms, even after taking into account demographics and access to adaptive spiritual and non-spiritual coping resources (Krumrei et al., 2009). Similarly, Warner et al. (2009) found that the more college students reported having had spiritual struggles at the time of their parents' divorce, the more current depression, anxiety, and painful feelings about the divorce they were experiencing. Yet, they also reported higher levels of spiritual growth; this suggests that people who experience the higher levels of spiritual struggles are motivated to develop a deeper understanding of their own faith and try form more meaningful ties to trusted individuals in their religious social networks.

Positive Religious/Spiritual Coping Processes: Adaptive Spiritual Coping with Parental Divorce

Overview. Ample research shows that calling upon religious and spiritual resources, such as positive religious/spiritual coping methods, in times of trouble tends to decrease emotional stress and increase well-being and spiritual growth over the long run, even beyond the benefits of other resources (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament & Ano, 2004). This includes coping with the

death of a loved one, terminal illness, major surgery, imprisonment, physical abuse, war, racism, flooding, car accidents, and adjustment to college (Pargament, 2007). Spirituality can likewise be a vital, perhaps even the most relevant, place to turn to recover from spiritual traumas. However, cross-sectional research reveals an important paradox about seemingly positive religious/spiritual coping processes. Namely, at the time of a crisis, greater use of religious/spiritual resources is often tied to more, not less, psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression and anger) and spiritual struggles (e.g., anger or doubts about God). Stated differently, the more an event causes pain, the more people try to mobilize spirituality to cope. Further the more people turn to positive religious/spiritual coping methods at the time of a tragedy, the more they report personal and spiritual growth as time passes. Taken together, these findings indicate that spiritual struggles motivate many people to turn to their faith as a means to grow through their pain. With this overview in mind, we now discuss specific types of adaptive spiritual coping that could facilitate youth's adjustment to parental divorce.

Pargament and others have identified distinct spiritual coping methods employed by adults that predict desirable functioning (Pargament et al., 1998). As mentioned earlier, very scarce research is available about spiritual coping by youth (Mahoney et al., 2005), but the Warner et al (2010) study provides some initial evidence that children of divorce attempt to engaged in adaptive methods of religious/spiritual coping to cope with the event. For the purposes of this manuscript, we group these methods into three categories that parallel our discussion of spiritual struggles: divine, intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Adaptive divine spiritual coping. This set of spiritual coping strategies directly center on an individual's relationship, thoughts, and feelings toward God. One strategy especially

applicable to events that fall outside one's control is to make a conscious decision to relinquish control over a situation to God after doing all within one's power to influence the situation (i.e., active spiritual surrender). For example, a child of divorce person might seek help from a school counselor, talk to friends, and try to bargain and negotiate with their parents spouse, but be unable to stop a divorce. Here it could be adaptive to give control up to God, saying "I have done my best and must give the rest up to God." Another God-centered strategy is to search for comfort and reassurance through God's love and care. Listen to how one individual relied on God to come to terms the losses brought about by her parents' divorce:

> "I felt like my relationship with my Dad was lost. Also my sense of a family was lost. I no longer had what I had known and grown up with. It was almost like I felt no one could relate to me. I also lost respect for my father due to the fact he cheated on my mother and left us. I think that my parent's divorce has taught me that no matter what at the end of the day you always have God to turn to. I have learned that God does not judge someone only tries to guide them on the right path."

Another strategy involves proactively seeking a sense of control and relief through building a partnership with God (i.e., collaborative spiritual coping) and plan for the future with this in mind. Here is an example:

> "I have learned through my beliefs that my parent's divorce was never meant to be, but God made the best of a very bad situation. My mom was able to survive her marriage by living for her kids. For my future relationships, there is a lot I would do differently my mom didn't do, such as having God at the center of my relationship and making sure God wants me to be with this man for the rest of my life."

Finally, an individual may reinterpret a stressful situation in a positive spiritual light (i.e., "benevolent spiritual reappraisal"). This strategy may be especially useful to combat perceptions of sacred loss and desecration. For example, an individual might try to view the divorce as part of God's plan and means by which God is trying to strengthen the person. The following two

comments illustrate this process: “Mostly, my spiritual beliefs after the divorce have helped me understand that God meant for that to happen (the divorce) and that there were positive outcomes” and “When my parents were married, I felt like they had beaten the odds when divorce rates were up so high. It helps me deal with fighting or breaking up to tell myself God has a specific plan for me and that everything happens for a reason so that His plan for me can fall into order.”

Adaptive intrapersonal spiritual coping. Another set of religious/spiritual resources center on an individual’s attempts to discover and access or rework elements of one’s spiritual orienting system beyond a God figure (although God may still be relevant). In the case of parental divorce this may especially involve reworking one’s religious and spiritual beliefs about marriage and divorce. For example, this individual writes about sustaining a connection with God while developing personal religious and spiritual beliefs that are contrary to what she was taught:

> “God has been a big part of my life and my mother’s. God is not part of my dad's life at all. He has never been religious. Though the church says divorce is always wrong, I do not believe that. I believe it [marriage] should be honored but I believe in some relationships, it’s needed. I have grown closer to God and started going to church more to look for answers.”

A child of divorce may also engage in religious and spiritual activities to shift focus from the stressor. In the case of parental divorce, a youth may engage in prayer, private spiritual rituals, or public worship services to get his or her mind off family problems and transcend feelings of anger, hurt, and fear. Efforts to develop methods of spiritual purification constitute another way to deepen one’s interior spiritual life. For instance, a child of divorce may choose to confess to oneself, clergy, fellow-believers and/or God personal failings that he or she believes contributed

to the parents' divorce. This may free the child from distorted and debilitating guilt. On a related note, a child may sort out his or her approach to defining and coping with transgressions, especially about the nature of divorce itself. As one individual wrote: "I felt that the belief of the church and God was violated. The act of marriage is a promise to God and for God. That was violated and that to me is a sin. But I don't feel sinning will tear you away from God if you live the life he wants you to live." Another strategy is to seek out a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the self as means to free oneself from isolation. To cope with parental divorce, for instance, an adolescent could seek out spiritual intimacy with others (e.g., share feelings of spiritual loss), attempt to feel part of a larger, transcendent force (e.g., nature walks) and/or search for a closer connection with a higher power (e.g., meditation).

Adaptive interpersonal spiritual coping. Congregations represent one source of interpersonal resources that could offer resources to help youth cope with parental divorce. By analogy, divorcing adults report in qualitative studies that they commonly seek comfort through the love and care of congregation members and clergy (Blomquist, 1985; Greeff & Merwe 2004). In contrast, however, virtually none of the college students in our study reported reaching out for support from members of a faith community in their written responses to open-ended questions. As noted earlier, only a quarter of youth whose parents divorce had anyone from their congregation reach out to discuss any aspect of divorce, spiritual or not (Marquardt, 2005). Faith communities groups face serious challenges in deciding what steps they can and should take to reach out to youth whose parents divorce and to offer opportunities to explore the religious and spiritual dimensions of parental divorce.

Parents, however, are the people in youth's social networks who have the most powerful

influence on their children's religious and spiritual identities whether they intend to do so or not (Smith, 2005). For example, about three in four U.S. teens consider their own religious beliefs to be somewhat or very similar to their parents. Only 6 percent consider their beliefs to be very different from their mother and 11 percent very different from their father (Smith, 2005). These data imply that parents are the most well positioned people to talk to children about the spiritual issues that a divorce triggers. Moreover, approximately 88% of adults who undergo a divorce engage in religious/spirituality methods to some degree to cope with the transition (Krumrei, 2009). Yet it is not at all clear that parents and youth in divorcing family have spiritually intimate discussions about their respective experiences. Further, very few religious communities have rituals available to facilitate spiritual dialogues between children and parents about the divorce, or to help the family demarcate the dissolution of a marriage using religious rituals to facilitate healing in a manner parallel to the way that a wedding ceremony denotes the formation of a spiritual union. However, the profound potential for spiritual growth to be fostered by parents (and religious groups) can be heard in the following: "My mother is way more spiritual and in turn taught me more about being spiritual and finding someone I can positively share my spirituality with." Likewise parents can potentially offer their children a model for how to rebuild another marital union that helps their child come to terms spiritually with the divorce, as illustrated by the following: "I know that everything happens for a reason and my mother is happily remarried and I have a step-father there for me when my own father walked out. I grew deeper spiritually through seeing my mother and his relationship because God was actively apart of it." In the end, perhaps the most potent way for religious communities to help children of divorce is to reach out to their parents with compassion, not alienating condemnation, and be a

resource that helps parents and youth talk to each other about the spiritual dimensions of their family's divorce.

Psychological impact of positive religious/spiritual coping and divorce adjustment.

Findings from two initial studies of adults undergoing their own divorce show that greater reliance on positive methods of spiritually coping with divorce relates to lower depression at the time of the divorce (Krumrei et al., 2008; Webb et al., 2010). Krumrei also found that when adults turned to their faith in healthy ways to cope their divorce, they were less depressed one year later (Krumrei, 2008). In contrast, Warner et al. (2010) found that the more that college students used positive religious and spiritual coping methods at the time of their parents' divorce, the more distress (not less) they reported currently experiencing. This included greater anxiety, self-blame about the divorce, and viewing life through the filter of the divorce. These unexpected findings might have been a by-product of the fact that college students were not followed over time, but were asked to remember how they responded spiritually several years ago when their parents divorced (average 4.2 years earlier) and also how they were currently functioning emotionally. Perhaps college students who belonged to families that were destined to be embroiled in on-going, post-divorce conflict were more likely try to rely on faith at the time of the divorce and also thereafter to deal with continual turmoil tied to their parents' divorce. It is easy to imagine that higher self-blame and anxiety could extend well beyond the divorce date, and the youth who felt this way continued to access religious and spiritual methods to try to cope with persistent distress.

Nevertheless, the more college students accessed religious/spiritual resources, the more spiritual growth they believed they had derived from surviving parental divorce. In particular,

those youth who more often used adaptive spiritual coping methods were able to neutralize the negative effects of interpreting a parental divorce as a sacred loss or desecration, and developed a closer connection to God and deeper sense of spiritually. That is, those who used adaptive spiritual coping methods said these strategies spurred spiritual growth, even if their self-blame and anxiety persisted. Taken together, those youth who are most likely to try to turn to faith to cope with parental divorce may especially need adults to help them find effective spiritual solutions that builds their spiritual identity and protects them from psychological distress.

Guidelines for Talking with Adolescents about Parental Divorce as a Spiritual Trauma

In this article, we have argued that parental divorce can raise profound spiritual issues that are relevant to how a child of any age construes and adjusts to his or her parents' divorce. We offer the following guidelines and sample questions for adults to use to sustain a conversation with adolescents about whether they experience their parents' divorce as a spiritual trauma, identify religious/spiritual struggles tied to parental divorce, and help them seek out potentially useful religious/spiritual resources. Naturally, these questions should be modified for younger children.

** Seek information about the adolescent's religious and spiritual frame of reference*

* First, attempt to gain a better understanding of the youth's current religious and spiritual orienting system. Opening questions might be: "In what ways do you see yourself as a spiritual or religious person?," "Do you believe in God or a Higher Power? If so, how do you picture or think about God?," and "Are you involved in a religious organization and how active are you in that group?" In our experience, many young people will elaborate on their religious and spiritual backgrounds from these questions. After acquiring a basic understanding of an adolescent's

spirituality, an adult can better enter a dialogue about the parental divorce as a spiritual trauma.

* *Gain information about the adolescent's religious and spiritual frame of reference for the parents' marriage and divorce*

* Ask neutral, general questions about the role of spirituality in the parental divorce. An example is "Has your spirituality, or your religious beliefs or background, been a part of your thoughts or feelings about your parents' divorce?"

* Ask questions about positive spiritual appraisals that the teen may have had about his or her family unit or parents' marriage. A non-theistic question is "Did you ever experience your family or your parents' marriage as spiritual or sacred in any way?" Theistically oriented questions would be "Have you ever believed that your family or your parents' marriage was somehow connected to God or a Higher Power?," "What do you think God thinks of your parents' divorce?," and "How did you come to hold these beliefs?"

* *Help the adolescent articulate if and how much his or she experiences the parents' divorce as a spiritual trauma*

* Help the adolescent identify and express feelings of sacred loss or desecration in connection with their parents' divorce. "Sacred loss" and "desecrations" probes could be, respectively, "How much do you feel you lost something of spiritual importance because of their divorce?" and "How much did their divorce violate your expectations of the spiritual nature of marriage in general, about your parents' marriage, or about your family?"

* Help reduce stigma about the adolescent viewing the parents' divorce as a sacred loss and desecration by explaining that as many as a third of other youth have such thoughts.

* Explore what, if any, psychological and spiritual distress the individual has experienced

because their parents divorce felt like a trauma that undermined his/her spiritual worldview.

** Help the adolescent articulate religious/spiritual struggles caused by parental divorce*

* Open with a general question such as "Have you found yourself feeling confused or having more questions and doubts about religion or spirituality because of your parents' divorce?"

* Follow up with questions about divine, intrapsychic and interpersonal spiritual struggles. Sample probes are, "Has your parents' divorce created negative thoughts and feelings for you about who or what God is?" "Has your parents' divorce created questions, doubts or uncertainties for you about your spiritual journey in life?" and "Have you experienced tension between yourself and your family or other people because of spiritual or religious beliefs about divorce?"

* Explore how divorce may have lead to a decline in the youth's level of satisfaction with his or her spiritual life and decline in any spiritual or religious activity that was previously helpful. Ask how the parents' divorce has impacted the adolescent's views of organized religion.

** Identify when the adolescent has used adaptive religious/spiritual coping methods in the past to deal with the divorce or other traumas*

* Explore if and when the adolescent has dealt successfully with another stressful event using spiritual resources. An example question is, "In what ways, if any, has your spirituality or involvement in religion helped you deal with another big problem in your life?"

* Explore specific attempts the youth has made to turn to his/her faith to deal with the divorce. Probe in the areas of relating to God (e.g., "Have you found yourself turning to God for support?"), individual spiritual practices (e.g., "Have you gone online to find out more about spiritual ideas or practices to help you deal with your parents' divorce?"), and interpersonal

spiritual coping (e.g., “Have you talked to others who might understand what you are going through both emotionally and spiritually?”)

* Ask the adolescent about the extent to which he/she feels these efforts have been helpful. If not helpful, explore what the barriers have existed in this situation compared to past situations where religious/spiritual resources worked effectively for him or her.

* *Explore with the adolescent possible ways the divorce has or could trigger spiritual growth*

* Explore the adolescent’s attempt to reformulate his/her spiritual thinking or actions to accommodate the divorce.

* Ask the youth to imagine what spiritual growth due to the parents’ divorce might look like for him or her as well as each parent.

* Explore the adolescent’s examples and/or offer the youth examples of how others have found their faith tested, but strengthened by personal crises.

Closing

In this paper, we have discussed various roles that religion and spirituality could play in how youth interpret and cope with parental divorce. We have suggested that a parental divorce can be experienced as a sacred loss and desecration. Such perceptions and feelings reflect a unique and additive dimension of an already intensely stressful experience, rendering it a spiritual trauma. When parental divorce is experienced as a spiritual trauma, this may often trigger painful spiritual struggles. Yet such painful spiritual experiences can also facilitate long-range psychological and spiritual growth. Namely, spiritual struggles may spur many youth to grow in faith rather than abandon a spiritual frame of reference. However, the limited amount of data available on this topic suggests that most youth work through spiritual troubles triggered by

divorce on their own and that their private efforts to use religious and spiritual resources in an adaptive manner does not have the desired effect to reduce the psychological pain associated with parental divorce or the loss of connection with a religious community. Thus, parents and other adults in the social networks of children of divorce are urged to proactively reach out to youth and initiate sensitive conversations about the interplay of religion/spirituality and divorce.

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