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# HOW PARENTAL DIVORCE DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD GIVES MEANING TO WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Kayla Reed

University of Kentucky, [kayla.reed@uky.edu](mailto:kayla.reed@uky.edu)

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Kayla Reed, Student

Dr. Trent S. Parker, Major Professor

Jason Hans, Director of Graduate Studies

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the  
College of Agriculture  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Kayla M. Reed

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Trent S. Parker, Professor of Family Sciences

Lexington, Kentucky

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### HOW PARENTAL DIVORCE DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD GIVES MEANING TO WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study examined how parental divorce impacts emerging adults' familial relationships, romantic relationships, and development to build a basis for understanding emerging adult experiences. The participant sample consisted of 8 females between the ages of 19 and 24 ( $M = 21.6$ ). A qualitative transcendental or psychological phenomenological research method was used. 90-minute interviews were conducted focusing on romantic relationships, family relationships, reactions and thoughts of parental divorce, and self-perception. NVIVO was used to allow a "bottom-up" design, emergent design, and interpretive inquiry for data analysis. Three themes emerged from the data: impacts of family dynamics, effects of developmental stage, and self-identity and interpersonal relationships. Results are relevant for Marriage and Family Therapists working within a systems perspective, by providing information on how the experience of parental divorce influences emerging adults' state of homeostasis, as well as beliefs and attitudes about romantic relationships.

**KEYWORDS:** Divorce, Emerging Adults, Relationships, Self-identity

Kayla M. Reed

July 30, 2013

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By

Kayla M. Reed

Trent S. Parker  
Director of Thesis

Jason Hans  
Director of Graduate Studies

July 30, 2013

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Over one million children experience parental divorce per year, with around 50% of marriages ending in divorce (Amato, 2001; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010; Trotter, 2010). Although the divorce rate for marriages lasting less than 15 years declined and leveled out through the 1980s and 1990s, divorce rates for couples who have been married for 25 years or more are increasing (Amato, 2001; Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). This rise implies that children are increasingly experiencing parental divorce during their emerging adult years, rather than at younger ages (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007). Nevertheless, research on children's experiences with parental divorce has remained focused on children and adolescents; the literature on emerging adults' experiences with parental divorce focuses on those whose parents divorced during their childhood and adolescent years (Bulduc, Caron, & Logue, 2007; Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010).

Peer, romantic, and familial relationships differ a great deal between adolescents and emerging adults. Given the impacts divorce has on children and adolescents in these areas (Amato, 1994, 2000; Kot & Shoemaker, 1999; Richardson & McCabe, 2001), it is important to understand the effects on emerging adults' relationships as well. This becomes particularly important as emerging adults are building long-term romantic relationships and considering the prospects of marriage, while attempting to differentiate from their families (Richardson & McCabe, 2001). The primary purpose of this study was to understand how parental divorce during emerging adulthood gives meaning to emerging adults' intimate relational and developmental experiences during this life stage.



The research question explored is: How does parental divorce during emerging adulthood give meaning to parental and other familial relationships, to romantic relationships, and to the process of differentiation?

### **Emerging Adulthood**

The stage that takes place between adolescence and adulthood is now distinct enough that it is recognized as having a separate period of the life course (Arnett, 2007). This new life stage is labeled emerging adulthood and typically occurs between the ages of 18-25 (Gitelson, 2006). The process of transitioning into adulthood is marked by a series of changes: leaving home, finishing school, starting a job, getting married, and having children. Although this has previously been the norm, over the last decade researchers have focused their attention on how these changes are evolving, specifically on the rearrangement of timing, lengthened duration, and increased complication (Gitelson, 2006). The majority of this stage is spent exploring new experiences and making decisions about love and work, rather than getting comfortable in long-term adult roles (Arnett, 2007). Even though there has been a shift in focus towards the evolution and lengthening of this life stage, the impact of parental divorce during this stage remains to be explored

Erikson (1968) defined self-identity as a sense of inner wholeness, which provides a context in which a person can answer questions of purpose or meaning of life. The most important task in creating self-identity during the emerging adult developmental stage is differentiation from the family of origin along with the creation of intimate and differentiated peer relationships (Johnson & Nelson, 1998). Differentiated individuals are able to function autonomously and have self-directing behavior while still managing

contact with others (Bowen, 1978). To achieve differentiation, individuals must gain independence while simultaneously maintaining an emotional connection to their parents (Johnson & Nelson, 1998). This is done by creating separate identities with personal views while keeping emotional ties with the family. Individuals that are able to achieve differentiation are then able to have intimate, differentiated relationships (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Individuals who are unable to achieve differentiation have an unclear sense of self, experience an emotional reactive style, or become emotionally cut off from their significant others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

### **Impact of Divorce on Family Relationships**

Even though emerging adults may be more financially and emotionally independent than children and adolescents, they are not quite ready for the responsibilities of adulthood and are often still dependent on their parents for emotional and financial support (Gitelson, 2006). Individuals usually face emotional and financial challenges during a divorce (Amato, 2000; Carranza, Kilmann, & Vendemia, 2009; Trotter, 2010) and these challenges have the potential to impact parent-child relationships, especially if the emerging adult is reliant on the parent for these types of support. However, the emerging adult is attempting to find the balance of independence and reliance on parental support, so these changes may help the emerging adult to gain the detachment they are seeking.

One distinguishing factor between adolescence and emerging adulthood that would play a role in finding this balance is an emerging adult's increased cognitive abilities (Gitelson, 2006; Richardson & McCabe, 2001). Children often experience feelings of anger toward their parents after a divorce but the rationale behind the emotion

becomes more complex for older children (Cooney, 1988; Richardson & McCabe, 2001). An example of a more complex rationale is an emerging adult that understands he or she is angry at the mother for having an affair and leaving her husband, while the young child feels angry because he or she does not understand what happened to the family. For emerging adults, increased cognitive development allows them to have a deeper understanding of their context. It makes sense that this would extend to parents' behaviors and their own personal reactions. For example, emerging adults would be expected to be more capable of understanding the rationale behind the parental divorce.

One challenge for emerging adults with this understanding is the potential of parents interacting with them more as they would a peer than child. This tends to lead parents to seek support and advice from their adult children and involve them as a mediator in times of conflict (Richardson & McCabe, 2001). Even though the emerging adult has the freedom from his or her parents to make the decision to get involved, they may feel pressured to do so or have to cope with emotional repercussions if they remain uninvolved.

### **Impact of Divorce on Romantic Relationships**

The parental relationship has a large influence on emerging adults' own later intimate relationships (Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998). For example, when children see their parents divorce, they tend to mirror the decisions which led their parents to choose divorce and adopt more negative attitudes about marriage as well as positive ones about divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Trotter, 2010). They also fear that they will have an unhappy or a dysfunctional relationship, leading to an unhappy and unfulfilling marriage similar to their parents (Knox, Zusman, & Decuzzi,

2004) and these concerns persist into emerging adulthood (Miles & Servaty-Seib, 2010). Interestingly, while they tend to have more negative expectations about future marriage, emerging adults who experienced parental divorce still expect to one day get married (Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001).

Individuals who experienced parental divorce during childhood, as well as those who experienced post-divorce conflict or little amounts of parent-child interaction, experience reduced satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment in romantic relationships as compared to their peers who did not experience parental divorce (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Cui & Fincham, 2010; Ensign, Scherman, & Clark, 1998). Just as younger children become more hesitant to begin new relationships for fear of losing another person, emerging adults are hesitant to become emotionally vulnerable with others, resulting in a lower likelihood of getting involved in a romantic relationship (Mahl, 2001). Additionally, those emerging adults that witness a parental divorce during childhood and adolescence are more critical, less trusting, have less intimacy, and have a higher level of fear of betrayal and rejection in their romantic relationships than emerging adults who have not experienced parental divorce (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984; Mahl, 2001).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Method**

A phenomenological research design was employed to incorporate individual experiences into an image of collective experiences of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990), in this specific case the experience of parental divorce during emerging adulthood is the phenomenon. This qualitative research design focuses on describing what the participants all have in common through their shared experience of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The final goal of the description is to express what the individuals experienced and how they experienced it.

Specifically, this study used a transcendental phenomenology, or a psychological phenomenology, method (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). In this form of phenomenology, the researcher attempts to focus less on his or her interpretations and more on describing the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the impossibility of remaining objective, the researcher describes his or her bias and interpretations to inform the reader of how the researcher's perspective fits into the created experience of the participants.

#### **Role of the Researcher as Instrument**

My past experiences, biases, and other beliefs help shape the interpretation and approach to the study, so clarifying my viewpoint and bias of my personal experiences with parental divorce is important to express in order for the reader to understand how the data could be affected. The decision for me to explore the phenomenon of parental divorce was a personal one. My parents' decision to divorce when I was seven years old provided me with a variety of experiences, which have resulted in an awareness of its

impact on my life. Initially the experience was very stressful and it continues to have a direct impact on my life. The primary effects of the divorce were related to my relationships with my parents and extended family members, struggles with independence, ideas about healthy relationships, self-identity, and evolving values and personal opinions. Given my previous experiences with parental divorce throughout the interview process I continuously reminded myself that every experience is unique and to abstain from associating myself with the participants. I also have the professional experience of being a marriage and family therapist, so throughout the interviews I also focused on acting purely as an interviewing researcher, rather than an assessing clinician.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Sample.** The sample was recruited using criterion, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques through the University of Kentucky's School of Human Environmental Science undergraduate classes as well as through online advertisements on craigslist.com. The criterion requirement for participation in the study, was for individuals to be between the ages of 18-25 and to have either previously experienced parental divorce between the ages of 18-25 or currently experiencing parental divorce, which was defined as taking place after the official announcement of the decision to divorce was made. This information was provided to potential participants in undergraduate classes as well as in the online advertisements. Participants who had recently turned 18 and had experienced the beginning process of parental divorce after the age of 17 were considered but not included.

**Interview procedures.** I scheduled a 90-minute interview with each participant, with actual interview times ranging from 39 to 78 minutes long. Interviews were audio

and video recorded in order to be later transcribed onto a password-protected computer. Open-ended questions were asked in an attempt to gather as much information as possible. Questions also asked for background information, including when the parental divorce took place and the reasons for the divorce, if known (see Appendix A). This allowed for further assessment for patterns within the group. The questions asked throughout the interview focused on how emerging adults perceived their personal and familial relationships and experiences during this time period. Upon completion of each interview, the participant was given a \$10 gift card.

**Skype as a research instrument.** In order to increase the geographic diversity of the population sample, and to provide additional options for individuals to participate in the research study, Skype was used as an additional data collection method. Skype is a free video conferencing software program that has been used in research when face-to-face interviews are not possible. Skype is superior to other synchronous alternatives, such as telephone or text-based chat interviews, because the two-way streaming video function provides visual cues and allows for physical and nonverbal responses during an interview. In addition, Skype's visual component helps researchers build greater rapport with informants than non-visual methods, such as telephone or text-based chat (Nigel & Horrocks, 2010; Paul, 2012; Saumure & Given, 2012). Further, the use of Skype in one's personal setting instead of an unknown location can provide more comfort and ease to the participant without the feeling of personal space encroachment (Paul, 2012).

A possible disadvantage of using a video conferencing program such as Skype is a greater risk of stilted conversation throughout the interview that one may not encounter as often with face-to-face interviews (Saumure & Given, 2012). There are also risks of

technical malfunctions while using Skype that would not occur during face-to-face interviews, such as webcam failure or loss of Internet connectivity, but the advantages for this data collection method seem to outweigh the negative (Paul, 2012). In order to address these possibilities, the researcher provided participants with the informed consent, listing additional risks via email and discussed the possibility of pauses throughout the interview prior to beginning the interview process. Three participants chose to participate in this study via Skype. Any issues that may have impacted the data through the transcription process were noted.

**Participants.** Participants consisted of eight individuals between the ages of 19 and 24 ( $M = 21.6$ ) from Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Virginia. All eight participants were Caucasian. Three participants were currently experiencing parental divorce at the time of participation and the remaining five had previously experienced parental divorce at the age of 18 or later. One participant experienced the parental divorce between her biological mother and stepfather; however, the participant described her stepfather as her father, and he fulfilled that role throughout her childhood and adolescence. Two participants were in their senior year of high school when the announcement of the decision and divorce process began, which was finalized during their college enrollment. Two participants experienced parental divorce after they graduated from college. The remaining participants were currently enrolled and living away at college during the majority of the parental divorce. Two participants described being single during the entire process of their parents' divorce; the other six describing themselves as being in a relationship at some point during the divorce process. See Table 1 for detailed participant information.



## **Data Analysis**

After all data was collected, qualitative data management software was used to inductively code and analyze the transcribed interviews. This coding process involved both a “bottom-up” and emergent design. A bottom-up design involves organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information to create themes (Creswell, 2007). An emergent design includes creating lists of significant statements and working back and forth through the statements to evolve the themes, allowing the image of the data to continuously shift (Creswell, 2007). The same significant statements used to create themes were also used as quoted examples in the explanation of the themes in order to create rich, thick descriptions to express and describe the experience of the participants.

This process of working back and forth through the data to evolve themes included the key component of participants’ meaning of their experiences, while attempting to take into consideration the researcher’s experience (Moustakas, 1994). Interpretive inquiry was then used to interpret the emerging themes through the researcher’s understanding of each unique experience to create a holistic account. This inquiry process allows the researcher to see the participants’ meaning through their own background, history, context, and prior understandings while acknowledging the differences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Peer review and debriefing was used throughout the theme creation process to act as an external check to provide alternative perspectives to the data. The final holistic image is created through the combination of the participants’, researchers’ and reader’s interpretation of the problem. Throughout data analysis external audits were utilized in order to consult about the ongoing process

Table 1

*Detailed Participant Information by Pseudonym*

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Area</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Divorce Status/Age</i>	<i>Current Relationship Status</i>	<i>Relationship Status During Divorce</i>	<i>Parent Details</i>	<i>Current School Status</i>	<i>School Status During Divorce</i>	<i>Location During Divorce</i>
Hermione	OK	24	Currently Experiencing	Single	Single	Biological Mother & Step-Father	Not Enrolled	Not Enrolled	Away From Home
Ginny	KY	19	Experienced Divorce – Informed 18	Single	In Relationship	Biological Parents	In College	In College	Living at College
Molly	KY	23	Experienced Divorce – Informed 22	In Relationship	In Relationship	Biological Parents	Not Enrolled	Not Enrolled	Away From Home
Lily	KY	20	Experienced Divorce – Informed 18	In Relationship	In Relationship	Biological Parents	In College	In College	Living at College
Lavender	KY	22	Experienced Divorce – Informed 18	In Relationship	Single	Biological Parents	In College	In High School & College	Living at Home
Petunia	KY	23	Experienced Divorce – Informed 18	In Relationship	In Relationship	Biological Parents	Master’s	In High School & College	Living at Home
Luna	KY	20	Currently Experiencing	In Relationship	In Relationship	Biological Parents	In College	In College	Living at College
Dolores	VA	22	Currently Experiencing	Single	In Relationship	Biological Parents	Secondary Bachelor’s	In College	Living at College

and then again at the finalization of the study to examine the final product as well as it's accuracy and reliability.

## Chapter 3

### Results

#### Impacts of Family Dynamics

The first research question addressed how divorce affects family relationships. The primary theme that emerged was based on participants' descriptions of family dynamics changing as well as remaining constant in some areas. The combination of change as well as stability created a dynamic experience of both loss and hope. The changes in family structure along with supportive extended family impacted the overall experience of parental divorce. The subthemes that emerged were grieving, changes in family support, and constancy in family relationships.

**Grieving.** Participants expressed a feeling of grieving throughout the experience of parental divorce. Many participants indicated that their perception of their parents and their parents' relationship changed through the divorce experience, which resulted in a sense of loss. Participants also expressed a more tangible sense of loss in regards to places or things disrupted from the divorce process. Luna described the loss of her childhood home as a result of the divorce:

I've never been a fan of holidays because there's been so much money issues and there's so much pressure but they've always tried to make it normal. So this year I told [my mom] I don't even want to come home, because my dad's trying to sell the house that I lived in since I was born and I hate that, oh my god I hate it so much.

Participants described the feelings of loss in the sense that they have to adapt to the new requirements of their family. When Petunia was asked how she handled the changes she expressed how she addressed the issues:

I tend to go into like pragmatic, problem-solving mode, so I was like, I'm pretty sure I was like, where's mom going to live, how are [my brother and I] going to [be] split up, you know sort of very practical commendations.

The type of changes were unique for every situation but many felt like they had to "quickly grow up" or step into positions they were not sure how to handle.

Participants also expressed the difficulty associated with experiencing a lack of control over their situation. This experience led to feelings of uncertainty about the future. Ginny, while trying to maintain hope, expressed the following:

I guess making sure [I can still take care of my friends and family was important]. And that's probably a reason why this whole thing has impacted [me] because I want everything to be okay, and I know it is, but with [the divorce] happening it's like a pothole in the road.

**Change in Family Support.** For this subtheme, family support refers to the availability of communication, willingness to be involved, or interaction between family members. Many participants described becoming closer to one parent and distancing from another during the divorce process. Many of these situations involving a change in

availability of a parent were due to housing relocation or involvement with a new partner.

Ginny described how she grew closer to her father:

Well [he] is the person that I leaned on the most when my boyfriend broke up with me because my mom wasn't living in the house then and that's where I was living in the summer. So he was there for me all the time and then when I found out about [my mother's] engagement he was there, and so I feel like that's how I got close to him: because he was always there when I needed someone.

Participants also described communicating more often with siblings during the divorce to help one another process the experience and changes. Petunia said she would go home every weekend to help her younger brother adjust to the divorce and to make sure that her parents were treating him appropriately. She thought the timing of their decision likely played a part the sense of responsibility she felt for her brother:

Had he been a few years older I think it would have been much easier on him because he was just transitioning to middle school from elementary school. He was a preteen/teen right there on the edge, and then he had his mom leaning really heavily on him, and I understand, she was in a bad place. She was leaning inappropriately heavily on him.

Participants also reported changes in support from extended family members.

Luna, for example, indicated that family had moved up on her priority list:

Extended family has [moved up] because they were also there for me, my cousins who all heard about [the divorce] were there for me so I make it a point, I talk to them more just because they were there and they helped me through everything.

**Constancy in Family Relationships.** Participants expressed a perception that relationships and communication between immediate family members or other aspects of family life had changed due to the divorce, but that their own experiences and relationships as well as extended family relationships had not been notably affected. Petunia expressed her experience of this constancy:

A lot of times when people divorce you see all of mom's [family] flocking to her, all of dad's [family] flocking to him, but that didn't really happen. You know a lot of my mom's brother's and sister's still maintained relationships with my dad. Which I thought was great.

### **Effects of Developmental Stage**

Throughout the discussion on experiences of parental divorce, participants' experiences unique to their developmental stage arose. Participants expressed a struggle between balancing being an adult while still being a child. The tension in this stage created blurred lines between their roles in experience. Specifically, participants discussed their views or beliefs of what took place, their opinions, and understandings they gained. Two sub-themes emerged: agreement or support of decision, and awareness.

**Agreement or Support of Decision.** Participants expressed a sense of agreement with what their parents chose or felt supportive of their parents' decision. This does not imply that participants were happy with their parents' choice, but rather they expressed seeing the necessity or benefit of that choice. Ginny's explanation of her thoughts on the topic of her parents' decision to divorce depict this idea:

I don't agree with what they did at all but now looking it, they're both really happy and I thought they were happy before, but now I see the other side of it. I can really tell they're happy now. So maybe it was for the best.

Another aspect of this idea of agreement or support is that it was not always felt during the initial announcement or beginning of the divorce process. Many participants expressed disagreeing or not understanding at the beginning, but later after seeing the consequences of their parents' decision, they felt that they could provide their parents with support. Molly expressed this concept:

It's probably different than what I feel now, but at the time I felt like they were kind of taking the easy way out. I just felt it all happened too quick and they didn't really try, but now seeing both of them . . . I'd say that they're both definitely better people. Overall we're better as a family . . . my parents are a lot happier. But I couldn't tell that then.



Participants also extended this view onto what they thought about their parents' decision in the timing of the divorce. Participants expressed mixed feelings about their parents divorcing during their emerging adulthood, but ultimately understood why their parents chose the specific timing. Dolores expressed this when she was asked what she thought about her parents trying to wait and postpone a divorce.

The selfish part of me is like, yeah you should have waited, but then again the realistic part is like, yeah you shouldn't be together because your life is short you should be happy as soon as you can be happy.

**Awareness.** Participants expressed a certain level of awareness of the details of their parents' relationship or decision to divorce and an understanding of what reasons fed into the problems leading to divorce. This level of awareness made their parents' announcement of the decision not surprising. A factor that some participants mentioned brought them awareness through their experience of parental divorce was their age. Molly's description illustrates this idea:

I guess as a child you can see more than what your parents want you to see at times, so when you're old, I can definitely see the issues that were there.

For many there was a sense that they either picked up on details due to their level of awareness or that their parents expressed more to them due to their age. Participants

also expressed how they thought their level of awareness made things difficult in terms of understanding the implications of divorce. Dolores mentioned this idea:

I feel like it's different for little kids. Older adults like my age I feel like it's harder, maybe. Just because we know what's going on, we understand, and that is hard too.

In some instances it seems that awareness helped participants understand why the divorce was happening, which simultaneously made it difficult to balance their reactions as a child versus being an adult.

Participants who gained an awareness of reasons or details of their parents' divorce explained how they gained this knowledge. They explained that they were not necessarily told or overheard conversations, but that they could see it through body language and other nonverbal cues. Lavender illustrated it this way:

I knew it was coming so it was easier on me. My parents growing up never showed affection, but they never fought in front of us, you would think everything was fine . . . I caught on to it. [My mom] would never say anything bad, you would have thought that they had a really good marriage. I guess it's a front.

### **Self-identity and Interpersonal Relationships**

Participants expressed shifts in their self-identity in terms of what they knew to exist, things that they believed in, views for the future, or things of importance. Aspects

of the experience of divorce became incorporated into participants' personal relationships as well as their image of self. Participants had to decide on how to adapt their self-identity to fit the new lens gained through the experience. Three subthemes emerged from this theme: changes in value and priorities, impacts on the view of relationships, and importance of differentiation.

**Changes in Values and Priorities.** Participants expressed they felt that their self-identity had changed in some way during the divorce process. The combination of experiencing emerging adulthood and the occurrence of parental divorce resulted in a sense of growing up or experiencing change during this time period. Lily expressed this idea:

I feel like I've grown up a whole lot since even last year. Dealing with, obviously my parents, and having this picture perfect thing just not being there anymore. Dealing with that, dealing with my sister, and learning to pay my own rent.

Participants expressed how the image of their parents evolved and how the importance of parental involvement in their self-identity became less important. Molly stated:

That whole experience opened my eyes to not only who my parents really are, but how they handled certain situations. Because as a child growing up your parents [are] on this pedestal, and I'm not saying I don't have them up there, but they're probably not as high anymore.

Participants expressed aspects of themselves that they find to be important or values that they hold high, which they specifically mentioned was a reason for their parents' divorce or was something they considered their parents lacked. Luna, whose parents divorced due to financial issues, was asked to describe her self-image:

I think I like to work so much because of money. I like to have the money come in and I like to save it. That's one thing that's really valuable that they have taught me. I'm going to have my own money no matter who I marry, no matter where I am . . . I'm not going to end up, again something I'm not going to do because of them, I'm not going to end up without security.

**Impacts on the View of Relationships.** Participants talked about how the experience of parental divorce impacted their own view of relationships, marriage, and divorce. Participants expressed that they want to be married, not divorced, and how different aspects of parental divorce impacted the general ideas or impressions that they have about marriage or divorce. Many participants felt that they learned information from experiencing their parents' divorce in terms of how they should look at their own relationships or future marriage. Participants expressed the belief that they should use what they learned through their relationships in order to know how to handle future relationships. Lavender described this idea:

All this has helped me realize the things that should be important in a relationship and things that I do and don't want, things you can compromise on and things you can't, because relationships are hard and a lot of work.

Participants felt they were able to learn from the mistakes of their parents.

Participants who had experienced parental divorce a few years ago and are currently witnessing their parents date and remarry expressed how now seeing their parents in healthy relationships has impacted their view of relationships. Dolores described it this way:

I'm starting to think about marriage and it's really interesting because my parents never were physically together. But with my mom and her boyfriend, and even with my dad, he has a fiancé now, they're kissing and they're sitting together, holding hands. Seeing that now, that's how a relationship should be, a marriage should be. But seeing how my parents were together versus now, they needed to end it because they obviously weren't happy.

Not only did divorce have an impact on futuristic ideals of romantic relationships, but it also affected current relationships that participants were in at either the time of divorce or time of participation. Participants expressed feeling an impact from the experience of parental divorce on how they behaved emotionally towards their romantic partner and their perception of the relationship itself. Luna shared how her experience

led her to having doubts about the possibility of a future with her current boyfriend and the longevity of the relationship.

[The divorce] played a role in me and [my boyfriend] too. Because I figured if they can basically end 30 years of marriage over one business decision, that's the stupidest thing ever. I feel like anything could ruin something so easily.

Participants also considered their reactions to parental divorce when they considered their own possible divorce. Many participants expressed certain steps they would take to ensure the highest chance of a successful marriage and lowest possibility of divorce. When describing what steps they would take, participants talked about things they learned through their parents' divorce. Petunia described her preventative steps and views:

I firmly believe that if your expectations of each other are aligned, in the beginning, before you decide to get married, that your chances are significantly better and so I'm a big fan of pre-marital counseling.

**Importance of Differentiation.** Participants expressed the importance of maintaining a sense of self throughout the divorce. This sense of self is the idea that an individual must remove him or herself from the situation and find their own ideas and thoughts separate from the group or family experience. Participants expressed how they had to adopt the attitude that they were in control of their own happiness or perceptions

about the divorce and that they could not be responsible for their parents' or family members' beliefs about the situation. Hermione was asked what she would say to someone else going through a similar experience and she commented:

Just because [your parent's marriage] ended doesn't mean that your relationships will end and that your parents won't be happy. You just have to know you can't do anything to change what's happened and you have to move on and focus on how you can be happy regardless of what is happening.

This idea of maintaining a sense of self was also expressed through removing oneself from the situation. Petunia commented,

Try to maintain a perspective and not get sucked into the situation, heart and soul. At the end of the day it's your family, but they're your parents, they're adults, they're independent actors, you're never going to control what happens. So just take a step back.

Participants described this process as almost a physical experience in terms of trying to remove themselves from the experience. Dolores expressed her experience of the divorce:

We try everything we can to not let it happen even though we know that it should happen. I didn't want them to break up but I knew it was best for them, so it's

kind of like fighting yourself. You selfishly try to stay happy but also make your parents happy at the same time.

This idea of having to fight yourself as well as your family in order to determine self-image was expressed as highly important for these emerging adults.



## Chapter 4

### Discussion

The research question of the study was how does parental divorce during emerging adulthood give meaning to parental and other familial relationships, to romantic relationships, and to the process of differentiation? Participants described how maturity and understanding played a role in the experience of parental divorce during emerging adulthood. Additionally, they described how parental divorce influenced their views and beliefs about current and future relationships. Participants also expressed how finding balance between incorporating the experiences surrounding the divorce into their self-identity, while keeping a separate sense of self from the experience was a crucial part of the experience.

Previous research found that children's relationships with their parents tend to suffer through the divorce experience, specifically more with the father than with the mother (Amato, 1994; Axinn & Thornton, 1996; Johnson & McNeil, 1998; Nielsen, 1999). This type of decline in parent-child relationship existed for some of the emerging adults, but the overall experience showed that the parent-child relationship experienced a variety of changes. Some participants expressed that they grew closer to one parent when they felt they lacked support from the other parent through events such as relocation or the parent's new romantic relationship.

These changes in parental relationships were often expressed as a loss. While children experience a loss in their home situation, it seems the sense of loss is different for this age group than those who experience parental divorce during childhood. This

feeling of loss also presented itself through changed support from specific family members or a loss of control over what happened throughout the divorce process.

One advantage that emerged for participants in dealing with loss and changes in parental relationships was their level of maturity and understanding. This understanding was a result of emerging adults' cognitive ability. Richardson and McCabe (2001) explain that emerging adults may understand more of the reasoning behind the decision to divorce. They suggest that with this understanding, emerging adult children are invited into the discussion of the divorce with the parents.

This understanding, however, can place emerging adult children in positions of conflict mediator. This maturity also changes the feeling of freedom to make the choice to be involved or remain separate and the resulting consequences of that decision on their self-identity (Berzonsky, 1992; Richardson & McCabe, 2001). This gives the emerging adult the unique experience of having an independent, while complex, choice in their parent-child relationships. Participants expressed this dual role as independent adult as well as involved child complicated their feelings about the experience.

This dual role was also a factor in the participants' process of differentiation (Johnson & Nelson, 1998). Participants talked about how their parents' divorce or reasons behind the decision to divorce became incorporated into their personal values or beliefs. Additionally, participants rearranged the priorities they deemed important to their self-identity. For example, the level in which they valued their parents' involvement or decision-making power was redefined through the experience of parental divorce.

Participants provided insight into how parental divorce during emerging adulthood gives meaning to their current and future romantic relationships. Participants described a sense of hesitancy to form new relationships in light of their parents' relationship ending. This agrees with the existing literature that parental divorce sets a negative example for romantic relationships (Trotter, 2010). Knox, Zusman, and Decuzzi (2004) found that many children of divorce express a fear of the possibility of their own future divorce, or of an unhappy or dysfunctional relationship that is similar to what they saw in their parents' failed marriage.

Although some participants initially felt their parents' divorce taking place after many years of marriage was a sign that no relationship could last, they still expressed the desire for marriage and hope that divorce would not take place for them. This is similar to what younger children who experience parental divorce express in terms of hopes for a future marriage (Boyer-Pennington, Pennington, & Spink, 2001). Additionally, participants expressed that not all of their experience through their parents' divorce was negative. For example, their parents' relationship became a basis of learning what to do in future relationships or things that they wanted in a future spouse.

Conflict theory focuses on control over scarce resources and power to understand stability and instability in families (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Power changes within the family over the life cycle. For example, when children age they gain more power while parents lose power with age (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). The higher level of maturity and understanding that comes with age provides an increase in power that emerging adults have in conflict resolution. This fluctuation of power within the family creates a dynamic experience of parental divorce during emerging adulthood. With the higher

amount of power within the family, the emerging adult has more choice in the level of involvement of the divorce.

A large part of conflict behavior is spent on attempting to negotiate and bargain (Sprey, 1979). Parents that are seeking to gain a consensus over a conflict within the family may bring the emerging adult into the process as a negotiation or bargaining tool. The emerging adults are seen as a valuable resource to have in conflict management. Conflict is not viewed as negative but rather as the foundation for progress and change and in relationships it is important how conflict is handled (Mace & Mace, 1980). Handling conflict can increase intimacy, relieve tension and resentment, increase understanding, and enhance appreciation of a relationship (Farrington & Chertok, 1993). Parent-child relationships experience a variety of changes through the experience of parental divorce, some positive and some negative. Many times when participants expressed a change in relationship with a parent, it was described as changing due to how they handled conflict behavior through the process of divorce. When the parent-child relationship decreased it was often due to a lack of involvement or distraction from a new partner. Each member of the family has a unique role in how the emerging adult experiences parental divorce.

### **Limitations**

The results of this study must be understood in the context of the limitations. Six out of the eight participants were recruited at the same university and two participants were recruited from other locations. Despite recruiting two participants from different locations, the general characteristics of the participation sample were Caucasian and middle class. A more diverse group of participants may present different themes or

common occurrences through the experience of parental divorce during emerging adulthood.

Additionally, the sample included some participants who were living close to home and some who lived away from home. Future research should provide a focus to determine any differences experienced by these two groups of people. For example, emerging adults living close to home may feel more involved with their parents' divorce due to proximity. This has implications for their experience of parental divorce and the resulting consequences.

Finally, the sample consisted only of individuals who were enrolled in college at some point during their parents' divorce. Future research should focus on the experience of young adults who choose not to attend college. Many of their housing or social aspects may be different, both of which were factors for the participants in this study.

### **Clinical Implications**

For marriage and family therapists (MFTs), this information on family support, relationships, and identity will help to create a larger image of what clients are experiencing. For example, it is important to address any experience of a change in family support, including an increase in relationship with one parent and a distancing of the other. Additionally, it would be important to work on facilitating differentiation, especially if the client is experiencing pressure from parents to mediate their relationship.

It is also important for clinicians to be aware of an individual's future beliefs about relationships and his or her self as a person. Understanding changes in self-identity can facilitate an exploration on current difficulties in relationships or an individual's personal emphasis on seemingly minute details. The client may require guidance in

balancing previous thoughts about marriage and divorce with new perspectives gained through the experience. When an individual in a romantic relationship experiences a shift in priorities or beliefs the other romantic partner must adjust to fit the new roles or experience conflict in the relationship. Focusing on helping the client prepare for this redefinition of roles and helping to navigate potential conflict is important.

*Appendix A*

**Interview Questions**

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**Current Study:** How Parental Divorce During Emerging Adulthood Gives Meaning to Women's Emerging Adults' Experiences

**Questions:**

- 1) Are you currently experiencing a parental divorce?
  - a) If Yes, when did your parents inform you of their decision?
  - b) If No, when did the parental divorce occur (Date/Time Frame)?
    - i) How long did the divorce process take?
- 2) Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
  - a) If yes, how long have you been in this current relationship?
  - b) If no, were you in a romantic relationship at any point since your parent's decision to divorce?
    - i) If yes, when was this relationship? How long was it?
- 3) Are you currently enrolled in college?
  - a) If yes, when did you start college?
  - b) If no, have you ever been enrolled in college?
    - i) If yes, why are you no longer enrolled?
- 4) What reasons, if known, are behind your parents' decision to divorce?
  - a) How were you informed?
  - b) Thoughts on their reasons?
  - c) Thoughts on their decision?

- 5) What was your initial reaction to your parents' decision to divorce?
  - a) First thoughts?
  - b) Emotions?
  - c) First person you told?
  
- 6) Describe your experience with romantic relationships and other friendships since your parent's announcement of divorce.
  - a) Dependence?
  - b) Trust?
  - c) Activities with them?
  - d) Communication?
  - e) Views of romantic future?
  
- 7) Describe your experiences with family relationships since your parent's announcement of divorce.
  - a) Communication?
  - b) Conflict? Amount of conflict?
    - i) Describe experiences with family conflict and:
      - (1) Friendships
      - (2) Romantic relationships
      - (3) Family relationships
      - (4) Activities
      - (5) Personal Interests
      - (6) Image of self



- 8) Describe your personal activities and interests since your parent's announcement of divorce.
  - a) Interest?
  - b) Importance?
  - c) Occurrence?
- 9) Describe your image of yourself since your parent's announcement of divorce.
  - a) Coping strategies?
  - b) List of priorities?
- 10) What would you say to someone who was going through a similar experience as you?
- 11) If enrolled in college:
  - a) Describe your academic experiences since your parent's announcement of divorce.
    - i) Motivation level?
    - ii) Interest level?
  - b) What do you think of your college experience so far?
    - i) Importance?
    - ii) Interest?

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA  
B.S. in Human Development, 2011  
Minor in Psychology

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Department of Family Studies, University of Kentucky  
Graduate Assistant, 2011-2013

University of Kentucky Family Center  
Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, 2011-2013

### PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES & WORKSHOPS

Kentucky Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (KAMFT) Conference,  
Louisville, KY, 2011

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) National Conference,  
Charlotte, NC, 2012

### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT)  
Kentucky Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (KAMFT)  
University of Kentucky Student Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (SAMFT)