SURVIVING THE BLaST: STRESS, COPING
AND THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY
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ABSTRACT

Children from single parent homes live with many new types of challenges bringing elevated levels of stress that they must live with on a daily basis. This study measured differences in the coping strategies of locus of control and assertiveness in 105 undergraduate students at a large California state university who were children of divorce raised in single parent homes. Analysis of survey data revealed that children whose parents were divorced more than seven years had significantly greater internal locus of control and were significantly more assertive than children whose parents were divorced less than seven years. There was also a significant and negative correlation between these two coping strategies, leading to the conclusion that these individuals may be developing more healthy coping strategies.

Historically, the most salient part of any society is its family unit. Since the first no-fault divorce legislation in the United States in the early 1970s, the American family unit has undergone many changes. Research has advanced over the decades since divorce rates and the number of single parent families began to rise, producing evidence leading to opposing conclusions regarding the effect on children of divorced parents. The social and developmental impact of fatherless homes (Santrock 1972, 455) versus a decrease in domestic conflict that occurs after divorce (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986, 1) produced a disagreement concerning how, or if, children of divorce could develop normal social and coping skills.

Coping with stress on a chronic or acute level requires the development of coping and defense mechanisms. One of the coping mechanisms that people use is our perception of our control of our environment or situation, which can be a very important factor in an individual’s assessment and defense during stressful events and in stressful surroundings (Blonna 2007, 329; Compass et al. 1991, 23; Kobasa 1979, 1). This concept of locus of control (LOC) emerged from research done by Rotter in 1966. Rotter, using the Locus of Control Scale that he developed, measured an individual’s perception of the extent to which one feels that he/she has control over events in his/her life. Rotter found that those individuals with a high external locus of control felt that others, or fate or even luck, affect the stressors they
encounter. Individuals with a high internal locus of control view themselves as being responsible for the events and stressors in their lives. According to Lazarus, locus of control is the foundational coping mechanism that all individuals use as a filter when choosing which coping strategy to use when encountering stressful events and circumstances in life (Lazarus, 1966, 28; Lazarus 1999, 288; Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 117). Therefore, for the present study this researcher measured an individual’s locus of control as an indication of the differences in coping mechanisms in children of divorce.

Another coping mechanism proposed is assertiveness, which is a constructive coping mechanism that individuals with either an internal or an external locus of control acquire and use as a skill for coping with stress. Often confused with aggression, individuals use assertiveness as a way to look out for their own best interest when dealing with stressful situations and the daily hassles of life. Because the researcher in the present study proposes that the type of locus of control an individual has influences the choices made when deciding which acquired coping skill to use when encountering stressful situations, the researcher chose to measure assertiveness as well as locus of control.

**Literature Review**

In the 1970s, research studies of single parent homes provided evidence that the absence of fathers in the home had a detrimental effect on cognitive development, identity issues, and possible long-term academic achievement. The researchers concluded that fatherless homes had a negative effect on children and how they cope with stress (Santrock 1972, 455; Hetherington 1973, 47; Shinn 1978, 295). By the 1980s, researchers began to present evidence indicating that single parenthood had only marginal effects on social and behavioral functioning of children (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986, 1; Teti and Lamb 1989, 499). In fact, Hetherington, Camamara and Featherman (1983) argued that the reduction of domestic conflict and acrimony seemed to be such a positive change that the single parent home that emerged from the divorce seemed to function better than the original dual parent unit functioned before the divorce (Hetherington, Camamara and Featherman 1983, 205). By the 1990s, however, evidence from several longitudinal studies, as well as multiple case studies, led researchers back to the original conclusions that the effects of divorce were negative (Amato and Booth 1991, 895; Amato and Keith 1992, 26).

Researchers then began to compile evidence that children from single parent and divorced families did show patterns of both psychological and social adjustment difficulties, as well as academic problems, symptoms of depression and lower self-esteem (McLloyd 1990, 311; Coontz 1992, 1;
Ahrons and Miller 1993, 441). Based on these findings, it has become a well-established premise that divorce is not just a static incident, but a dynamic process that continues long after the divorce conflict ends (Elder 1994, 4; Amato 1999, 147; Wallerstein 1985, 116; Wallerstein and Lewis 2004, 350). Most researchers studying divorce and its consequences on the family agree that the recovery process continues well past the official date of the divorce. However, researchers disagree and debate about how those consequences present themselves. Some researchers focus on a “positive recovery” experience of divorce, while others point to an “impacted recovery” experience.

Researchers on one side of the debate have argued that divorce has the most detrimental impact on children within the first few years post-divorce (Hetherington 1999, 93; Amato, Loomis and Booth 1995, 895). However, some researchers conclude that after four to seven years, the children tend to develop patterns of behavior, coping mechanisms, and attitudes similar to their counterparts in a dual-parent, intact home. The researchers investigating this idea of a positive recovery compiled a sizeable amount of compelling evidence to support the idea that this recovery is not only a positive one, but does indeed occur within a few years after the divorce (Demo 1992, 104; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan and Anderson 1989, 303; Schick 2002, 5; Amato and Cheadle 2008, 1140).

Hetherington (2002), one of the landmark researchers in this area, provided an extensive amount of evidence to support these findings in her 30 years of research in this field. In an overview of case studies, personal interviews and clinical evaluations with over 140 families about their progress before, during, and after divorce, as well as her follow-up with the children in these families well into adulthood, Hetherington writes, “…the vast majority [of children of divorce] are adjusting reasonably well six years after divorce” (p. 159). However, not all researchers hold the same optimistic view of post-divorce recovery outcomes for children. Many researchers agree that divorce impacts an individual long into adulthood, but disagree that the recovery ends with positive outcomes (Wallerstein 1985, 116; Bilbarz and Raferty 1999, 321).

The researchers on the impacted recovery side of the debate have compiled evidence from longitudinal case studies, clinical evaluations, and meta-analyses of the literature that leads them to conclude that, regardless of the amount of time post-divorce, children of divorce never really present behavior patterns or social adjustment that resemble their counterparts in a dual-parent, intact home (Wallerstein 2005, 401). Additional studies done in scholastic settings have lead researchers to also conclude that there is a disadvantageous impact on both academic achievements and coping skills in...

Wallerstein, one of the landmark researchers on the impacted recovery side of the debate, coined the phrase *the overburdened child* (1985, 116), which she claimed was the role that children of divorce played throughout their childhood. According to Wallerstein, this pattern was the result of the multiple changes in responsibility that children lived through during and after a divorce. This role brought with it an undesirable and dysfunctional pattern of coping that followed them well into adulthood and ultimately into their adult relationships. In 2000, Wallerstein and Lewis reported results from a 25-year longitudinal study of 131 divorced families that supported their earlier predictions that the effects of divorce would follow an individual well into adulthood. Personal interviews and case studies of these families provided a compelling amount of evidence indicating that these individuals had developed maladaptive attitudes and dysfunctional social skills that included inadequate coping mechanisms, as well as various adult relationship issues.

Within all the affects and effects presented in the research of single parent family structure that researchers study, they emphasized increased stress as one factor that parents and children must live with on a daily basis (Johner 2007, 89; Kelly 2007, 35). With inflated levels of stress before, during, and after the divorce, multiple coping skills are necessary to deal with the stressors and stressful situations that arise. As a result, the concept of coping with stress has been the subject of multiple studies over the years (Blonna 2007, 53; Lazarus 1966, 288; Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 117).

When we are in control of events, we tend to find them less stressful, thus a locus of control is developed very early in childhood and becomes a filter through which we process our appraisals of potential stressors (Blonna 2007, 329; Sandler, Kim-Bae and MacKinnon 2000, 145). Strickland (1989) produced evidence that led her to conclude that those individuals with an internal locus of control tended to cope with stress more efficiently. Kim, Sandler, and Tein (1997) concluded that the perception of control in a child from a single parent home, especially if they also witnessed the conflict of divorce and separation, tended to produce an external locus of control. They proposed that this perception of an external locus of control continues through childhood and into adulthood and becomes a pervasive part of the individual’s personality leading them to feel that because they could not control their family unit structure during childhood, nothing else is controllable in their life either (Weyer and Sandler 1998, 27). Additional studies have revealed evidence indicating that children from single parent homes, especially those from divorced homes that contained high amounts
of parental conflict, tend to retain a very high external locus of control that makes it especially difficult for them, as adults, to accept responsibility for many of the outcomes they create. These individuals also report increased rates of anxiety and depression as well (Sheets, Sandler and West 1996, 2166; Sandler, Kim-Bae and MacKinnon 2000, 336; Johnson and Saranson 1978, 205).

Traditionally, researchers proposed that an individual primarily depended on just one coping strategy/defense mechanism when dealing with stress; however, the last two decades of research has revealed evidence for the premise that an individual best copes with stress with the incorporation of more than one acquired skill or mechanism (Blonna 2007, 42). Because this researcher proposes that the type of LOC an individual has (internal versus external) influences that type of coping strategy an individual chooses when encountering stressful situations, another coping skill, assertiveness was chosen for study. Assertiveness is defined as “a healthy way of expressing your thoughts and feelings directly and honestly” (Weiten and Lloyd 2003, 204). The use of assertiveness is considered as a way to take control over a situation as opposed to being submissive and thereby avoiding the opportunity to take control over a stressful situation (Galassi, DeLo, Galassi and Bastein 1974, 165; Ames 2008, 32).

**STATEMENT OF PURPOSE**

The intent of this study was to compare the differences between the use of locus of control and assertiveness coping skills from families at least seven years past divorce (seven-plus) and individuals whose families were less than seven years past divorce (less-than-seven). The researcher measured participants’ perceived control in different situations and their use of assertiveness during stressful events with scales designed for this purpose. If Wallerstein and others are correct in their view of impacted recovery, then upon comparison there should be no significant differences in LOC or use of assertiveness between the less-than-seven and the seven-plus individuals. However, if Hetherington and others are correct, and seven-plus individuals do exhibit positive recovery, then a comparison of LOC and use of assertiveness should produce significant differences between the two groups.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

In consideration of the results of the past studies, the researcher hypothesized that the two different types of family structure, less-than-seven, versus seven-plus, would produce significant differences in LOC. Specifically, the LOC for the less-than-seven group will be external and the LOC for the
The following details the methods used in the present study.

Participants
The group of participants consisted of 105 undergraduate students (71 females, 34 males) enrolled in psychology classes at a large state university in California. Participants received class credit towards fulfillment of their respective courses as reimbursement for participating in this study and were treated in accordance with the American Psychological Association's principles of ethical treatment of human subjects. Because of the debate between positive recovery and impacted recovery, the researcher divided the participants, who were all from single parent families, into two groups. One group consisted of individuals whose parents have been divorced for more than seven years (seven-plus). The other group consisted of individuals whose parents have been divorced less than seven years (less-than-seven).

Materials
Demographics—The researcher gave the participants a demographics sheet with questions regarding age, gender, grade point average, marital status of parents, birth order and other questions used to disguise the purpose of the gathered information. The only questions of interest were those regarding gender, family structure, and the number of years the participant had lived with a single parent.

Locus of Control—The inventory used to measure the locus of control for each participant was Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (Rotter 1966, 1). This inventory is a 29-item scale with scores ranging from 0 to 29. Scores closer to 0 indicate an internal locus of control; scores closer to 29 indicate an external locus of control.

Assertiveness—The inventory used to measure the level of each participant’s overall assertiveness was the College Self Expression Scale (Galassi et al. 1974, 165), a 50-item Likert scaled inventory with five anchors: 0 = always, 1 = usually, 2 = sometimes, 3 = seldom, and 4 = never or rarely. Half of the items are reversed scored. There are three levels of assertiveness: Assertive (146-200), Intermediate (104-145) and Non-assertive (103-0).
Procedure
When the participants arrived, the researcher asked them to sit down and then provided them with consent forms to sign. After the participants signed the consent forms they returned them to the researcher who placed the consent forms into a separate envelope so that the researcher could not link this information to individual participants. The researcher gave each participant his/her packet of materials. The researcher instructed the participants not to place their names or any other identifying marks on the materials. The packet of materials contained a demographic sheet and the two inventories described previously. The researcher arranged the demographic sheet and inventories in random order for each participant before the study began.

After the participants completed the inventories, the researcher collected the packets and kept them separate from the consent form envelope. The researcher then orally debriefed the participants, answered any questions they had at that time, and handed out a debriefing sheet for the participants to keep. The debriefing sheet provided them with an in-depth explanation of the study, an email address for any further questions, as well as a phone number to the Counseling Services Department on campus should they feel distressed in any way about the inventories they had just completed. The researcher thanked everyone for their participation and the participants were free to leave.

Results
After data collection, necessary scoring and variable recodes, the inventories were analyzed via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). All tests were analyzed at an alpha level set at $p < .05$.

Locus of Control
The mean score for locus of control for seven-plus participants ($M = 9.830$, $SD = 3.382$) and less-than-seven participants ($M = 13.310$, $SD = 4.503$) was examined using an independent samples t-test. A Levene’s test for Equality of Variances revealed no threat to the assumption of homogeneity ($F(1,103) = 1.84$, $p = .179$). Although both groups scored in the internal locus of control range, there was a significant difference in scores between the seven-plus and the less-than-seven groups ($t(103) = -4.453$, $p = .000$, two-tailed). There was a large effect size ($d = .61$). A 95% confidence interval of the differences revealed that the mean difference lay between the lower interval of $-5.029$ and the upper interval of $-1.930$. 


Assertiveness
The mean score for assertiveness for seven-plus participants ($M = 121.230$, $SD=20.886$) and less-than-seven participants ($M = 111.860$, $SD = 24.472$) was examined using an independent samples $t$-test. A Levene’s test for Equality of Variances revealed no threat to the assumption of homogeneity ($F (1,103) = .897$, $p = .346$). Although both groups scored in the intermediate range of assertiveness, there were significant differences revealed between the seven-plus and the less-than-seven group ($t (103) = -2.056$, $p = .042$, two-tailed). There was a small effect size ($d = .28$). A 95% confidence interval of the differences revealed that the mean difference lay between the lower interval of .331 and the upper interval of 18.411.

In order to determine if LOC was related to assertiveness, a Pearson’s correlation was performed. The analysis included all of the study’s subjects and revealed a significant, moderate, negative correlation ($r = -.35$, $p = .001$) that had a weak effect ($r^2 = .12$).

**DISCUSSION**
Individuals in the seven-plus group had lower locus of control and higher assertiveness scores than those individuals from the less-than-seven group. Overall, it can be concluded that individuals that were at least seven years past the divorce had a more internal locus of control and were more assertive than individuals who were less than seven years past divorce. These results are congruent with the first hypothesis that there would be significant differences in locus of control scores between these two groups, as well as the second hypothesis that there would also be a difference in assertiveness scores. These results support the positive recovery side of the debate between researchers, who argue that the most detrimental impact of divorce is within the first four-to-seven years after the divorce (Hetherington 1999, 93; Amato, Loomis and Booth 1995, 895).

Although the seven-plus group had a significantly higher internal LOC, neither of the two groups’ LOC mean score could be considered highly internal in view of Rotter’s scaling (Rotter 1966, 1). The mean scores for both groups fell within the internal range but both groups fell close to the midrange point; however, the seven-plus group was the furthest away from that overall midrange point. It is worth mentioning that, 36.1% of the less-than-seven group was in the external range. When considering the mean and standard deviation scores, one standard deviation point would bring the overall mean score for this group fully to the external LOC range.

The results for assertiveness scores had the same trend. Although the seven-plus group had significantly higher assertiveness scores, the mean scores for
both groups were in the intermediate range. The differences in LOC and assertiveness indicate a positive recovery in individuals after the first seven years of the actual divorce. This may indicate that individuals do learn better coping skills as time passes after the actual divorce.

A possible relationship between the development of an internal LOC and assertiveness is seen in the significant negative relationship between the two coping mechanisms. Individuals who have a more internal locus of control tend to be more assertive. Further studies that address the exact number of years post-divorce, LOC, assertiveness, and other variables involved in the recovery process could produce a regression analysis that determines which factors are most beneficial to the development of good coping mechanisms and progress towards more “normal” social and relationship skills.

Even within the positive recovery conclusion for this sample, the researcher would note that the LOC and assertiveness scores for the seven-plus group do not indicate a high internal LOC or high use of assertiveness. Therefore, the researcher concludes that, although there is positive recovery, overall, individuals may still fall short of having what researchers consider completely healthy coping styles. It is also worth noting that, although the present study’s findings show evidence that divorce may only delay the development of positive coping skills during a positive recovery process, some of these results may be at least partially due to some of the limitations of this study.

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations of this study may be the population from which the sample was drawn. The participants were undergraduate students from a state university. The fact that they are attending a four-year university could indicate that they have already developed healthy coping strategies. The lines of reasoning being that these individuals have already experienced enough positive recovery to get them to a university-level education. Therefore, this sample may already be at the higher end of the distribution for positive recovery, making these results very hard to generalize to the overall population.

Another limitation encountered was assigning participants to the seven-plus group if they had lived with a single parent for 7-16 plus years or to the less-than-seven group if they had lived with a single parent for 1-6 years. There was a difference between the two groups, indicating differences somewhere in the first seven years, but the researcher could not determine when these differences occurred within the first seven years. The age range of these groups also presented a limitation when analyzing the data, and again when interpreting the results.
Finally, another reason the data from this study may not agree with past studies is the study design. Most of the studies reported in the Literature Review resulted from case studies and clinical evaluations. This study used an empirical approach. The differences in these two types of approach makes it hard to compare the conclusions between this and other empirical studies, and again brings limitations to generalizing the results to the overall population. Although case studies allow a researcher the ability to measure a change in an individual’s coping skills, the cross-sectional type of design used in this study measures an individual’s particular moment in time. These individuals may or may not have received counseling or training in healthier coping skills. The majority of the case studies done in the past were also conducted in combination with clinical evaluations, using a longitudinal design measuring changes in individuals who are already in treatment at a clinical level and who already may have been taught healthier ways of coping. In such a combined study, researchers are measuring an individual’s progress towards healthier coping skills while they are being taught how to cope in a healthy way. The difference in these two types of studies makes it difficult to compare one to the other and presents difficulty in the ability to infer the results to the general population. The limitations found in this study provide multiple ideas and opportunities for future research.

**Future Research**

Future research studies could address the idea of longitudinal versus cross-sectional disparities, by using a cross-sectional approach that includes both participants who have received counseling or clinical intervention in some way and those who have not, and controlling for both groups having the same number of years post-divorce. The differences in the two groups could provide very useful information for clinicians on the effectiveness of clinical interventions and the development of healthy coping skills. Because this researcher concluded that the positive development of healthy coping skills was taking place within the first seven years post-divorce, including a methodology that could isolate the year(s) that are the most critical in that development could also be beneficial in determining the best time for clinical intervention.

Finally, the researcher proposed that LOC is the coping mechanism that influences an individual’s use of other coping strategies (such as assertiveness) and the results of the present study did reveal that those individuals with a more internal LOC did have higher assertiveness scores. Future research could include measurement of whether or not spiritual wellness or birth order also influences an individual’s development of LOC. Because LOC is a
Coping mechanism that continues to develop throughout life, knowing what effects LOC could be very useful to the field of child and adult development as well as educators and parents alike.

CONCLUSION

More than 30 years have passed since the change in America’s divorce laws brought about change in family structure and dynamics. The study of the single parent family is now in its third generation. There are individuals from a generation whose grandparents were divorced, single parents and even some whose great-grandparents experienced divorce. With multiple generations having experienced the same event, and multiple generations now living in or having been raised in a single parent home, it may be that the single parent family structure is here to stay. With all of the complexities, challenges, and ultimately elevated stress levels that this type of family structure faces, it is beneficial to examine the coping skills and other dynamics of this family type. Continuing research in this area may provide ways for clinicians to offer effective counseling to help the children of single parent families develop viable coping skills to deal more effectively with the stressors in their lives.
REFERENCES


