This study was an exploratory project that used the lens of the assimilation model (Stiles, 2002) to study parental divorce. It took a developmental approach, suggesting that Erikson’s psychosocial stages, and McAdams’s research on life stories could be incorporated within the assimilation model to improve its ability to understand the experience of parental divorce among young adults. Three women between the ages of 18 and 25 were interviewed for approximately 2.5 hours about their experience of childhood parental divorce. Their interviews were then studied to understand how each of the women’s ability to narrate her experience of her parents’ divorce was tied to their ability to master their current developmental tasks. This study suggested that participants’ ability to narrate their experience of parental divorce was tied not only to their assimilation of this experience, but also to their success in mastering their current developmental stage.
YOUNG ADULTS’ ASSIMILATION OF PARENTAL DIVORCE: A DEVELOPMENTAL ELABORATION OF THE ASSIMILATION MODEL

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Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  The Assimilation Model .............................................................................................................. 1
  The Prevalence of Parental Divorce .......................................................................................... 2
  Risk and Resilience Associated with Parental Divorce .............................................................. 3
  Romantic Relationships .............................................................................................................. 3
  Adult Parent-Child Relationships ............................................................................................... 5
  Socioeconomic Status .................................................................................................................. 6
  Development in Young Adulthood ............................................................................................... 7
  Understanding Young Adulthood through the Qualitative Analysis of Narratives ................. 8
  Study Design ............................................................................................................................ 9

Method ........................................................................................................................................... 10
  Participants .................................................................................................................................. 10
  Measures/Materials .................................................................................................................... 10
  Procedure ..................................................................................................................................... 10

Results .......................................................................................................................................... 13
  General Overview ....................................................................................................................... 13
  Participants Overview .................................................................................................................. 14
  Case One: Crystal ...................................................................................................................... 16
  Case Two: Amy .......................................................................................................................... 24
  Case Three: Erin ......................................................................................................................... 32

Discussion .................................................................................................................................... 39
  Limitations and Future Directions ............................................................................................. 42

References ..................................................................................................................................... 44

APPENDIX A ................................................................................................................................. 51
APPENDIX B ................................................................................................................................. 52
APPENDIX C ................................................................................................................................. 53
APPENDIX D ................................................................................................................................. 54
Young adults’ assimilation of parental divorce:
A developmental elaboration of the assimilation model

Researchers have become increasingly interested in studying the developmental processes that occur during young adulthood (Arnett, 2006; Aquilino, 2006; Cote, 2006; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006). Arnett (2006) has suggested that today’s young adults often go through a protracted period of identity exploration as they seek to consolidate their personal values that will guide their adult lives. This protracted period of development includes using family of origin experiences as a base of operations from which to proceed forward. This study elaborated the assimilation model (Stiles, 2002) by studying the identity processes of three young women who had experienced childhood parental divorce.

The Assimilation Model

The assimilation model (Stiles, 2002) is a theory of psychological change that describes how problematic experiences are assimilated to the person’s larger network of interrelated life experiences. It draws on postmodern conceptions of the self as multivoiced (Hermans, 2004), and describes the self metaphorically as a community of voices (Honos-Webb & Stiles, 1998). This community consists of experiences of oneself, others, and the world that are distinct, internally accessible, and available as resources in daily living. The model also uses the metaphor of voice to describe how peoples’ experiences may communicate internally to them. The metaphor of voice stresses the agency and influence of past experiences upon current thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

According to the assimilation model, voices are addressed and take positions when the person encounters circumstances that are similar to the original experience. Thus, voices are said to speak, and their actions include motor activity, bodily reactions, motives and affect, as well as sights, sounds, and thoughts (Osatuke, Gray, Glick, Stiles, & Barkham, 2004; Stiles, Osatuke, Glick, & Mackay, 2004).

A problematic voice is defined by its relationships to other community voices. The voice of a problematic experience may stem from a traumatic memory, an unacceptable part of the self, or anything that is threatening or painful (Osatuke et. al., 2004a). Encounters between problematic voices and community voices generate negative affect; thus, the person may actively avoid or ward off the emergence of problematic voices.
Assimilation denotes the process whereby experiences are processed and become integrated. Assimilation may occur through the assistance of others such as in therapy or close interpersonal relationships (Goldsmith, Mosher, Stiles, & Greenberg, 2008; Mosher, in press; Mosher, Goldsmith, Stiles, & Greenberg, 2008). Assimilation occurs when voices that are in conflict (i.e., problematic and community) are integrated based on an understanding of their mutual contributions to present day life circumstances.

Such understanding is built through the construction of meaning bridges. A meaning bridge is a semiotic link—comprised of signs (e.g., words, phrases, stories, theories, images, gestures, or expressions)—that clarifies and reframes the positions of each voice, so that they both make sense within the person’s current life context (Brinegar, Salvi, Stiles, & Greenberg 2006). As experiences are assimilated, they become smoothly accessible resources that are helpful in relevant life circumstances. Assimilated experiences provide the skills, competencies, and knowledge that enable us to participate successfully in the varying demands and challenges of daily life.

Research on the assimilation model has developed a continuum that outlines the role of recalled experience at different levels of the assimilation spectrum (Stiles, 2002). This continuum, referred to as the Assimilation of Problematic Experiences Sequence (APES; Table 1), describes how interrelationships between voices change as problematic voices are assimilated into the community of voices. The eight stages of the APES are: (0) Warded off/dissociated, (1) Unwanted thoughts/active avoidance, (2) Vague awareness/emergence, (3) Problem statement/clarification, (4) Understanding/insight, (5) Application/working through, (6) Resourcefulness/problem solution, and (7) Integration/mastery (Table 1; see Stiles, 2002 for a complete description). The stages of the APES are continuous; thus, a problematic experience can be considered between stages (e.g; APES 2.5).

The Prevalence of Parental Divorce

In the United States, divorce has become increasingly common in the 20th and 21st centuries, rising from an incidence of 5% in the middle of the 19th Century to its current rate of approximately 50% (Amato & Sobelewski, 2001). Nearly 1 million American parents divorce each year and, before they reach adulthood, at least 50% of children in the United States will experience parental divorce (Harvey & Fine, 2004). Since parental divorce is so frequently
experienced by American youth, examining the assimilation of this experience represents an important elaboration of the assimilation model.

**Risk and Resilience Associated with Parental Divorce**

Childhood parental divorce is linked with both risk and resilience in adulthood, and its psychological impact may change during the transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2002). Generally identified resilience factors include the importance of developing individual, interpersonal, and structural resources; finding positive meaning in the divorce; and, demographic factors (Amato, 2000). Literature on the risks and resilience factors associated with parental divorce in adulthood suggests that early experiences of parental divorce are relevant to adults, insofar as they relate to: 1) romantic relationships (Amato, 1996; Amato, 2003; Amato & De Boer, 2001; Glen & Kramer, 1987; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979; Lauman-Billings & Emery, 2000; Ross & Mirowski, 1999; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2002); 2) adult parent-child relationships (Amato, 1999; Amato & Sobelewski, 2001; Baker, 2005; Harvey & Fine, 2004; White, 1994; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993); and, 3) socioeconomic impact (Amato, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991; McCleod, 1991; Ross & Mirowski, 1999).

**Romantic Relationships**

Romantic relationships are perhaps the most studied factor in the impact of childhood parental divorce on adulthood. This literature trends towards the potential for negative outcomes in this area, perhaps because of the finding that parental divorce is associated with increased rates of divorce in offspring (Amato, 1996; Amato & De Boer, 2001; Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979). However, this research has also suggested that parental divorce can be tied to positive outcomes when it leads to more complex views regarding romantic relationships (Amato, 1988; Scabini & Cigoli, 2004).

*Risk factors.* Childhood parental divorce is a risk factor for difficulties in adulthood romantic relationships (Amato, 1996; Amato, 2003; Amato & De Boer, 2001; Glen & Kramer, 1987; Kulka & Weingarten, 1979; Lauman-Billings & Emery, 2000; Ross & Mirowski, 1999; Wallerstein, Lewis & Blakeslee, 2002). Parental divorce has been associated with a higher incidence of behaviors that damage romantic relationships, including jealousy, struggles with anger, communication problems, and extra-marital affairs (Amato, 1996). Adult children of
divorce tend to get married at an earlier age (Glen & Kramer, 1987). Amato (1996) suggested that witnessing parental divorce might lead to less investment in marriages, and a quicker decision to divorce.

**Resiliency factors.** Research has shown that adult children of divorce had more complex views on marriage compared to their counterparts from non-divorced families (Amato, 1988), to include increased awareness of its limitations and greater tolerance of alternatives. Qualitative research has been used to elaborate how parental divorce may be tied to increased resilience in romantic relationships. Scabini and Cigoli (2004) found that some participants coped better with the pain of experiencing their parents’ divorce when they considered the personal limits of each of their parents, as well as the overall difficulties posed by marriage. Harvey and Fine (2004) found that some participants were able to use their experience of childhood parental divorce to learn about romantic relationships, “Although the divorce was very painful for me I also learned a lot about relationships and what it takes to make them work” (p. 79).

**Attachment and later romantic relationships.** One potential explanatory factor in how earlier parental divorce may impact later romantic attachments is *adult attachment theory* (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). This research is an extension of Bowlby’s work on infant attachment patterns (1969/1982), applying its principles to adult romantic relationships by focusing on how childhood experiences with important adults are relevant to later romantic relationships. Adult attachment theory posits that children form mental representations of their early childhood relationships, which act as templates for future adult romantic relationships (Bowlby 1969/1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998). These templates are characterized as either secure, anxious-ambivalent, or avoidant. Secure infant attachment styles are thought to provide a secure base for the formation of satisfying adult romantic relationships, whereas anxious-ambivalent and avoidant styles are linked with continued difficulties in adult relationships.

Research suggests that secure attachment styles can provide a protection against later negative events (Weinfield, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2000). However, early childhood attachment patterns do not always transfer to adult relationships, as attachment style remains open to change based upon later life experiences (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). Thus, attachment styles can be altered by negative life events, such as parental divorce, when these events evoke intense feelings of grief. Davies and Cummings (1994) have proposed that intense marital conflict erodes the attachment between the couple, which in turn may have a
negative impact on the attachment that members of the couple have with their children (Davies & Cummings, 1994).

**Adult Parent-Child Relationships**

Childhood parental divorce has the potential to have both positive and negative repercussions on parent-child relationships in young adulthood. The direction of this impact has been tied to the role of parental conflict (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995) and opportunities for positive relationships with parents (Amato, 1999, 2003; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Harvey & Fine, 2004).

**Risk factors.** There are links between childhood parental divorce and problematic relationships with parents in young adulthood (Amato, 1999; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Baker, 2005; Harvey & Fine, 2004; White, 1994; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Parental divorce has been linked with lower quality relationships with both parents (White, 1994) and problems such as: spending less time with parents, getting less assistance, and experiencing less affection (Amato, 1999; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001). In turn, lower quality parent-child relationships as a result of parental divorce can lead to higher distress and lower self-esteem in children.

In particular, parental divorce has the potential to negatively impact young adults’ relationships with their fathers. In an analysis of college students’ narrative accounts, some young adults saw their parents’ divorce as particularly problematic because a strong patriarchal presence was absent (Harvey & Fine, 2004). Amato (2003) also found a stark contrast in relationships with fathers before and after the experience of parental divorce. In the Harvey and Fine (2004) study, females attributed their difficulties in dating to absent fathers.

**Resilience factors.** While sometimes a risk factor for relationships with parents, parental divorce can also lead to resilience when the divorce is preceded by high levels of conflict. Interparental conflict is a large determinant in offspring’s adjustment after a divorce. Amato, Loomis, & Booth (1995) found that divorce was only associated with a negative outcome when it was preceded by an absence of conflict between parents. In households where the divorce was preceded by high-levels of conflict, Amato, Loomis, & Booth (1995) found an increase in the functioning of the children after the divorce.

Studies have consistently found that interparental conflict has a negative relationship with functioning in offspring (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998). Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Murey, and Cummings (2006) found that
interparental conflict was a mediating factor in adolescents’ later emotional security. They found that age was relevant in this association, with adolescents showing more distress than younger children after exposure to interparental conflict. Interparental conflict has also been found to negatively impact girls more than boys during adolescence (Davies & Lindsay, 2004) with the proposed difference occurring because adolescent girls are more focused on communion than adolescent boys, and thus may be more vulnerable to interparental conflict.

In qualitative work, Harvey and Fine (2004) found that some of their participants their experience of parental divorce as an opportunity to develop a stronger bond with their custodial parent: “Instead of letting it take my life over, I used it in a positive way. I grew up much faster and took care of my mother” (p. 68). Another participant said that: “My relationship with my entire family has become stronger since the divorce of my parents and my appreciation and love for them has grown stronger” (p. 79).

Socioeconomic Status
Childhood experiences of parental divorce are also linked with lower attainment of socioeconomic status (SES; Amato, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991; McCleod, 1991; Ross & Mirowski, 1999). There have not been any specifically identified resilience factors in relation to SES stemming from parental divorce.

Risk factors. Ross and Mirowski (1999) found people whose parents divorced in their childhood were more likely to be less educated, experience financial hardship, obtain lower occupational status, and have less household income than people whose parents had remained married. Amato and Keith (1991) reported that adults who had experienced childhood parental divorce had less education and a lower yearly income.

The lower SES of adults who experienced parental divorce as children may be attributed to uninvolved fathers. For example, Amato (1999) reports that less help is exchanged between adult children and fathers in divorced families, including little or no contribution of the father for college expenses. In an excerpt from Harvey and Fine (2004), a college student writes that:

…before the divorce, we were fairly well off, living in a nice house and getting most of what we wanted. After the divorce, my mother, sister, and I moved into a small, two-bedroom apartment that was not even close to as nice as our former house … The biggest changes I noticed following divorce were the kind of place we were living in and the lack of money to go around. (Harvey & Fine, 2004, p. 42)
Development in Young Adulthood

The current study focused on the assimilation of parental divorce for three young adults. Developmental theorists (Erikson, 1963; Arnett, 2006; Aquilino, 2006; Cote, 2006; Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradovic, Long, & Tellegen, 2004; Schulenberg & Zarrett, 2006) have identified young adulthood as an important transitional period. Arnett (2006) has labeled this transition period emerging adulthood, and suggests it represents a time during which relationships, career paths, and values are experimented with and self-sufficiency is developed.

Emerging adulthood represents a period of increased self-reflection and identity development. Developmental approaches suppose that experiences in the family of origin provide the base of operations for the emerging young adult. Because these experiences are brought to bear in newly developing adult roles, they may gain an increased importance in relevant life contexts such as romantic relationships, adult parent-child relationships, and career decisions. Thus, because of the relevance of early relational experiences during emerging adulthood, childhood parental divorce may be particularly crucial to assimilate by this time, because if not it can lead to increased distress during the developmental tasks of young adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae, 1998).

The literature on emerging adulthood is heavily influenced by Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial stages of the lifespan (Arnett, 2006). Emerging adulthood comprises a developmental sub-stage in between adolescence (i.e., identity vs. role diffusion) and young adulthood (i.e., intimacy vs. isolation) in Erikson’s original model. In the identity vs. role diffusion stage, the task of the young adult is to achieve a consistent sexual and career identity. In the subsequent intimacy vs. isolation stage, the successful mastery of identity in the previous stage leads to the task of committing to concrete affiliations, and developing the capacity to honor these commitments, even when this commitment requires personal sacrifice.

Erikson (1963) emphasized the importance of relationships and culture within his view of development. He defines culture in terms of the influence that parents, friends, and romantic partners have on defining and mastering the specific tasks that comprise each developmental stage. Erikson’s work on psychosexual stages (1963) has been subsequently expanded by researchers focusing on the specific characteristics of each developmental stage (Cicchetti, Toth, Bush, & Gillipsie, 1988; Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradovic, Long, & Tellegen, 2004; Roisman,
This research is referred to as the organizational perspective because it holds that development consists of a series of reorganizations around stage salient tasks (Cicchetti, Toth, Bush, & Gillepsie, 1988). This perspective has found consistent evidence supporting Erikson’s (1963) claim that successive developmental stage build upon mastery of earlier stages. For example, research has shown that earlier childhood resources such as intelligence, socioeconomic status, and parenting quality continue to play important roles in developmental success in early adulthood, even though autonomy, adult-parent child relationships, coping skills, and avoidance of problems with the law are the more stage salient skills (Masten, Burt, Roisman, Obradovic, Long, & Tellegen, 2004; Roisman, Masten, Coatswork, & Tellegen, 2004).

**Understanding Young Adulthood through the Qualitative Analysis of Narratives**

Narrative approaches to psychology also focus on developmental aspects of young adulthood. McAdams (1997; 2001; 2006) described young adulthood as the time during which identity is developed through the creation of a life story, which is a narrative based on biographical facts organized to make meaning of past and present experiences to guide future endeavors. McAdams (2001) suggested that the capacity to maintain a life narrative in the face of adversity is linked with psychological well-being.

There are two basic forms of life stories (McAdams, 2001). In commitment stories, the person feels compelled and able to transform challenges and adversities into growth, which is thought to lead to strong identity, psychological growth, and satisfaction in life. In contamination stories, the person describes something negative that undermines a formerly positive experience. Contamination stories may suggest a weaker identity that is prone to more psychological difficulties in life (McAdams, 2001).

McAdams’s work on life stories (1997; 2001; 2006) suggests that young adults’ identities can be researched by examining the themes produced when discussing experiences in the family of origin. This provides a theoretical link with the assimilation model: Narratives are created with signs that convey the teller’s lived experience with important people, places, and events. Thus, because voices are expressions of experience, the stories and experiences contained in an individual’s narrative can be construed as voices to be assimilated (Osatuke et al., 2004a). Furthermore, the level of coherence and the overarching tone of the person’s narrative provide evidence of a voice’s level of assimilation. For example, underdeveloped or fragmented
elements of an otherwise articulate narrative may be indicative of problematic experiences at low levels of assimilation. Alternatively, rich and detailed accounts of previous events may convey the ways the teller has assimilated and made meaning of the relevant aspects of the experience they are describing.

Accordingly, the narratives told by young adults about their experience of parental divorce may be studied to determine the link between the assimilation level of this experience and its ramifications for progress within the development of identity in young adulthood.

**Study Design**

This project elaborated the assimilation model (Stiles, 2002) through a theory building research design. Theory building research involves applying case observations to an existing theory in order to refine and extend the existing theory (Stiles, 2007). When the case observations do not fit the existing theory, then, the theory is altered to improve its precision in explaining the relevant psychological mechanism.

The assimilation model has been expanded by previous researchers through application to issues of acculturation (Henry, Stiles, & Biran, 2005), assimilating one’s psychotherapist (Mosher & Stiles, in press), couples therapy (Schielke, Stiles, & Greenberg, 2008), childhood abuse (Salvi, DeNardi, Humphreys, & Stiles, 2006), childhood sexual abuse (Salvi et al., 2006 submitted), depression (Glick, Salvi, Stiles, & Greenberg, 2004), dissociative identity disorder (Humphreys, Rubin, Knudson, & Stiles, 2005), Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Gray, Stiles, & Borkovek, 2006), social phobia (Gray, Salvi, Stiles, & Biran, 2004), and trauma (Varvin & Stiles, 1999). This project employed a theory approach to childhood parental divorce. The assimilation model was used to understand the narratives of three young adults who had experienced parental divorce in their childhood.

In addition to using case observations, it also incorporated developmental (Arnett, 2006; Erikson, 1963) and narrative theory (McAdams, 1997; 2001; 2006). Participants’ narratives were gathered using open-ended interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice, for a total of about three hours. Interviews were conceptualized as narratives that the participants produced to convey their experiences of their parents’ divorce. Interview narratives were analyzed by a team of three researchers. Through the process of theory building, the assimilation model was extended to in this project through its application to parental divorce. This extension indicated that parental divorce could be studied through the narratives produced by participants’ about this
experience. It also suggested that the narratives created about this experience could be seen as relevant to the psychosocial developmental task (Erikson, 1963) that the participant was currently striving to master.

Method

Participants

Interviewees. Three female undergraduate students at a small Midwestern university were interviewed for this study.

Crystal was an eighteen year old undergraduate student whose parents had divorced when she was sixteen years old. She had just started her freshman year at an undergraduate institution in the Midwest.

Amy was a twenty-two year old whose parents had also divorced when she was sixteen years old. She was a senior at an undergraduate institution in the Midwest, and had been accepted to law school for the upcoming fall semester.

Erin was a twenty-two year old whose parents had divorced when she was four years old. She was a senior majoring in Public Relations.

Researchers. A team of graduate student researchers analyzed the data. The team consisted of three doctoral students in clinical psychology, and included the author (i.e., primary investigator) of this thesis. All three members of the research team were familiar with the assimilation model. The faculty member advising this study acted as auditor of this analysis, assisted with the team structure, and helped clarify specific points regarding data analysis.

Measures/Materials

Interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, and combined questions with a interviewee-centered approach that followed each participant’s lead in discussing the topics related to their parents’ divorce. Appendix A has the list of questions that was brought to each interview.

Analysis. Researchers used the APES (see Appendix B) and a points of contact page (see Appendix C), which was a formal procedure to collect case observations to understand and analyze each case.

Procedure

IRB approval. An application was with the department’s review board, and permission was granted to use human subjects. To protect participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms were
used for both participants and their family members within all written documents, and all other identifying information (e.g., place of birth) was removed.

**Recruiting participants.** Participants were recruited using a flyer (Appendix D) that was posted in a local coffee shop. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three female participants. All interviewees were required to have experienced parental divorce before the age of 18, and to have currently been between the ages 18 and 25 years. Each participant was paid $50 for her participation in two interview sessions.

**Interviewing.** Five people were interviewed. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, with the exception of one participant who did not return for a second interview. The interviews lasted between one and two hours each session for a total of about two and a half total hours. There was approximately one week between the first and second interviews. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, converted to .mp3 format upon completion, and then were transcribed using Microsoft Word.

The first interview with each participant began with getting to know more about them and their experience of the divorce. Each participant was asked each to talk about herself and her current life. She was then encouraged to talk about her experience of parental divorce. If she was unsure of which aspects of the divorce to talk about, interview questions were used as guidelines. The aim of each interview was to orient the participant to the topic and questions the project was focused on, and then to follow the participants’ lead in regard to which aspects of the divorce had been most important in her life.

In the second interview, the present-day implications of their parents' divorce were focused upon. Examples of topics that the second interview focused upon were: how the divorce had impacted current relationships with parents; how the divorce was a factor in the participants’ attempts to separate from their families and adjust to being away from home and at college; and, how the divorce was a factor in the participants’ current views and experiences in romantic relationships.

**Qualitative analysis.** Three of the five total interviews were selected for analysis. One interview was not used because the participant did not return for a second interview. Of the remaining four completed interviews, three were selected because they provided three distinctly different experiences of parental divorce.
A research team was used in efforts to increase the reliability of the research findings. The team analyzed each case one at a time using the Ward method (Scheilke, Fishman, Osatuke, & Stiles, in press; Ward, 1987), a qualitative procedure designed for group work with the aim of maximizing each members’ contribution.

Each researcher was given access to both the audio records and to the full written transcripts of the interviews. They then listened to the participant’s two interviews in their entirety, creating notes of topics and themes that were relevant to the assimilation model’s conceptualization of the case. Next, the research team met to discuss the themes each had collected, paying special attention to the similarities across the themes collected by each. Between weekly meetings, each researcher updated their list of themes they saw as important to understanding the case, borrowing from the other researchers’ ideas, and elaborating their views based on group discussions of these themes during our team meetings. The team met approximately five times for each of the cases analyzed.

Achieving consensus. The research team was able to reach consensus on the conceptualization of each individual case. This consensus was reached through adhering to the Ward method (Scheilke et. al., in press), which prizes differences in opinions about case material, and which explicitly contradicts silencing dissenting voices in the data analysis. Each team member’s voice was heard through their creation and maintenance of an independent document, which they presented at each research meeting. The lead investigator ensured that all positions were heard through allowing each team member time to discuss their emerging conceptualization each week. At times, team members disagreed about how to interpret the interview material. When this occurred, the opposing positions were discussed until a compromise that captured both viewpoints was reached.

During the iterative process of analysis, a formal way of recording team members’ conceptualizations of the cases was devised. Based on a method used in a previous assimilation model study (Humphreys & Stiles, 2008), a points of contact page (see Appendix C) was created to provide the team with a more formal means of collecting and elaborating their views of the case material. The purpose of the points of contact page was to help members of the research team systematically explore the case material by specifically looking for correspondence and departure between theory and observation within the case data. These observations were then
recorded on the points of contact page, and shared with other research members. The points of contact pages continued to be elaborated as the team met to discuss the case.

A final check was that to ensure that the consensus arrived at in the team analysis was accurately represented in the final document, team members were given a write up of three cases. They made comments throughout the document, indicating the areas that either did not fit their understanding of the case material, or were unclear. These comments were then used by the primary investigator to revise the document.

Results

General Overview

This study concluded that parental divorce was important to participants because their efforts to master their current developmental tasks required them to create narratives that assimilated, or made meaning of, their experience in their family of origin, particularly their relationships with their parents. Parental divorce was important within this process because it had the ability to impact participants’ relationships with their parents. Participants’ descriptions of the quality of their relationships with their parents corresponded to their ability to create narratives that were meaning bridges to their experiences from their family of origin.

Success in creating a narrative about their family of origin experiences was tied to participants reporting that they were successfully mastering their current developmental tasks. These tasks were analyzed according to Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial stages of development. When participants struggled to create a narrative about their family of origin experience, they reported struggling with their current developmental tasks. Participants struggling to tell a narrative that demonstrated assimilation of their experiences from their family of origin also reported that they saw their parents’ divorce as problematic.

The type of narrative being worked on by each participant was related to their current developmental stage. For instance, the research team conceptualized Erin and Crystal as working to resolve identity vs. diffusion; their narratives tended to focus on their efforts to achieve autonomy from their families of origin and create sustainable sets of values with which to live. Alternatively, Amy—who we thought struggled with intimacy vs. isolation—tended to focus on creating a narrative with a romantic partner that would allow for a committed relationship.
An important difference in the analysis of the three cases is that parental divorce was only actively problematic for Amy. As a result of her current struggles to come to terms with her parents’ divorce, the voices representing this conflict were directly salient in her interview narrative. In contrast, because Crystal and Erin were not reporting that their experiences of their parents divorce were currently problematic, and the team concurred with this evaluation, the individual voices representing their experience of the divorce were not in conflict, and thus were not observable in the interview.

Participants Overview

The three participants varied in their evaluation of whether their parents’ divorce was problematic in their current life. Their narratives also differed in regard to their evaluation of how this experience had changed over time. Following is an overview of each participant’s evaluation of her experience of parental divorce, along with the strategies that were used to analyze each case. This overview will be followed by a more in-depth exploration of the results from each case.

Crystal, presented in case one, evaluated her parents’ divorce as problematic when it occurred. She reported that her parents were unsupportive when it occurred, and expected her to take her mother’s former role in the family during the initial divorce. Crystal also reported that her mother inappropriately used her as a support system in ways that blurred the boundaries in their relationship. In Crystal’s narrative, she said that she had developed bulimia, and that she was binge drinking, in order to cope with the pain that accompanied her parents’ divorce.

Crystal said that after her drinking and bulimia got out of control, her parents and friends became concerned and assisted her in coming to terms with her experience of the divorce. She reported that therapy helped to repair her relationship with her mother, and that her growing ability to develop friendships where she could openly speak about her difficult experiences in her family of origin helped her to learn valuable lessons from her parents’ divorce.

Crystal reported that her experience of parental divorce was no longer leading to difficulties in her current life, and the research team’s analysis of her interview. Analysis of her interview indicated that she was able to create a narrative of her parents’ divorce that fully articulated her previous pain stemming from her parents’ divorce, as well as the lessons that had learned from this experience. The analysis of her case will showed that Crystal was able to demonstrate her assimilation her parents’ divorce through her creation of a narrative that
articulated the difficulties she had experienced as a result of the divorce, and of the actions which led to her overcoming these difficulties. This narrative acted as a meaning bridge that allowed Crystal to fully integrate her parents’ divorce within her current psychosocial developmental context.

Amy, presented in case two, evaluated her parents’ divorce as problematic both when it occurred, and in her present life six years later. She reported that when it occurred 6 years previously, she had seen the divorce as a betrayal because her parents had always outwardly appeared happy with their marriage. She described a period lasting several years where she felt shock, anger, and sadness as a result of the divorce, and reported that she still struggled with these feelings at the time that she was interviewed.

Amy saw her parents’ divorce as problematic in her current life because it led to difficulties in her current romantic relationship. She attributed the divorce to her belief that she had not learned healthy communication in her family of origin, and that her current deficits in her ability to communicate were creating problems in her current efforts to develop a committed romantic relationship. Because Amy’s experience of childhood parental divorce was still problematic in her current life, the conflicting voices concerning this experience were directly observable in the interview itself. Therefore, her narrative was analyzed in terms of the conflicting voices observed in her interview.

Erin, presented in case three, reported that she had never evaluated her parents’ divorce as overly problematic. She indicated that this was because both of her parents had handled the divorce well, and that they had both maintained good relationships with her in its aftermath. Erin reported that she did not remember some of the negative aspects of the divorce when it occurred, and so did not see them as an issue.

While Erin did overwhelmingly see her parents’ divorce as non-problematic, she did express some of the little ways that it led her to frustrations in her relationships with her parents. These examples included feeling in the middle when her parents wanted to know about the other parent’s current romantic relationship.

Erin’s case shows how her navigation of her current developmental stage reflected her experiences in her family of origin. Her cultural context altered the way her parents related to her around money. They not only emphasized its importance, but also helped her to gain the skills necessary to be financially solvent. Erin’s observations of her parents’ relationships also
suggested to her that she was more likely to be successful in separating from her family of origin if she avoided romantic relationships during this process.

**Case One: Crystal.**

*Biographical information and interview overview.* Crystal was 18 years old at the time I interviewed her. She was a freshman in college who was in the midst of adjusting to life away from home. Her parents had divorced when she was 16, roughly 2 years before the interview.

Prior to the interview, Crystal expressed interest in participating in the project in an email where she said that her life had ‘turned to shit’ when her parents divorced. During the interview itself, she described in detail many of the difficulties she experienced before, during, and after her parents’ divorce. She spoke in an intense, purposeful manner, and seemed to resist my attempts to interject and ask questions; she seemed to really need to tell me her story in her own way. The beginning of her narrative had a dark emotional tone: Crystal detailed intense moments of distress during her parents’ marital problems and divorce. After about 40 minutes of describing her struggles during her parents divorce, she paused, looked at me, and then smiled.

Crystal then proceeded to describe how things began to change in her life, and what helped these changes to occur. In particular, she credited improved relationships with each of her parents, and a new capacity to find support and meaning in her friendships. Crystal was confident that she had learned something valuable from her difficult experience and she was thankful that she had undergone this ordeal, even though it had been very difficult.

*Understanding Crystal’s case through a developmental elaboration of the assimilation model.* Through study of Crystal’s narrative, the research team concluded that she was currently in Erikson’s (1963) identity vs. role diffusion stage of development. Her developmental tasks, which had not changed substantially since her parents’ divorce, entailed separating from her family of origin and developing a set of personal values by which she could live by. Crystal reported that she more interested in exploring her life and values than settling down in a committed romantic relationship.

Crystal: … I really feel that individuals need to get out and do what they need to do before they settle down. … Friendships are a way for you to be alone as an individual …
Crystal’s current developmental task of identity vs. role diffusion provided the life context within which she needed to create a narrative that assimilated her parents’ divorce.

Crystal’s case demonstrates the important role that parents and friends played in helping her create a narrative that assimilated her experience of parental divorce. Before her accomplishments approximately one year before the interview, Crystal was struggling with feeling unloved by her father, intruded upon by her mother, and unsupported by her friends. The net result of these difficult relationships was that Crystal could not create a narrative about her experience of parental divorce.

_Crystal’s parents’ role in her assimilation of their divorce._ Crystal’s progress in assimilating her parents’ divorce followed from her increasing ability to communicate about this experience with her friends and family. Her friends’ collective ability to empathically listen to Crystal’s experience of her parents’ divorce helped her to construct a narrative that assimilated this experience within her current life context.

During the interview, Crystal was able to create a narrative that described in precise detail why her parents’ divorce had been problematic when it occurred, and why it was no longer a problem in her life. This analysis will explore Crystal’s description of why her parents’ divorce was problematic, and will also analyze her report of the factors that helped her come to terms with this experience and move on with her life.

Crystal’s parents had divorced two years before our interview. During the time period leading up to the divorce, and continuing until one year afterwards, she reported struggling as a result of her parents’ divorce. Crystal’s struggles during and after her parents’ divorce were partly tied to a deterioration of her relationships with her parents. This deterioration was most profound with her mother, who Crystal reported was inappropriately using her as a support system to cope with the difficulties of the divorce. Some of the aspects of this support that felt harmful to Crystal were her mother’s expression of hatred about Crystal’s father, and her mother’s disclosure of her struggles regarding difficulties she was having in forming a relationship with another man.

Crystal: And, um, I, I’d talk to my mom, we’d have these conversations and she was telling me, you know, all this information I really didn’t want to know, that, um, she would talk about how she hated my father, and all of this kind of stuff, and it, just horrible things about my father, in order to, I felt like I was being
brainwashed, and she wanted me to side with her, all the time. … One of the main issues that my mom had is that she would tell us way too much information, like, personal information, with this guy, stuff she should tell her friends and not me as her daughter, who’s a teenager, so I was so confused with just what was going on. I was getting too much information, just inappropriate stuff, that I didn’t want to hear, and it was bad.

Crystal’s report that she felt her mother was brainwashing her is significant because this description suggests that her mother was unaware of Crystal’s need to talk about her own separate experience of the divorce, and was in fact (from Crystal’s point of view) imposing her experience of it on Crystal. One element of creating a narrative about experience involves successfully telling this narrative to others. Given that Crystal indicated that her mother was so intent on convincing Crystal of her perspective, it appears that from Crystal’s perspective, her mother was unwilling to listen to her own experience of the divorce.

In addition to these struggles with her mother, Crystal also reported difficulties with her father. She indicated that he was often at work, and that she experienced him as cold and distant. As a result of her mother’s increasingly erratic behavior, and her father’s physical and emotional distance, Crystal felt that she was supposed to take the role of parent and caretaker within her family.

Crystal: There was no emotion from my father. Like he never really cared that much to, like he’d never tell me I was pretty, so I never had self-confidence … Crystal: My dad would be at work, so I, my brother and my sister and I would all be at home, and I’d have to make dinner for them, and then I’d have to do schoolwork, and it was basically just me doing everything. … I had to take the role of mother, of the role of mom. I had to make dinner, um, clean the house, do all that kind of stuff, while I was dealing with school, and um, that was really, really difficult. I mean, it already started to build up.

Crystal’s report that her father was largely absent from her life during the divorce is also a concern in regard to her ability to create a narrative about her experience of the divorce. She began to feel overwhelmed because there was no one to listen to her experience of the divorce, and she felt unable to take the role of mother in her family because she was a junior in high-school who was preparing to go to college.
Crystal: I was, really in a bind, because my, the junior year is the most important year in your high school career, because that’s when you’re doing SAT’s, you need to keep your grades up. … I was having such a difficult time at home with all of my stresses, I, my grades were definitely suffering, and, I was suffering inside. I didn’t really know, you know, why this was happening to me. I didn’t how, what have I done, you know what I mean, for this to happen. … I would just sit in my room and cry. Because I didn’t know what else to do.

Crystal reported feeling extreme distress because the mother role that she was taking as a result of her parents’ divorce was making it impossible to keep up with her school work. She said that her best friend was self-absorbed and unaware of her struggles, and that she hid them from her other peers at school.

Crystal: … at school nobody knew what was going on. I kept everything hidden. … I got to the point where I was really, really, really depressed. And, um, I didn’t let anyone know - because I didn’t have anyone to talk to. My best friend at the time was very self-absorbed. So, I would call her and I would be just hysterical, but I wouldn’t let her know, and then I’d want to talk to her, but then, right as I was about to tell he what was going on, she’d be like, ‘I’m having such a hard time with my life.’

Crystal’s report about the time that she was struggling intensely with her parents’ divorce suggests that she had no support in making sense of the divorce. Her lack of close interpersonal relationships appeared to have left her with few opportunities to assimilate her experience of the divorce by creating a narrative about what she was going through.

Crystal’s unassimilated experience of her parents’ divorce was leading to intense distress in her life. Because she was unable to receive support from her parents and friends, she reported that she began resorting to bulimia and alcohol in order to relieve her unprocessed emotions about the divorce.

Crystal: … my bulimia became a way to cope with my parents’ divorce, it was the only way. Because everything else was so out of control, it became the only motive of self control that I had. … alcohol played a huge part, a huge role in suppressing my, um, anger and suppressing my, um, sadness with what was going on.
Crystal’s report suggests that one way in which this developmental elaboration of the assimilation model can understand her reliance on drinking and bulimia is that these coping mechanisms stemmed from her struggles (or lack of opportunity) to develop supportive interpersonal relationships to assimilate her experience of parental divorce. The model would suggest that one reason that drinking and bulimia are ineffective in helping Crystal to assimilate her parents’ divorce is that these two ways of coping do not help her to negotiate the meaning of her parents’ divorce. Supportive interpersonal relationships would be seen as an effective way to assimilate experience because they involve the use of signs (words, gestures, etc.) to convey experience to another. This thesis suggests that the creation of a narrative in interpersonal relationships not only helps to process and organize a person’s experience within the context of their relationships, but also helps internally organize this experience as well.

Crystal reported that her drinking and bulimia became so severe that she passed out in the snow one day and when her friends tried to assist her by offering her food, that she threatened to throw it up. Her friends became very concerned by this, and took her home so that her parents could help her.

Crystal: Um, they brought me home, brought me to my parents, and were like, you know, you need to assess this. … So, my dad did everything he could, um, to help me with my bulimia, he was like, okay, we’re going to get you on a workout plan, you can just work out, you know, any time you feel like you need to vomit, please call me, we’re going to do whatever we can. So my mom was like, ‘Oh my god, oh my God, w.., I can’t believe you lied to me, she freaked out, she got really, really angry, and um, she, we would just, um, it was just bad because we were fighting over the fact that I didn’t tell her.

Crystal’s improved relationships with her parents. Crystal reported that her mother got extremely upset when she found out that Crystal was bulimic, and blamed her for lying to her about her throwing up. In contrast, Crystal saw her father’s reaction as extremely supportive, and in helping her to overcome her difficulties tied to her parents’ divorce. Crystal began to fight with her mom because she was growing less tolerant of her mother’s boundary violations in her life. Her father offered her support after these intense battles.

Crystal: So my mom and I would be fighting all the time. I would be in hysterics because I couldn’t, I never got along with her. We’d have these blowout fights. And, um,
I would leave the house, I’d go to my dad’s house, I mean, it was bad. ... My dad would console me,

Crystal’s shift in her relationship with her father indicated that she was beginning to help her create a narrative about her experience of the divorce. By consoling her, he was responding to her one aspect of her experience of the divorce, her mother’s erratic behavior. Her father’s growing responsiveness to her also extended to improvements within their relationship. Crystal reported that he became much more supportive and affectionate with her once he realized how Crystal’s perception of him as cold and distant were affecting her.

Crystal: one positive thing that happened with my dad is he became more emotional. (J: hmm) So now he’ll hug us and kiss us, and say I love you. He never did that, ever, ever.

As an outgrowth of the increased conflict between Crystal and her mother, Crystal’s mom took her to therapy to work on their relationship. This decision indicates that in spite of her mother’s struggles to tune in to Crystal’s experience, she was able to demonstrate that she cared about their relationship, and was willing to take steps to improve it.

Crystal reported that therapy was very difficult for her at first because she was confronting and expressing all of her negativity towards her mother that had built up during the divorce.

Crystal: … she brought me to a therapist, and my therapy, the first therapy appointment was horrible, ‘cuz I was just saying all this stuff that I hated about her, and it was just, I had this complete hatred of my mother. And it was sad because, like, you don’t want to hate your mom, you know, I mean she bore you, you have such a huge relationship with her, you can’t hate your mom, but I hated her, I did not want her a part of my life.

Crystal’s therapy was helpful in part because it helped her to articulate the specific ways that her mother’s behavior was upsetting her. This included an increasing ability to use signs to articulate her experience of the divorce to another. In addition to helping Crystal to better narrate her experience of the divorce, it also provided a way for her mother to learn new relationship approaches with Crystal. Crystal reported that her therapist met with her mother and helped her understand how her dumping of her problems on Crystal was negatively impacting this relationship.
Crystal: … my therapist was good in the aspect that she knew, um, what my mom needed to work on ... My mom knew the things she had to work on. She had to work on being more of a mature adult, acting her age. She had to work on not making us tell my father things. Not telling us things that we didn’t want to hear. And work on being there more.

Crystal and her mom’s combined progress led them to be able to work out their differences after a fight. This was in contrast to their earlier fights where Crystal reported no successful resolution.

Crystal: I had a really good therapy session, and then I came home and we got in a huge fight. And then the next day I was like, “look,” my mom called me and said “I love you, I’m really sorry. Look, we just really need to work on this.” So my mom and I sat down. My mom’s like “you have a really, really, really, um, fiery temper, so do I, I mean, we’re pretty alike in those aspects.” … And so she’s like, “I’m going to work on this, if you’ll promise to work on this.” And we have, and it's just like, we’ve been getting along tremendously. … My mom had her life, and she kept it that way, she didn’t involve it with mine, you know what I mean, she definitely kept her personal issues to herself.

Crystal’s resolution of this argument with her mom indicates that her mom was able to take an increasingly supportive role in her relationship with Crystal. By identifying Crystal’s anger (fiery temper), and suggesting things she could do to improve their relationship, Crystal’s mother was providing Crystal with the support she needed to make progress in assimilating her experience of the divorce. Crystal indicated that as a result of therapy’s role in helping her to express her frustrations with her mother, and her mother’s ability to engage in therapy and work on changing her behaviors, that she was able to get to a point with her mother where she felt close to her.

Crystal’s friends’ role in her assimilation of her parents’ divorce. Crystal credited her improved capacity to make friends with playing a large role in helping her to recover from the negative aspects of her parents’ divorce. It appears that being able to improve her relationships with her parents was part of her natural individuation process that was tied to her ability to successfully work towards mastering her current stage of development, identity vs. role diffusion. Her previously reported struggles with her parents’ divorce were perhaps problematic.
largely because they were negatively impacting her ability to separate from her family of origin. Her progress in her relationships with her parents’ was helpful not only because it helped her to assimilate her experience of the divorce, but also because it led to progress within her current developmental task.

Crystal reported that she began to focus more energy outside of the home, and indicates that this was the most crucial aspect of her coming to terms with her parents’ divorce. She was able to stop drinking and purging, and she got a job in a mosaic shop, where she developed a close friendship with a coworker. Crystal reported that this coworker was extremely empathic, and listened to Crystal’s story of how difficult her parents’ divorce had been for her.

Crystal: I stopped being bulimic in July. At that point I got a job, and I was working, um, at a mosaic studio. I met one of my really, really good friends (Amanda), now, um, there. And she was amazing to talk to. I was able to expel all of my emotion and tell her everything that was going on. And she was really, really there for me. And we had a relationship where we could cry with each other, and she would cry for me, she was very empathetic, and it was just amazing. And, um, that kind of relationship really, really helped me, um, kind of deal with what was going on.

Crystal’s report indicated that she was making increasing progress in telling others about her experience of parental divorce. She later formed another close friendship that was based less upon her struggles with the divorce, and more on providing each other with mutual support.

Crystal: But, once I met Kristen, that was, she, her and I are like the same person, so it was just, I did open up to her about everything, and anything, and she helped build my confidence and all that. Everything that I felt like I had lost, she built it back up.

Crystal’s ability to form a friendship based less on her need to process the divorce experience, and more on her desire for a mutual relationship, suggest that she had made significant progress in assimilating her parents’ divorce. She credits the divorce with specifically teaching her about the importance of supportive relationships in helping her successfully face the demands of daily living.

Crystal: I was just basically talk to the people that I trusted, and that was Kristen, who’s my best friend, and then Amanda, who’s also my best friend, my two best friends, and I worked with both of them. And then, um, and they just helped me out so
much through this divorce, I mean, they, hones..., they were basically the reason I was able to make it through the final end of it. … It was incredible, how, just finally just sitting down and talking, just changed everything. Because so long, I would just avoid talking to people, for so long I was avoiding really talking to people about it, but that was the best thing that I could’ve done. … Honestly without my friends I don’t even know where I’d be right now.

The result of Crystal’s assimilation of her parents’ divorce. Crystal’s generalization of the divorce experience to her overall outlook on life suggests that the experience was fully assimilated, and was now an integrated resource in her life. The context within which she integrated this experience was her current stage of identity vs. role diffusion, and her ability to learn from the divorce within this context led to an increased ability to work towards mastering this developmental stage.

Crystal: So, all in all, through the divorce, it was a really, it was really, really rough, it was like, it was a really, really hard divorce. But now, I it’s actually weird, because everything's kind of finally settled, everything’s at rest. … Right now, everything’s smooth. My parents are living their own separate lives, everything’s fine, they’re communicating. Any leftover baggage that still remains is between them. … honestly, in a way I’m happy that I’ve gone through something like this, I mean I’m happy that had, I mean, I’m not happy that I had an eating disorder, but I’m thankful that through the eating disorder, through my parents divorce, and through having to mature, um, definitely at a quicker pace then what a lot of people, I mean, I’m, I’m definitely more aware and definitely more of a stronger individual.

Case Two: Amy

Biographical information and interview overview. At the time I interviewed Amy, she was 22 years old. She had two older sisters, who were 28 and 30. Her parents had divorced approximately 6 years earlier, when she was 16. Amy was as an intelligent and articulate senior undergraduate student. She was interested in politics and active with her campus-level political affiliation. She had completed a multi-disciplinary college degree with emphases in political science and sociology and had been accepted into several laws schools. She was in the process of deciding which one to attend.
Although Amy came across as confident and talented with regard to her studies, she presented as anxious and hesitant discussing the circumstances of her parents’ divorce. During the first interview, she shared the painful impact her parents’ divorce had upon her life and cried a bit. It was my sense that the interview appeared to help her better understand her experiences linked to her parents’ divorce, as well as to help her to vent, uncover, and clarify the ways in which she was still struggling with the associated events.

In the second interview, Amy talked about the connection between her parents’ divorce and her struggles in own romantic relationships. She talked about actively trying to avoid making the same mistakes as her parents, and struggling to find an alternative way to be in her own relationships.

*Understanding Amy’s case through a developmental elaboration of the assimilation model.* Through study of Amy’s narrative, the research team concluded that she was currently in Erikson’s (1963) intimacy vs. isolation stage of development. Her current developmental tasks entailed developing the capacity to commit to concrete affiliations, and to develop the skills to persevere in her commitments in the face of inevitable obstacles. Amy’s current developmental stage was the life context within which she needed to create a narrative that assimilated her parents’ divorce.

Amy: I worry if I’m in a really long committed relationship and I let these things build up to the point where I then, where my feelings change about this person … Yeah, and I mean that’s what I feel like, exactly what I experienced with my, with my parents too. … And with Matt, like, I was willing. … I wanted to work through these issues. Like I thought, I wanted, I thought we’d come out closer, you know. And I thought that, um, and then just to see him give up, and like, completely just, it was like. And, uh, was like just really like difficult

In her interview, Amy showed how she tried to create a narrative about her parents’ divorce while she wrestled with her developmental task of achieving intimacy in her own romantic relationships. Her parents’ divorce seemed to be problematic for her current developmental task in two ways: 1) it was tied to difficulties to develop an emotionally honest relationship with her father; and 2) it was related to her struggles to commit to a romantic relationship.
Because we directly talked about how Amy’s experience of her parents’ divorce was in conflict with her attempts to develop satisfying relationships with her father and with her current romantic partner, these voices were directly observable. Thus, the research team was able to name and track two voices within Amy during the interview. Additionally, since there was movement during the interview in Amy’s ability to understand both of these voices within her current life context, the team rated her increasing assimilation of her parents’ divorce.

*Traces of the divorce tied to problems with her father.* Amy’s difficulties in her relationship with her father began when he moved out of the house because of the impending divorce. Amy felt a sense of loss from not having him in the house. She also felt angry that he had been unwilling to continue working on the marriage with her mother. However, Amy and her father continued to have a relationship after he moved out and she reported that this had eased some of her insecurities stemming from his leaving the house. Her father had reassured her that she would continue to be important in his life. Part of this reassurance had been his promise to not get married to his current girlfriend. For Amy, this seemed to be very important:

Amy: Just ‘cuz it’s, again, for the longest time it’s just been, me and him, and for the longest time he’s been very specific saying that’s not going to change, you know.

However, just prior to our interview, Amy’s father had announced he was going to get married to his current girlfriend. Amy felt betrayed by this decision, yet was unable to talk with her father about how she felt. Amy’s feelings about the matter were mixed (indicative of an APES stage 2). Here, she described this:

Amy: It’s something that I, I don’t know if it’s all mixed in with feeling betrayed by the divorce and the fact that I had no idea that it was coming, and that. Um, like they told me, and had very little plans for what was going to happen in the weeks and months afterwards, you know. Like how we were going to like do any of this. So I don’t know, like, I felt, betrayal. I mean, I don’t know if it’s getting mixed in with that, but, I, and I think I do specifically feel betrayed by my dad getting remarried.

The preceding passage shows how Amy’s narrative of her parent’s divorce continued to evolve long after the actual event. An important feature of this evolution was that her narrative about her experience of parental divorce included traces of experience that had occurred six years after the divorce. This indicates a method by which voices can accumulate additional
experiences over time: When the narrative told about the phenomena continues to accumulate relevant life events. Because Amy’s sense of betrayal about her father’s reported change of heart reminded her of her experience of the divorce, it became included in the narrative she told to understand this experience.

As mentioned previously, the traces of experience from her parents’ divorce that were problematic in her relationship with her father were observable during the interview session, and we talked directly about these problematic traces. In the team portion of the analysis, we identified two voices that appeared to be at conflict within Amy. The first was the experience of her parents’ divorce, which we referred to as the “Divorce” voice. The second appeared to stem from her Amy’s experiences in her family before the divorce, and we called this voice the “Don’t ruffle feathers” voice. In the case observations below, the **Divorce** voice is **underlined**, and the “**Don’t ruffle feathers**” voice is in **bold**.

Amy indicated that the problematic aspects of her experience tied to her father were evoked whenever she was with him. This included phone conversations and trips to her father’s new house, which he was sharing with his new fiancé. Amy reported feeling intense emotional pain and confusion that she would push away. Here, she talks about it:

**Amy**: I talk to my dad on the phone and I, just, I’ll just be, like, not for necessarily any reason, I’ll just, like, get really upset, when I’m getting off the phone with him, or something, you know. I’ll like, I’ll just feel like I’m on the verge of tears, and like. And I, and I don’t even know why, it’s not necessarily, I think like, I don’t know, I just, I don’t know why. … **And so a lot of times I try to circumvent it as much as possible, so he doesn’t think that I’m unstable in any way, you know?**

The avoidance and suppression of emotion tied to an experience is associated with APES stage 1 (Unwanted thoughts/avoidance). Unlike Crystal, who reported turning to alcohol and bulimia to suppress her emotions, Amy dealt with her emotions by commiserating with her family, particularly her siblings:

**Amy**: … **Because I can have conversations with my sisters, and depending on my mood of the day, I mean, I can, I can be short with Denise (Amy’s sister),**
and, for her being upset, you know. Or, and I can just try to rationalize it through with her ...

While the traces of experience from her parents’ divorce continued to be problematic, Amy seemed more able to contain this experience when she was apart from her father. This containment included having the interpersonal resources by which she could make sense of her distress by talking about it with others. Although the narrative Amy was creating did involve avoiding addressing some of her more vulnerable feelings regarding her father (e.g., hurt, loss, etc.), it did appear to help her make meaning out of her distress tied to him.

In addition to focusing on her “Divorce” voice, I also focused on understanding Amy’s “Do not ruffle feathers” voice by connecting it to her sense that her feelings of sadness, hurt, and anger towards her father were irrational.

Jonathan: And you think, like you see some of the emotions, like the hurt, as being, you see that as sort of being irrational in a sense?

Amy: Ye-yeah, I do. Um, I don’t know, I mean__Yeah, I don’t think I should be this, I don’t think I should (pauses). Yeah, because like feeling hurt and betrayed by the idea of like, and it’s ridiculous to say, like, ‘oh, he’s starting a new life with (pauses) a new family,’ and that’s exactly what he is doing, but I shouldn’t view it that way, I should be able to view it as like, as like a logical progression,

As our conversation continued, Amy and I spoke about how she was experiencing conflict between these two voices during the interview. Her response showed that she had some ability to understand these two voices within her current life context, but that her “Do not ruffle feathers” voice was dominating her narrative about the divorce by insisting that she did not have the right to feel her feelings connected to her father’s remarriage.

Amy: ... rationally I want my dad to move on, I want him to be happy, so I see it as irrational, like getting emotional and getting upset about it, is, to me irrational, because, um,(pauses) I should just be (whispers in slightly facetious way) be happy for him.

Jonathan: … so maybe there’s two parts to you, I mean, maybe there’s a part of you perhaps that wants him to be happy, and a part of you that just feels really intensely about it.
Amy: ... Yeah, (said sadly, pauses) and, yeah (said more confidently). And it’s kind of like when I rationalize, then I have no emotion about it whatsoever.

By gaining recognition of how the two voices were conflicting within her, Amy seemed to gain perspective how these two aspects of her experience were both important to her helping her understand her parents’ divorce. This approach of commenting on conflicting aspects of experience may be an example of how important others such as therapists or friends can help to facilitate assimilation by increasing the person’s awareness of the dynamics in their community of voices.

Amy and I were able to connect her emerging emotions to the situations that were reminders of the divorce, which appeared to help her understand how her troubling feelings during family gatherings were tied to her struggles from her parents’ divorce:

Amy: Like, I don’t think I should still be getting, like really upset about it, I mean I, and I don’t all of the time, but, I still like find myself, usually at holidays, um, just like really sad that we’re not all together as a family anymore. …

Jonathan: These are all things that ... remind you of the divorce, and that (Amy: yeah) bring some of that emotion back.

Amy: Um, yeah (voice quivers). I mean, it’s interesting, that, that must be.

The specific connection Amy was able to make between her emotions and the traces of her experience responsible for these feelings seemed to help anchor her in APES stage 2 (Vague awareness/emergence). With her increased awareness of the connection between her distress and her parents’ divorce, she was able to begin to further explore her emotions about her father’s decision to remarry:

Amy: ... this is what I’ve been feeling the whole time, and I’m like I know, I understand, but I, it’s just, I’ve realized, this is I’m not comfortable with this, you know, … For the longest time it’s just been, me and him, and for the longest time he’s been very specific saying that’s not going to change, you know. ... And it’s probably still kind of selfishly, and like, maybe kind of immaturely, I’m still obsessing about them getting married. It’s just like, it won’t be my dad’s house, you know, I won’t be able to just like go to the refrigerator as much as I like. It’s something
that I... I don’t know if it’s all mixed in with feeling betrayed by the divorce and the fact that I had no idea that it was coming... but, I, and I think I do specifically feel betrayed by my dad getting remarried... it’s kind of like when I rationalize, then I have no emotion about it whatsoever. And then, but when I start to think about like, when I actually let myself probably think about it more. And in a lot of ways life is not as neat as it should be, so maybe I should like own up to my emotional feelings a little bit more,

Amy’s ability to own her feelings during the interview seemed to help her make progress towards clearly stating the problem: that she was not comfortable with her father’s marriage. These traces of the divorce experience were between an APES stages 2 (vague awareness/emergence) and 3 (problem statement/clarification). During the second interview, she was able to concretely link these problematic traces with her struggles in developing a committed romantic relationship.

Difficulties in romantic relationships. Amy’s account indicated that the same traces of her parents’ divorce that were problematic in her relationship with her father were also problematic in her attempts to develop a committed romantic relationship. Specifically, her “Do not ruffle feathers” voice seemed to block her attempts to work towards commitment in her current romantic relationship. Instead, she found herself feeling anxious about her partner’s intentions in the relationship, and was unable to talk to him about topics related to commitment:

Amy: ... I would just wish that I, um, could be more confident to like address the situation. But I again feel like I’m scared to like, rock the boat too much, you know. ... just been hard because, I found myself kind of insecure in the relationship just because I don’t think it’s progressed to the point where I can feel comfortable, you know. ... I guess, I just, being exposed to divorce, and, I don’t know, deception, or something in sort of like, of observing a relationship that turned out to not be anything like you expected it to be. I think it’s made me more aware, um. And its, of, sort of like, what, what could go wrong. ... I’m worried that I also don’t know how to like make it past the first conflict stage, you know, like where you’re comfortable enough to like really duke something out and to like have the security, and, the, to like know that it will end. ... and that’s
one of the biggest things that s., scares me now. Just not having like any openness, or just trying to avoid conflict at all costs …

Amy outlined and articulated the connection of this difficulty to her desire to not repeat the same mistakes that her parents made in their marriage. Particularly, she was aware she was experiencing struggles in regard to commitment, but was unsure what to do about them. She talked about how she could explain forever why she wanted to improve her ability to communicate in her relationships, but that this explanation would not help her actually do this successfully. Amy saw her parents as not having provided examples of healthy communication in a relationship, and this was something that she wanted to learn to improve her relationships:

Amy: ... I don’t know necessarily know how to do that, … and I can say it as much as I want, but I don’t think like, uh, that communicating like your wants and desires and like your un-satisfactions. Like, I, uh, I’ve never been good at confrontation, like with uh, um, in any sort of like relationship setting. And when I do, I feel like then I also have trouble with um, then, how do we argue that out? Like, I’ve never been good at, like. Because I just never, we never, we don’t get into like blow-out fights, and things like that. ... I’ve never seen my parents’ do that, and like move on, you know. … I’m not sure that I know what a real marriage looks like, or what like, how to, how like a successful marriage.

Amy was able to clearly state how the “Do not ruffle feathers” experience in her family was leading to her current struggles to develop a committed relationship. However, she struggled to go beyond this problem, and commented on her sense that she did not yet know how to solve this difficulty. Amy’s clear statement of the problem indicated that during the end stages of the interview, her experience of parental divorce was assimilated to APES stage 3 (Problem statement/clarification).

Amy was able to connect exactly how her “Do not ruffle feathers” voice that was problematic in her attempts to develop a committed romantic relationship had its origins in her family’s struggles to communicate about concerns. The following quote was the inspiration for the team’s decision to refer to one of Amy’s voices as the “Do not ruffle feathers” voice.
Amy: ... We, I think we were kind of a closed off family, anyways. Like, don’t want to ruffle any feathers, don’t want, like, you know, don’t want to get into big, blow out fights, you know, nothing like that. I don’t know if it just, polite? I don’t know. ... it comes down to ‘we don’t like to ruffle feathers. We don’t like to make a deal about things. Like, we don’t like to carry on, as a family … ...I’ve never been good at confrontation, like with uh, um, in any sort of like relationship setting.

Amy did not yet have a specific understanding of how her experience of the divorce was leading to her struggles in her current romantic relationship. Having such an understanding would have been reflected within Amy’s narrative as a coherent understanding (APES 4: insight/understanding) as to why her parents’ divorce was leading to these difficulties. Instead, she was unsure of why she was having difficulties in talking about commitment with her current romantic partner.

Amy: I’m trying to figure out why this makes me so uncomfortable ... This idea of pushing him (current romantic interest) on this issue … Um, but it’s like, um, for some reason I, I just find myself like completely like, trying to be this person who just doesn’t ruffle any feathers, or something. … Although I care, I have like a connection with him more than I have with anybody else, … it’s just so hard for me to really push the issue.

Despite her ongoing struggles to understand why she was struggling to talk about commitment in her current relationship, Amy had made measurable progress in assimilating her experience of parental divorce. Amy’s progress from APES 1 to APES 3 was facilitated by her ability to focus on her feelings and to create a narrative within the interview that explained how traces of experience from her parents’ divorce were connected to her struggles to master her current developmental task.

Case Three: Erin

Biographical information and interview overview. Erin was a 22 year-old undergraduate student when I interviewed her. She was attending a college in the Midwest several hours away from where her family (including both of her parents) lived. She was several weeks away from graduation with a degree in Public Relations.
Erin was quiet and gave very short answers as the interview began. However, as it progressed she warmed up and talked about her experience of parental divorce. Erin’s parents divorced when she was four years old, and she had very few memories of their marriage. The few memories that she did have were foggy and vague. Although she could remember the house she lived in before her parents divorced, she hadn’t any memories of her parents as a couple or of their fights before and during the divorce.

When her parents divorced, Erin lived with her mom, and her dad lived in a nearby city. Her father was always a presence in her life, as she visited him every weekend. Erin said that her parents handled their divorce well because both of them continued to be an important presence in her life: her mom raised her and handled day-to-day responsibilities, while her dad remained a presence through weekend visits and by attending important events.

Erin’s parents continued to be involved in each other’s lives after the divorce. This involvement consisted of having phone conversations, having family dinners with both parents, and her father loaning money and being available to her mom in times of crisis.

Both of Erin’s parents were unmarried at the time I interviewed her. Her mom had remarried briefly when she was in middle school, and this second marriage was quickly dissolved (in about a year). Erin described her mom as having engaged in a series of romantic relationships that were unhealthy and controlling. Erin’s father had one major romantic relationship after the divorce, which left him feeling wounded and closed to developing another romantic relationship.

_Understanding Erin’s case through a developmental elaboration of the assimilation model._ Through study of Erin’s narrative, the research team concluded that she was currently in Erikson’s (1963) identity vs. role diffusion stage of development. Her developmental tasks, like Crystal’s, entailed separating from her family of origin. Whereas for Crystal this developmental task involved developing a personal set of values to live by, for Erin this meant developing financial security so that she did not have to rely on financial support from her parents.

Erin: Because it’s always, you have to be kind of content with yourself, and, where you are in order to be content with another person. … In terms of money, I’ve watched my mom struggle, and I don’t want to have to struggle like that, and kind of live, like paycheck to paycheck, at all. Like I’ll try to avoid it with anything I can.
Erin’s case was different from the other the cases insofar as Erin reported her parents’ divorce as mostly non-problematic. This analysis suggests that her evaluation was based on her ability to create a narrative that assimilated her traces of experience with her parents within her current developmental context, identity vs. role diffusion. The report of her case focuses on the aspects in Erin’s narrative that led her to evaluate her parents’ divorce as mostly non-problematic. It also discusses how her construal of her current developmental stage was based on her relationships with her parents, and reflected the larger cultural context within which her family lived.

Erin reported that she was only four years old when her parents divorced, and that she had few memories of the event itself. Instead, she had tangible memories of her father moving out, which appear to represent much of her childhood experience of the divorce.

Erin: Well I guess it’s just been normal for … my parents to be divorced, because I don’t remember them being together. And I don’t really remember the fighting, so I guess I don’t have any, such a negative opinion about it, because I don’t remember, like the drawn out process. Like I kind of avoided all that but. Like yeah, had I been ten years old, I kind of feel like the experience would’ve been a lot different. …

Jonathan: So you said you don’t remember much from the actual divorce itself?
Erin: mm-mm. I remember living in the house that they bought, and I think, probably when I was in kindergarten, or like 4 maybe, my mom sold it and she moved, but. I don’t really remember them being, yeah … But I guess I remember living in the house, and I feel like when I remember living in the house it was after they divorced.

Because her parents divorced when she was so young, Erin appears to have been protected a great deal from some of the more negative aspects of the divorce, including conflict between her parents.

Erin: I don’t really think anything of it. My parents are pretty good about, um, never making either my sister or me choose who we wanted to live with. They never really fought like for custody orders, we could go and spend time with our dad whenever we wanted, and our grandparents, so that was really good, I think. … that’s definitely been a positive aspect, and it could’ve easily turned out a lot
worse, and she could have been really strict and followed the court order to a ‘T’, and she never did. They never had to go back for custody fights, or change visitation rights, or anything. … I really made an effort that I wanted to see him on the weekends when I wasn’t in school, because obviously I couldn’t see him at night, because you know he lived far away, but, I’d say up until my sophomore year of high school when I started working I pretty much stayed there like every weekend. And once I started working I’d always make an effort to go down to ________ (where her dad lived) on Sundays …

The overwhelming reason that Erin reported not seeing her parents’ divorce as problematic was that it did not have a negative impact on her relationships with either of her parents. Based on the analysis of the other two cases, these continually supportive relationships with both of her parents were likely crucial because they helped Erin create a narrative about her family of origin experience that created smooth access to her experiences of both of her parents. In contrast to Crystal, Amy, and her own sister, Erin had fewer memories of an intact family, and so had less of a need to mourn and assimilate her experiences of the divorce process within her narrative about the divorce.

Erin reported that her strong relationships with both of her parents came as a result of their mutual efforts. As an example, Erin related that when a girl at school asked her why she didn’t have a father, she went home and cried to her mother because this had upset her. Erin’s mother helped her to understand that she did still have a father, and that he did still care about her.

Erin: I remember at school once, in first grade, and this really upset me, this girl was like, ‘Where is your dad?’ And ‘why don’t you have a dad?’ And I was like I do have a dad, he just doesn’t live with me, and I remember going home crying, and really upset about that, and um, my mom was like ‘Don’t listen to them’ and ‘you do have a dad, and he loves you very much, and you can see him whenever you want’

During the interview, Erin contrasted her parents approach with how her uncle had handled his divorce. Her description shows how she thought her parents had handled the divorce much better than her uncle’s family had.
Erin: It was a big difference from my uncle who was going through like a custody battle for years, and they never saw really their grandkids very often, so I know they really appreciated that. ‘Cuz they knew in the end it was really going to hurt us more than it was going to hurt them.

In spite of her largely positive view on how her parents had handled their divorce, Erin did indicate that there were some ways that the divorce was difficult for her. These difficulties involved her parents’ jealousy about each other’s relationships, how much Erin loved them, and their ongoing tendency to get on each other’s nerves.

Erin: I mean in some respects they did have a good divorce, but in others aspects they didn’t at all. They know exactly what to say to push the other person’s buttons. And … they want to know about, like, the other one’s personal life … (And) I remember my mom, when I was little, was like, ‘Can’t you just say you love me a little bit more.’ … I remember like telling her, trying to explain to her how I wasn’t going to choose, that I loved them both the same. … it was irritating too. Because I felt like I shouldn’t have to choose.

Erin indicated that what helped her to not feel overly upset about these frustrations that did occur as a result of the divorce was that she saw the overall relationship between her parents as positive. She talked about her parents were able to drop their differences when either of them needed something, and how they were able to focus on helping each other through these times of need.

Erin: But my dad, and again, that goes back to my parents relationship, like they, even though they don’t get along, they’re going to be the first one there to step in and help the other person out. … : Um, and they wouldn’t hesitate, and I know that, and they both know that too. … even like I said, even if they were fighting, and something would happen to the other one, they would be the first ones there. But they know that and that’s always been comforting.

Because of her perception of the overall positive relationship between her parents, Erin was able to contextualize the problems that did occur as a result of the divorce within an overall positive framework.

*Erin’s understanding and navigation of her current developmental stage.* Erin’s case demonstrates how socioeconomic status can be transmitted to children through experiences of
their parents, which then have a role in determining the narratives they create about their current developmental tasks. Whereas Crystal came from an upper-middle class family, Erin came from a working class family. She observed her mother’s difficulties holding down a job, and her father’s insistence on the importance of financial security.

Erin: I’m not in any rush (to get married). Like I’d like to establish a career and be financially independent for myself, and not have to rely on anybody else. And that’s .. my dad has instilled in me. Like don’t ever, don’t have to depend like on that situation where you have to depend on somebody else. So really make sure that you can take care of yourself, and that you, try not to rely on anybody else, so. I mean than, I do visibly remember him always telling me that, but um, I’m sure that’s kind of impacted that too.

Erin’s father was a particularly important influence on how Erin conceived of individuating from her role as a child to that of a young adult.

Erin’s mother also actively instilled their working class values in Erin with regard to the importance of financial independence. An example of this was her mother’s struggles to manage money; she wanted Erin to achieve this skill so she had Erin manage the money that her father paid in child support each month.

Erin: My mom’s kind of like a parenting thing, but she gave me my child support, and she let me, um, to try to like, because she was always really bad with money, so she was like, I want to make you really good with money. And I was in Catholic grade school, so she said like ‘you have this money, but you have this and this to pay for, so she did that to try to like, so I had to pay tuition out of that, and I had to pay for braces, and then whatever I had left over I could use … And like to this day, like I’m better with money than she is, … I think that was really, really good and it taught me a lot.

This creative approach on the part of her mom appeared to have worked, because Erin reported that she became at managing money as a result.

In addition to influencing how she saw the economic aspects of her current developmental task, Erin’s parents also appear to have been a factor in her decision to remain single during this developmental period.
For example, Erin saw her mother as an overly dependent who made bad relationship choices as a result.

Erin: Yeah, I feel like she (her mom) always like falls in the same pattern of like, guys controlling, but, which is weird because I don’t feel like my dad’s controlling … But I think my mom’s just really afraid of being alone, she doesn’t want to be alone so she settles. She just, uh, wants desperately to have somebody.

In contrast to Erin’s experience of her mother as too willing to enter into romantic relationships due to her fear of being alone, Erin experienced her father as closed to romantic relationships because of the intense hurt and letdown that he had suffered years before in his last serious romantic relationship.

Erin: … he was really hurt. … He dated a girl for like two years who he really cared about, and they broke up, and she ended up marrying someone soon after that, and I think that kind of like scarred him a little bit, and he really cared about her, and he didn’t want to, after that he didn’t really want to date anymore. …

Because in Erin’s experience, both of her parents had struggled with romantic relationships, she may have also equated healthy individuation with remaining single.

Erin: … I feel like I’m very similar to my dad, that’s part of it, and my sister’s very similar to my mom, so that kind of creates conflict because I, we both see like, I guess all of the difficult patterns, and, with like relationships, and that irritates me, and my dad understands that. … I mean he never, I mean he’s just … (her father would) rather be by myself, like, I’d never be with someone just to be with them. … Well, I don’t feel like I’ve had a serious relationship. I think I’ve just wanted to focus on school, and I think I’m always really busy. But part of it too, like, I was saying before, I’m kind of like, I’d just rather be on my own, instead of just being with someone just to be with someone.

Erin’s construal of her task of individuation shows that she approached this task based on her evaluation of her parents, both in regard to social class as well as in terms of her experiences of their struggles in romantic relationships. Erin appears to see her mother’s fear of being alone as related to her own struggles with closeness. In response to this, she appeared to identify more with her father’s characteristics during her current stage of development. Even though her father
is closed off to romantic relationships, Erin’s experience of him appears to provide her with a resource in regard to her own attempts to individuate from her family of origin.

Discussion

This study examined the narratives three young adults told about their experience of childhood parental divorce. It offered an elaboration of the assimilation model by outlining a preliminary theoretical understanding of identity. In this understanding, identity consists of a narrative or meaning bridge that assimilates the experiences that are relevant to current developmental tasks. Specific emphasis was placed on identity relevant experiences from participants’ family of origin. Parental divorce was seen as relevant to young adults in accordance with its impact on the accessibility of family of origin experiences. Instead of being a single definable experience that held across participants, parental divorce consisted of traces of family experiences that were relevant to young adults’ current lives. When family experiences relevant to the divorce were assimilated, young adults reported that their parents’ divorce was not negatively impacting their current lives. In contrast, young adults reported that their parents’ divorce was a problem when family experiences related to the divorce were problematic.

This project differs from previous work on the assimilation model because it suggests that experiences are not assimilated within the community of voices, but rather within a narrative that is created to marshal the necessary psychological resources to master the developmental tasks that are encountered in daily living. It suggests that because these narratives are developmentally situated, that assimilation is temporal and context dependent rather than permanent and/or static. The community of voices draws from a deeper reservoir of experience that can not be studied by science. In spite of the limitation of never being able to study the depths of experience, the product of this experience, the narratives we create to assimilate our experience can be studied scientifically, and this was the endeavor that this project undertook.

Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial stages were used to understand participants’ narratives about their family of origin experiences. Two participants, Crystal (case one) and Erin (case three), were constructing a narrative that would help them to individuate from their family of origin. This is consistent with Erikson’s (1963) developmental stage identity vs. role diffusion, where the person’s task is to develop a consistent sexual and career identity. Amy (case two) differed from these two cases in that her current psychosocial task was thought to be intimacy vs.
isolation, which consisted of constructing a narrative that would allow her to make and follow commitments in spite of the inevitable hardships that may arise.

The inclusion of identity within the assimilation model’s conception of self suggests that experiences can be unassimilated, and yet unproblematic, at particular points in development. This occurs when a person has troubling experiences that are not directly relevant to their current life tasks. For example, Erin indicated that her parents have often put her in the middle, and have not been role models for her within their own romantic relationships. Even though Erin acknowledges that these experiences might be problematic, they did not appear to be relevant to her current psychosocial identity narrative. In other words, even though they were potentially troubling aspects of her parents’ divorce, they were not necessary to her current psychosocial stage of development. Instead, she focuses on the importance of her parents teaching her independence, and has created a narrative that assimilated her experiences of her parents that are relevant to this goal. It might be that the aspects of her parents’ divorce that were related to intimacy and relationships will become necessary for Erin to include within her identity when she reaches the psychosocial task of intimacy vs. isolation. If this occurs, then the narrative she uses to create her identity at this stage of her life will presumably have to assimilate, or explicitly label as problematic, these aspects of her parents’ divorce. This potential is evidenced in the narrative that Amy (case two). This narrative emphasizes her parents’ difficulties in communicating with each other, and her own difficulties to communicate with her father. This difficulty in communicating is distressing to Amy because it prevents her from forming a successful identity within her current psychosocial stage. Whereas Erin’s family of origin experiences around being single and independent were the relevant aspects of her parents’ divorce to her current identity, Amy’s experiences of relationships and communication were central in hers. This study suggests that these differences might not be incidental, but rather reflective of participants’ current psychosocial developmental context.

In addition to being based upon participants’ current psychosocial stages, their identity also reflected their unique cultural experiences. Even though Crystal (case one) and Erin (case three) were both judged to be in Erikson’s identity vs. role diffusion stage, they each saw their current developmental tasks differently based on their unique cultural and family experiences. Crystal, who was from a middle-upper class family, saw young adulthood as consisting of exploration and development of a set of values by which she could live by. In contrast, Erin,
who was from a working class family, saw young adulthood as requiring that she develop financial dependences from her parents. While both of these goals would be characterized as Erikson’s (1963) identity vs. role diffusion stage, these two cases show how unique family and cultural experiences within the community of voices are drawn from, and shape, the narratives that young adults create about their current psychosocial stage.

This project emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships in influencing the identity that young adults are constructing. This adds to ongoing work highlighting the importance of interpersonal relationships in assimilating problematic experiences. Mosher & Stiles (in press) reported that assimilation of the voice of the therapist helped participants to not only assimilate problematic experiences, but also to carry this voice as an ongoing resource in their daily lives. Schielke, Stiles, & Greenberg (2008) reported that assimilation of problems in romantic relationships involves assimilation at both an intra- and inter-personal level. This study added to these projects by adding developmental considerations to the model’s understanding of interpersonal relationships role within the community of voices. It was the first to look at assimilation specifically within young adults, a time that developmental theorists (Arnett, 2006; Erikson, 1963) suggest that adult identity is being formed. It provided initial evidence that identity consists of family of origin experiences that a person organizes through the narratives they tell in their daily living. This study suggests that these narratives provide a way to make sense of, or assimilate, family of origin experiences such as parental divorce within the scope of cultural and interpersonal considerations.

The suggestion of this study that assimilation depends upon developmental context converges with findings in the parental divorce and developmental literature suggesting that an experience can have a differential impact at different points in an individual’s life. For example, some studies suggest that parental divorce that is associated with minimal distress during adolescence can lead to increased distress during young adulthood (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin & Kiernan, 1995; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale & McRae 1998). This also makes sense from the organizational perspective (cite) that holds that while earlier developmental tasks remain relevant in later development, that the young adult’s identity is reorganized based on newly emerging developmental tasks.

The corresponding suggestion in this study is that the narrative that individuals create in forming their identity undergoes changes in accordance with their life context. In other words,
the meaning bridges that assimilate a person’s experiences at one point in time may no longer achieve this end once the person is in a new life context. A person trying to make sense of his or her parents’ divorce in the context of separating from their family of origin (identity vs. role diffusion) will likely be drawing from different aspects of their parents’ divorce than a person working towards developing a committed romantic relationship (intimacy vs. isolation). For example, a person in the intimacy vs. isolation stage of development may become more interested in understanding what aspects of their parents’ relationship led to their divorce, whereas a person in the identity vs. role diffusion stage may be more focused on what enables their parents to live autonomously.

This study also supports the overall mixed findings concerning the impact of parental divorce (Amato, 2000, 2003; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Harvey, 2004), and suggests that studying narratives told by individuals about their experience of parental divorce offers one way to understand the complex factors that account for the variety of outcomes associated with parental divorce. As an important aspect in these mixed findings, this study mirrored work on the interaction between interparental conflict and divorce. Amato, Loomis, and Booth (1995) report that divorce by itself was most harmful when it was not preceded by interparental conflict, and that it was least harmful when it led to reductions in previously high levels of interparental conflict (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, and Cummings, 2006; Davies & Lindsay, 2004; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998).

Additionally, previous research has indicated that females may be more likely than males to be negatively impacted by interparental conflict during the identity vs. role diffusion developmental stage. As this research suggests, Crystal reported distress when she was involved in her parents’ conflict, and reported that developing healthier boundaries with her mother relieved her distress. Additionally, Erin reported that her parents’ had handled the divorce well because they had continued to have a good relationship with each other.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of this study stems from only having only one source of data about participants. The only source that was used to understand participants’ assimilation of their parents’ divorce was the narratives they told about this experience during their interview. Follow up studies should include more sources of information that can provide alternative ways
to assess the participants’ assimilation of their parents’ divorce, and their current life functioning. Examples of additional sources that would improve this study’s findings include interviewing other members of the participants’ families in order to assess how other family members see the participants’ current adjustment, and including assessment measures to collect additional information about the participants.

Another limitation of this project concerns its sample size and composition. Interviewing more participants from diverse backgrounds would add confidence to the current findings. In addition to increasing the number and diversity of participants, including both male and female participants would be suggested.

Additionally, future work could go beyond the particular experience of parental divorce, and look at how young adults assimilate other experiences that are risk factors for healthy development. This approach would supplement current work on the construct of resilience that has become of increasing interest to both clinicians and researchers (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000), and would help to articulate the link between resilience and the capacity to tell experientially rich narratives about difficult life events.
References


APPENDIX A.

**Focusing on event:**
Tell me a little about yourself and your parents divorce
How did you find out that your parents were getting divorced?
How old were you when your parents got divorced?
What happened when they got divorced?
Who did you live with afterwards?
What was this time like?
How did you cope?
Was there someone (or something) to turn to?

**Reflecting on impact:**
How has your parents’ divorce impacted you while growing up?
Has either of your parents gotten remarried? What has this been like for you?
How is your parents’ divorce impacting you now?
Has the impact of your parents’ divorce changed over time? How so?
How has your parents’ divorce made you life worse?
How has your parents’ divorce made your life better?
Do you have any brothers or sisters? How has this impacted your relationship with them?
Who have you talked to about your parents divorce? Has this helped at all?
How are you coping with your parents’ divorce now?
Has your parents’ divorce impacted your romantic relationships at all? How so?
Are their aspects of you parents’ divorce that were difficult in the past, but have helped you to
grow in some ways? Could you tell me about this?
Do you know why your parents’ got divorced? How did you learn this? Have you talked to your
parents about this?
APPENDIX B.

Points of Contact Page

Name:  

Case:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Observation</th>
<th>Role of Observation in Theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Please put one or more quotes that illustrates this observation. Mark quotes with their dialogue line #.)</td>
<td>What does this observation suggest about the role of a particular experience within the participant’s identity? What part of the assimilation model might this observation apply to? In what ways might this observation require elaboration of the assimilation model?</td>
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# 1

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# 3

# 4

(numbers expand as far as each research team member needs)

Additional comment section: Please describe the client, your understanding of their narrative, and your conceptualization of their narrative from the standpoint of the assimilation model.
### Table 1: Descriptions of the Eight APES Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 0</strong> – <em>Warded off / Dissociated:</em></td>
<td>The problematic experience is not in conscious awareness. There is likely little affect because the experience is successfully avoided. The problem may manifest somatically, through acting out, or through state switches.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 1</strong> – <em>Unwanted thoughts / active avoidance:</em></td>
<td>The problematic experience is actively avoided, and pushed out of awareness when addressed by life circumstances. Affect likely includes unfocused negative feelings whose connection to the problematic experience is unclear.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 2</strong> – <em>Vague awareness / emergence:</em></td>
<td>The problematic experience enters conscious awareness, but cannot be clearly formulated or reflected on. Affect consists of psychological pain, which may be accompanied by fear, anger, sadness, or shame.</td>
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<td><strong>Stage 3</strong> – <em>Problem statement / clarification:</em></td>
<td>The problematic experience can be clearly stated and reflected on. It is differentiated and can communicate with other members of the internal community. Affect is negative but manageable.</td>
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<td><strong>Stage 4</strong> – <em>Understanding/insight:</em></td>
<td>The problematic experience is understood, and reaches an understanding (meaning bridge) with other members of the internal community. Affect may be mixed, with some uncomfortable recognition accompanied with pleasant surprise.</td>
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<td><strong>Stage 5</strong> – <em>Application / working through:</em></td>
<td>The understanding of the problematic experience is used to work on a problem, assisted by other members of the internal community. Affect is positive and optimistic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 6</strong> – <em>Resourcefulness/problem solution:</em></td>
<td>The formerly problematic experience has become a resource that can be used in problems of daily living. It is mostly integrated, and can be accessed smoothly. Affect is positive and satisfied.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Stage 7</strong> – <em>Integration/mastery:</em></td>
<td>The formerly problematic experience is fully integrated, and automatically generates solutions in life situations. Affect is likely to be positive or neutral.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
I am conducting a research project on young adults whose parents divorced during their childhood. If your parents divorced before you were 18, I am hoping to interview you to better understand how you experienced parental divorce, and what your current life is like. The interviews are designed to learn about your parents’ divorce, your current relationships with your parents and significant others, and your values. They are expected to last between 4 and 5 hours across 2 or 3 meetings, and you will receive $50 compensation for participation. If you are between the ages of 18 and 25, and are interested in participating, please call or email Jonathan Fishman at:

Phone: (513) 288-1105

Email: fishmajl@muohio.edu