

---

Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

---

2013

## Satisfaction in adult romantic relationships after parental divorce : the role of locus of control

Meghan L. Mole  
*Smith College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mole, Meghan L., "Satisfaction in adult romantic relationships after parental divorce : the role of locus of control" (2013). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/617>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@smith.edu](mailto:scholarworks@smith.edu).

Meghan Mole  
Satisfaction in Adult Romantic  
Relationships After Parental  
Divorce: The Role of Locus of  
Control

### ABSTRACT

Previous research has found that parental divorce influences both locus of control (LOC) and relationship satisfaction, and LOC also influences relationship satisfaction; therefore, LOC may play a mediating role in the relationship between parental divorce and relationship satisfaction. The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore the relationship between LOC and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, comparing participants from intact and divorced families of origin. The influence of gender, age when parents divorced, and current age was also explored based on the following hypotheses: that parental divorce during early childhood would yield a more external LOC while parental divorce at an older age would yield a more internal LOC; that female participants would be more likely to have an external LOC; and older participants would have a more internal LOC. Additionally, this study hypothesized that an internal LOC would be associated with more relationship satisfaction in participants from both intact and divorced families. Finally, it was expected that offspring of divorced parents with an external LOC would have the lowest satisfaction in current relationships while participants from intact families with an internal LOC would report the most relationship satisfaction.

The sample included 57 total participants who completed anonymous, internet surveys, including a demographic questionnaire, Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (1967) and the Relationship Satisfaction Scale. No statistically significant relationships were found between

LOC and age, LOC and gender, LOC and age at parental divorce, LOC and relationship satisfaction, nor parental marital status and relationship satisfaction. The implications of these findings for practice and research are discussed in light of the study's methodological limitations.

Satisfaction in Adult Romantic Relationships After Parental Divorce:  
The Role of Locus of Control

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Meghan Mole

Smith College School for Social Work  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been completed without the help and support of a few important people.

I want to thank my partner, Alex Kane, for her endless patience and support during my stressful moments in thesis writing and for holding me together during my Smith experience.

I want to thank my mother for always lending an ear and some words of encouragement when I needed it the most.

I want to thank my best friend, Jayme Senkbeil, for the many hours she spent helping me score my surveys and compile my results, and for listening to my thesis frustrations during our dog walks.

I want to thank my close friend and professional life partner, Jamie White, for her twinship and support during our shared Smith and thesis experience.

I want to thank my former professor and significant role model, Nathalie Saltikoff, for all of her guidance during this process and through my entire academic and professional career.

And I want to thank my thesis advisor, Natalie Hill, for her thorough, timely, and thoughtful feedback which has contributed significantly to my final thesis.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	4
III. METHODOLOGY .....	17
IV. FINDINGS .....	21
V. DISCUSSION.....	27
REFERENCES .....	41
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Recruitment Note.. .....	45
Appendix B: Informed Consent .....	46
Appendix C: Resources for Participants .....	48
Appendix D: Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter .....	49
Appendix E: Survey.....	51

## LIST OF TABLES

Table .....	Page
1. Selected Demographics of Participants .....	23

## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Currently, one in three first marriages end in divorce within the first ten years, and almost half of all marriages ultimately end in divorce (Joongbaeck & Hyeyoung, 2011). Children of divorced parents have higher levels of psychological distress (Joongbaeck & Hyeyoung, 2011), are more likely to experience dissatisfaction in romantic relationships, and more likely to divorce (Ming & Fincham, 2010; Mustonen, Huurre, Kiviruu, Haukkala, & Aro, 2011). Failure in adult romantic relationships is also associated with psychological distress (Ming & Fincham, 2010). Therefore, it is useful to understand potential mediating factors for the detrimental effects of parental divorce on adult relationships.

One factor that may influence how parental divorce impacts adult romantic relationships is locus of control. Locus of control (LOC) is the degree to which people feel in control of their own life (Myer, 2007). Locus of control is divided into two subgroups: internal LOC and external LOC. An internal LOC is comprised of both a general belief in free will and personal agency, paired with beliefs and confidence in one's own aptitude to create change; an external LOC is comprised of a general belief in luck or external agency, paired with beliefs that one does not have the capacity to create change (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

LOC is significantly correlated with how both children and adults cope with general stress (Kim, Sandler, & Tein, 1997), and stress specific to parental divorce (Ming & Fincham,



2010; Mustonen et al., 2011). Children with an external LOC are more likely than children with an internal LOC to believe that their parents' divorce will have negative implications for their own well-being or future goals. Children with an internal LOC are more likely to use active coping during parental divorce and work on improving themselves through actions such as improving school performance (Sandler, Kim-Bae, & MacKinnon, 2000). However, studies have yielded conflicting results regarding whether parental divorce is associated with a more internal or external LOC (Kalter, Alpern, Spence, & Plunkett, 1984). Furthermore, although an internal LOC is most commonly associated with positive psychological outcomes, a more external LOC may be more adaptive during a negative event (Kim et al., 1997).

LOC is also relevant to romantic relationships because it is related to social sensitivity, receptivity, and attentiveness (Bugaighis, Schumm, Bollman, & Jurich, 1983). However, few studies have explored LOC in romantic relationship satisfaction. The existing evidence suggests lower levels of marital satisfaction when one partner has an internal LOC and the other partner has an external LOC; but higher levels of marital satisfaction when both partners have an internal LOC (Bugaighis et al., 1983). This increased marital satisfaction may be explained by higher levels of engagement (rather than avoidance) in marital problem-solving (Miller, Lefcourt, & Holmes, 1986).

Since parental divorce influences both LOC and relationship satisfaction, and LOC also influences relationship satisfaction, LOC may play a mediating role in the relationship between parental divorce and relationship satisfaction. Therefore, this quantitative study will explore the relationship between LOC and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, comparing participants from intact and divorced families of origin. The influence of gender, age when parents divorced, and current age will also be explored based on hypotheses arising out of the

literature review (Chapter 2). These hypotheses will be tested using data from an anonymous internet questionnaire, as described in Chapter 3. The findings (Chapter 4) may be of value in understanding factors mediating the effects of parental divorce on relationship satisfaction, which may then inform psychotherapeutic clinical practice and literature. Finally, further implications, limitations, and directions for future study will be discussed in Chapter 5.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

Climbing divorce rates and potential psychological harm caused by parental divorce have motivated many researchers to explore factors that may mediate the negative effects of parental divorce. This literature review will begin by describing the effects of parental divorce on adult romantic relationships. Then, locus of control (LOC) will be explored as one possible mediating variable. This chapter will summarize the limited research on the role of LOC in adult romantic relationship satisfaction, the relationship between LOC and response to parental divorce, and how parental divorce may influence LOC. Based on the research cited in this literature review, research hypotheses for the current study will be presented.

#### **Offspring of Divorced Parents and Romantic Relationships**

Parental divorce has been shown to influence adult romantic relationships in a variety of ways. Studies indicate that parental divorce impacts one's relationship status. Offspring of divorced parents are more likely to report that they do not wish to marry, more likely to seek cohabitation over marriage (Ottoway, 2010), and more likely to delay marriage in their romantic relationships (Storksen, Roysamb, Gjessing, Moum, & Tambs, 2007). Offspring of divorced parents who do marry are more likely to get divorced themselves than offspring from intact families (Storksen et al., 2007). Mustonen et al. (2011) found that parental divorce was significantly associated with current relationship status and those from divorced families were

more often separated or divorced at age 32. Offspring of divorce are also more likely to marry other offspring of divorce, and these couples have an increased risk of divorce compared to couples from intact families, and couples with one partner from a divorced family of origin (Storksen et al., 2007). It has been theorized that children of divorced parents are more likely to view divorce as a solution to marital conflict, and therefore more likely to get divorced in adulthood (Ming & Fincham, 2010).

**Parental Divorce and Quality of Adult Romantic Relationships.** Parental divorce and marital conflict are both associated with a lower perceived quality of the offspring's own romantic relationships (Ming & Fincham, 2010). Some researchers suggest that the relationship between parental divorce and adult relationship satisfaction is mediated by optimism, trust, and commitment (Mustonen et al., 2011). One way parental divorce may decrease the perceived quality of offspring's romantic relationships is by causing negative attitudes toward marriage and commitment (Ming & Fincham, 2010).

Another link between parental divorce and quality of adult relationships is attitude toward conflict. Marriages ending in divorce often involve increased levels of marital conflict. Parental marital conflict is associated with conflict in offspring's own romantic relationships, which influences quality of offspring's relationships (Ming & Fincham, 2010). Social Learning Theory suggests that, through observations of their parents' divorce, children learn conflict behaviors and establish negative views of marriage (Ming & Fincham, 2010). Conversely, children of divorced parents are less likely to have observed adaptive relational patterns within their parents' marriage, and without this modeling are more likely to lack conflict resolution and effective communication skills (Ottoway, 2010).

**Impact of Parent-Child Relationships.** Parent-child relationships can also have an impact on adult romantic relationships in offspring (Mustonen et al., 2011). When one parent moves out of the home, and the family structure shifts from intact to separated or divorced, the offspring's relationship with each parent is likely to change. The potential disruption of attachment bonds between parent and child due to parental divorce may jeopardize success in adult relationships (Mustonen et al., 2011). Studies indicate that a child's bond with each parent may influence the child's self-esteem and desire to connect with peers and an eventual romantic partner (Ottoway, 2010). Disturbance in parent-child relationships, in addition to witnessing a failed relationship, may cause a lack of trust in intimate relationships; indeed research shows that offspring of divorced parents tend to demonstrate a lack of trust in their relationships (Ottoway, 2010). Parent-child relationships have also been found to affect the offspring's perceptions of social support, which has been linked to marital functioning and to women's marital satisfaction (Mustonen et al., 2011).

**Impact of Offspring's Age at Parental Divorce.** Studies indicate that the child's age during parental divorce is significantly related to the impact of parental divorce on offspring's adult romantic relationships. Younger children tend to have less social support outside of their immediate family and also may have a more difficult time understanding their parents' divorce. Thus, younger age during parental divorce is correlated with more problems in adult intimate relationships (Ottoway, 2010). However, although a younger age during parental divorce predicts increased challenges in later romantic relationships, it also predicts less long-term traumatic effects associated with the event such as symptoms related to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It is theorized that less memory of the divorce decreases the potential psychological harm from the experience. Additionally, a longer period post-parental divorce predicts more trust

and altruism in offspring's current intimate relationships perhaps due to increased time to cope and adapt to family changes before beginning one's own romantic relationships (Ottoway, 2010).

Children whose parents divorced before adolescence often experience accelerated intimacy and tend to marry younger. Researchers hypothesize that this pattern may be a result of seeking to fulfill needs for affection, intimacy, and emotional contentment. Additionally, adolescents from divorced families have higher rates of sexual activity and are more likely to become adolescent parents (Ottoway, 2010).

**Gender Differences.** Women are more likely than men to experience negative relationship outcomes in the aftermath of parental divorce. Parental divorce is a predictor of decreased confidence in adult relationships, but only for female participants, which may account for increased likelihood of divorce in this population (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008). Females are more likely to lose contact with their fathers after parental divorce which may create insecure attachments (Ottoway, 2010). In turn, female offspring of divorced parents have increased insecurity in romantic relationships and heightened fears of abandonment. While females of this population are more likely to demand more from their partners during relational conflict, males of this population are more likely to avoid intimacy during relational conflict (Ottoway, 2010). Parental divorce is also significantly related to an increased number of sexual partners in women. Divorce also affects each gender at a different stage in life, as males show more signs of divorce-related trauma in childhood and adolescence while females are more likely to show the same signs in adulthood, which may contribute to women's heightened difficulties in romantic relationships (Ottoway, 2010).

**Gaps in Age of Population Studied.** Much of the existing research on relationship satisfaction after parental divorce has focused on undergraduate students' self-reports. More

research is needed on how parental divorce affects offspring's relationship satisfaction as they age past young adulthood. These gaps in the age of the target population in the literature in addition to the contradictory findings of the research about the impact of parental divorce leave some room for future study (Ottoway, 2010).

There is a need for more research to determine if the offspring's age at parental divorce affects the status and perceived quality of adult relationships. For example, are the people who experienced parental divorce at a young age more likely to get divorced or separated, or more likely to never marry than people whose parents got divorced during adolescence? Are the people who experienced parental divorce at a younger age more likely to perceive a lower quality in their romantic relationships?

### **Locus of Control**

As discussed in the last chapter, locus of control (LOC) is the degree to which one perceives life events as under one's own control (internal LOC) or the control of an outside force (external LOC). According to Albert Bandura, LOC can be further divided into two subgroups: outcome expectancy and self-efficacy expectancy. Specifically, an internal sense of outcome expectancy is the belief that is possible to influence outcomes in one's life, and an internal sense of self-efficacy expectancy is the belief that one personally has the capacity and ability to exert such an influence (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008). Therefore an internal LOC is comprised of both a general belief in free will and personal agency, paired with beliefs and confidence in one's own aptitude to create change. And an external LOC is comprised of a general belief in luck or external agency, paired with beliefs that one does not have the capacity to create change. The two subgroups have a reciprocal relationship: experiences of a responsive environment foster

self-efficacy and self-efficacy increases attempts to control the environment (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

**Components of an Internal and External LOC.** Cross-cultural studies indicate that an external LOC is positively correlated with both depression and anxiety (Ghorbani, Krauss, Watson, & LeBreton, 2008). People with an internal LOC are more likely to believe that they can avoid bad situations through their own free will (Ross & Mirowsky, 2002), are typically more concerned with their well-being and health, and are better prepared for adverse life events (Cummings & Swickert, 2010). People with an external LOC are better at performance-based tasks and working under an authority while people with an internal sense of control are better working alone (Cummings & Swickert, 2010).

**LOC and Gender.** Previous studies indicate that women are more likely to have an external LOC than men especially in their capability to protect themselves from an aggressive act (Kalter et al., 1984) and to exert control over political and world events (Erwee, 1986). This gender gap in LOC is found to increase with age and is likely related to environmental factors. Cross-culturally, women are more likely to experience events which foster an external LOC such as: unemployment, physical illness, and financial instability and are also afforded less opportunities which foster an internal LOC, such as: leadership roles, high paying jobs, and educational opportunities (Barrett & Buckley, 2009; Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

**LOC and Age.** Age is also related to LOC. In one study, children in third grade scored with a more external LOC than children in fifth grade, indicating that LOC is related to developmental stages, with individuals shifting toward a more internal LOC as they age (Kalter et al., 1984). Internal LOC tends to peak in adolescence and young adulthood (Barrett & Buckley, 2009) and then decline from mid-life to old age (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008). The decline may



occur because, as people age, they become more likely to experience struggles which may cause a more external LOC such as unemployment, physical illness, and loss of a romantic partner (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

**Education and LOC.** Additionally, higher levels of education are associated with a more internal LOC. Education fosters problem-solving skills, cognitive and social development, and self-efficacy. It also creates more life opportunities and better chances of successful efforts toward achievement. Well-educated men and women are more likely to report stable relationships, better health, employment, and leadership opportunities which each foster a more internal LOC (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

**LOC and Learned Helplessness.** An extreme form of external LOC is learned helplessness, which occurs when the world creates a situation in which one is powerless (likely a traumatic event) and one stops trying to take control because one has “learned” that one’s efforts cannot produce change or stop something from happening. Specifically, an exposure to repeated trauma and other difficult life events may foster learned helplessness (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). External LOC and learned helplessness can lead to depression and other negative outcomes. People with learned helplessness experience heightened anxiety and psychological distress, decreased motivation and action-oriented coping, and decreased job and interpersonal relationship satisfaction (Myer, 2007).

**Detriments of Internal LOC.** Contradictory research suggests that an internal LOC is associated with poorer outcomes in some areas. While an external LOC may breed learned helplessness and cause lack of effort in the face of life challenges (Myer, 2007), an internal LOC can cause internalized blame and self-hatred which may manifest in self-harming behaviors and depression (Van der Kolk, 1989). Based on a meta-analysis of previous studies, Frazier, Keenan,

Anders, Perera, Shallcross, and Hintz (2011) theorize that perceived past control over a specific event may not always be adaptive and may actually be associated with more distress. The authors hypothesize that perceived past internal control over a stressful event causes more distress because it may be inaccurate, and thinking about possible ways the event could have been changed may lead to fixation on the distressing occurrence. Additionally, overestimating one's control over an ongoing traumatic event, an incurable illness, or another situation in which an individual has no real objective control may cause frustration and hopelessness (Double, 1996). An overestimated sense of control can be maladaptive because it may produce unrealistic and often unsuccessful efforts to change one's circumstances or inability to accept previous events (Frazier et al., 2011).

**Benefits of Internal LOC.** In spite of these possible detriments of an internal LOC, the literature most generally supports positive physical and mental health outcomes from an internal LOC (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008). According to Van der Kolk (1989), victims of rape who blame themselves have a better prognosis because an internal LOC enables an individual to avoid helplessness. A current sense of internal control (after the stressful event) is associated with better adjustment (Frazier et al., 2011). In contrast to learned helplessness and an extreme external LOC, internal LOC acts as a protective factor against depression following challenging or upsetting life events (Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008). An internal LOC has also been found to foster greater social skills, increased optimism and motivation, increased effort in the face of challenges, and decreased levels of depression, stress, and anxiety (Double, 1996). People with an internal LOC use more active coping skills to change a stressful circumstance which is associated with lower levels of depression; in contrast avoidant coping behaviors associated with an external LOC foster more psychological distress (Sandler et al., 2000).

The contradictions in the literature and lack of recent studies make it difficult to ascertain which type of LOC is the most beneficial but it is clear that LOC influences many components of overall health. Because there are apparent advantages and disadvantages of each LOC, it is still unclear which LOC fosters better response to traumatic events, and therefore which would lessen the detrimental effects of parental divorce on adult relationship satisfaction.

### **Locus of Control and Adult Romantic Relationships**

LOC is relevant to romantic relationships because it is related to social sensitivity, receptivity, and attentiveness (Bugaghis et al., 1983). However, few studies have explored LOC in romantic relationship satisfaction. The existing evidence suggests lower levels of marital satisfaction when one partner has an internal LOC and the other partner has an external LOC; but higher levels of marital satisfaction when both partners have an internal LOC (Bugaghis et al., 1983). This increased marital satisfaction can be explained by higher levels of engagement (rather than avoidance) in marital problem-solving. Specifically, spouses with an internal LOC were more likely to openly confront conflict, clearly state their own views, and act upon issues discussed in confrontation (Miller et al., 1986). Finally, the act of marriage may alter LOC for women: while there were no significant differences in LOC between married and unmarried men, married women had a more internal LOC than unmarried women (Barrett & Buckley, 2009).

**LOC and Relationship Satisfaction in Males.** LOC is related to heterosexual men's treatment of their romantic partner. The strongest attitudinal predictor of men's hostility toward women is LOC. Studies indicate that men with a more external LOC are more likely to exhibit hostility toward women. Additionally, an external LOC is related to personal feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem (Cowan & Mills, 2004). It is reasonable to suggest that

increased levels of hostility, feelings of inadequacy, and low self-esteem may decrease perceived relationship quality for both partners.

**LOC and Relationship Satisfaction in Females.** Women with an external LOC are more likely to remain in unsatisfactory relationships, while women with a more internal LOC are more likely to engage in active coping and problem-solving behaviors and end unsatisfactory relationships (Clements, Sabourin, & Spiby, 2004). Women with an internal LOC tend to have higher self-esteem and lower levels of hopelessness and dysphoria (Clements et al., 2004) which may predict more relationship satisfaction.

Further research is needed to determine the direct relationship between LOC and relationship satisfaction. Additionally, no studies have been found which look at the role of LOC in relationship satisfaction across people from divorced and intact families. Thus, this study will investigate whether LOC mediates the effects of parental divorce on relationship satisfaction?

### **LOC and Offspring of Divorced Parents**

Although there are limited studies exploring the role of LOC in coping with parental divorce, research indicates that LOC influences children's response to the event (Sandler et al., 2000). Specifically, LOC has a strong correlation with children's anticipatory anxiety (Li & Chung, 2009) which may also influence their response to parental divorce. Also, an internal LOC can foster motivation, maturity, and other adaptive skills in children. These skills associated with an internal LOC may increase a child's ability to cope with helplessness in the aftermath of parental divorce (Kalter et al., 1984).

Children with a more external LOC are more likely to attribute a negative event to their own flaws. Therefore, a child with an external LOC may attribute their parents' divorce to their own perceived inadequacies such as not behaving well, not being smart enough, not succeeding

enough in school, or not doing enough for their parents. Additionally, children with an external LOC are more likely than children with an internal LOC to believe that their parents' divorce will have negative implications for their own well-being or future goals. Children with an internal LOC are more likely to use active coping during parental divorce and work on improving themselves through actions such as improving school performance (Sandler et al., 2000).

**The Influence of Parental Divorce on Offspring's LOC.** LOC has been hypothesized to be a fluid trait, influenced by developmental events and life circumstances (Kalter et al., 1984) thus, it is likely that parental divorce may shift a child's LOC. However, studies conducted on LOC in offspring of divorced families have yielded some conflicting results (Kalter et al., 1984). Because the stressful events following a divorce (such as one parent moving out, financial hardship, parental conflict, and decreased time with at least one parent) are often outside of a child's objective control, it is reasonable to infer that parental divorce may decrease a child's sense of internal control (Kim et al., 1997). Although an internal LOC is most commonly associated with more positive psychological outcomes, a more external LOC during a negative event such as parental divorce may be the most adaptive. The child's ability to alter thinking and cognitively accommodate for the unexpected, uncontrollable, and often unwanted parental divorce requires a more external LOC (Kim et al., 1997). Although not replicated in recent literature, an earlier study supported this hypothesis by demonstrating that participants from divorced families had more external LOC than those from intact families (Parish & Boyd, 1983).

In contrast, other research suggests that adult offspring of divorced parents tend to have a higher sense of internal control (Joongbaeck & Hyeyoung, 2011) and school-aged children of divorced parents also had a more internal LOC in regards to interpersonal relationships and

aspects of family life (Kalter et al., 1984). This finding may be a result of the likelihood for children to blame themselves for their parents' divorce (Kalter et al., 1984). Because children often depend upon their parents to fulfill their basic and emotional needs, it may even be adaptive for children to blame themselves, rather than their parents, when their parents create a painful situation (Van der Kolk, 1989).

**LOC and Step Families.** A notable confounding variable in the previously cited studies is parental remarriage in the aftermath of divorce. Even though step families are the fastest growing family configuration, little research has been conducted on resiliency factors in parental remarriage (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009). One study found that males with remarried mothers had a significantly more external LOC than males from intact families; no significant difference was found in females (Parish, 1982). LOC can also influence a child's ability to cope with the formation of a step family: children with a more internal LOC, and children of parents with a more internal LOC are found to adapt better to parental remarriage and to be more active in managing stressful situations (Greeff & Du Toit, 2009).

### **The Current Study**

The current study will explore the relationship between LOC and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, comparing participants from intact and divorced families of origin. Results are expected to support the hypothesis that parental divorce during early childhood will yield a more external LOC while parental divorce at an older age will yield a more internal LOC. It is also inferred that female participants will be more likely to have an external LOC and middle-aged participants will be more internal than elderly participants. Additionally, this study hypothesizes that an internal LOC will be associated with more relationship satisfaction in participants from both intact and divorced families. Finally, it is expected that offspring of

divorced parents with an external LOC will have the lowest satisfaction in current relationships while participants from intact families with an internal LOC will report the most relationship satisfaction.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between locus of control and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, comparing participants from intact and divorced families of origin. The research question was, as previously stated: Is locus of control related to satisfaction in adult romantic relationships and does the relationship between these variables differ as a function of parental relationship status? The study also explored if there are differences based on age at the time of parental divorce and gender in results on LOC and relationship satisfaction scales.

#### **Research Design**

A quantitative approach utilizing internet-based surveys was used to explore the role of LOC in relationship satisfaction. Data collection was done online and analysis was conducted using SPSS. A quantitative approach was chosen for the study because the LOC scale and Relationship Assessment Scale adequately measure the variables of interest and the methodology allowed for anonymity for participants and convenience for both participants and the researcher. An online approach is appropriate for exploring the research question because parental divorce, LOC, and relationship satisfaction may feel like private information and participants may feel more comfortable self-disclosing via a private and anonymous medium of participation.



## **Sample**

The target population for the study included anyone over the age of 18 who had been in a heterosexual romantic relationship within the past year; the goal for a total sample size was at least 50 participants. Snowball sampling was conducted beginning with the researcher's Facebook friends. A link for the study was posted on the researcher's Facebook page in a note which included the recruitment letter (see Appendix A) and also included a "share" button to allow others to post the note on their Facebook pages to reach their friends. This sampling method was chosen based on convenience, as more representative sampling methods are beyond the scope of the project.

Ideally, this snowball sampling via internet can yield a diverse sample; more targeted sampling for diversity was not done, since the process could compromise anonymity. Participants were not chosen based on ethnicity or race, religion, gender, or age. The actual sample may not have been representative of the entire population due to the sampling method used.

## **Ethics and Safeguards**

Participation in the study was completely voluntary, and no incentives were offered. All participants provided informed consent (Appendix B). Participation was also completely anonymous. Data collection took place online in order to ensure anonymity and privacy for participants. Anonymity was maintained because participants took the scales via survey gizmo, which does not indicate who took the survey during any point in the survey process, and IP tracking was disabled.

While the survey was not designed to be upsetting, it is possible that participation in the study may have elicited negative feelings about participants' parental divorce or poor

relationship experiences. Evaluating one's attribution of control in the world and one's relationship satisfaction may also have been stressful and potentially disappointing. Participants were provided with a list of resources (national websites and hotline; Appendix C) if needed. By participating in the study, participants may also have begun to further explore their sense of control and satisfaction in relationships. Additionally, being a part of a study to deepen understanding of parental divorce and romantic relationships may have felt satisfying or empowering, and provided a new context for individual experiences. All data will be stored securely in a password protected file for three years as required by Federal regulations, and then destroyed. If the data are needed longer than three years, they will continue to be stored securely, and destroyed when no longer needed.

Approval was obtained from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee to conduct this study (Appendix D).

### **Data Collection**

Online surveys were created on Survey Gizmo and included a demographic survey and two pre-existing scales which are comprised of a series of close-ended questions. A short demographic survey (asking age, gender, parents' marital status, age at the time of parental divorce if applicable, and participants' current relationship status), was followed by Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966) and the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS, Hendrick, 2001; see Appendix E for all three surveys). These two pre-existing scales were used because they have operationalized each variable of interest, and have been psychometrically tested.

### **Rotter's Locus of Control Scale**

The LOC scale was used to determine the LOC of each participant. The result is a continuous variable on a spectrum of internal to external LOC. Each of the 29 questions in the

scale is composed of two statements and participants are asked to choose which statement they agree with most. Higher scores indicate an external LOC and lower scores indicate an internal LOC. The internal consistency of the LOC scale has been found to be .69 to .79 and the variable test-retest reliability of the scale is .49 to .83 (Scott, 2010).

### **Relationship Assessment Scale**

The RAS was used to determine subjective satisfaction in participants' current (or most recent) heterosexual romantic relationship. The result is a continuous variable of a spectrum of satisfaction. The RAS is composed of seven questions using five point Likert scales to rate general aspects of their relationship such as love and satisfaction. The internal consistency of the Relationship Assessment Scale was found to be .86 (Vaughn & Baier, 1999).

### **Data Analysis**

SPSS was used to analyze the data for the study. The results of the demographic survey and two scales provided data on participants' LOC and satisfaction in romantic relationships. To address the central research questions, a Pearson correlation was calculated to examine the relationship between LOC and relationship satisfaction and a Multivariate Analysis of Variance was calculated to explore if this relationship differs based on parental marital status.

Additionally, a Pearson correlation was calculated to determine if there was a relationship between LOC and age and a relationship between age at the time of parental divorce and LOC. An independent T-test was run to compare LOC across gender. Finally, a Pearson correlation was calculated in order to understand the relationship between relationship satisfaction and age, gender, and age at the time of parental divorce.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

To explore the possible connection between LOC and relationship satisfaction, participants completed an anonymous, online survey including demographic data, and two standardized measures, as described in Chapter 3. Based on their responses, two scores were calculated for each participant: a LOC score, with lower numbers indicating internal LOC and higher numbers indicating external LOC, and a RAS score, with higher numbers indicating greater relationship satisfaction.

It was hypothesized that LOC would negatively correlate with RAS. It was also expected that females would score significantly higher on LOC than males, and that middle-aged and elderly participants would score significantly higher on LOC than younger participants. Among participants with divorced parents, age at the time of divorce was expected to negatively correlate with LOC. Participants from divorced families of origin were also expected to score significantly lower on RAS than participants from intact families of origin. However, LOC was hypothesized to mediate this between-groups difference, such that participants from divorced families with higher LOC scores would have the lowest RAS scores, while participants from intact families with low LOC scores would have the highest RAS scores.

## **Participants**

A total of 83 people entered the study's survey gizmo site by clicking on the link found in recruitment materials (see Appendix A). Of this total, 26 were excluded: 7 based on their responses to the eligibility questions (see Appendix E), 14 because they submitted incomplete surveys, and 5 because their responses indicated that they had been single for over one year and were therefore ineligible.

## **Demographics of Participants**

Fifty-seven complete surveys were included for data analysis. Of these participants, 49 were female, 7 were male, and 1 person specified "prefer not to answer" for their gender. Within this sample, the age range was 22 to 58 years old, the mode for age was 24 years old (at a frequency of 10 participants), the mean age of participants was 29 years old, and the median age was 40 years old. Thirty-eight participants reported that their parents were married, 14 participants reported that their parents were divorced, and 5 participants reported that their parents were never married. Of the participants with divorced parents, age at the time of their parents' divorce ranged from age 1 to age 24. Finally, 48 participants reported that they are currently in a relationship, while 9 participants reported being single. Of the participants currently in a relationship, the length of relationships ranged from 1 month to 29 years (see Table 1). Additionally, of the participants currently single, the length of time of being single ranged from 3 months to 12 months (12 months was the longest period one could be single to be eligible for the study).

Table 1

*Selected Demographics of Participants*

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Female	49	86.0%
Male	7	12.3%
Prefer Not to Answer	1	1.7%
Total	57	100.0%

<i>Parental Marital Status</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Married	38	66.7%
Divorced	14	24.6%
Never Married	5	8.8%
Total	57	100.0%

<i>Participants' Relationship Status</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
In a Relationship	48	84.2%
Single	9	15.8%
Total	57	100.0%

**LOC Scale and RAS Scale**

The LOC Scale and the RAS Scale were both manually scored. The potential range for the LOC Scale is 0 to 23: 0 indicates the most internal LOC and 23 indicates the most external LOC. In this study, LOC scores ranged from 2 to 18, with a mode of 11 (for 9 participants), a mean of 10.21, and a median of 10. Due to the many factors influencing LOC, no psychometric data were available on normative scores in the general population for comparison.

The potential range for the RAS Scale is 7 to 35: 7 indicates the lowest relationship satisfaction and 35 indicates the highest relationship satisfaction. In this study, RAS scores ranged from 15 to 35, with a mode of 32 (for 9 participants), a mean of 28.96, and a median of 25. The mean for RAS (28.96) within this study is higher than the comparison mean of 23 in a

previous study conducted to explore the validity and reliability of the scale (Vaughn & Baier, 1999).

### **LOC and Relationship Satisfaction**

In order to explore the hypothesis that people with a more internal LOC would report higher relationship satisfaction, a Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between LOC and relationship satisfaction. No significant correlation was found ( $r(55) = -.199, p = .137$ ), indicating no significant linear relationship between the two variables.

### **LOC and Demographic Variables**

In order to explore the relationship between LOC and age, an independent t test was calculated with a cut point set at age 28. The sample included young adults to middle aged adults, with no elderly participants. As a result, the only part of this hypothesis that could be tested was that younger adults would have a more internal LOC than middle aged adults. The mean LOC Scale score for the younger group (ages 27 and younger;  $M = 10.73, SD = 3.35$ ) was greater than the mean LOC scale score for the older group (ages 28 and older;  $M = 9.63, SD = 4.20$ ), indicating a more internal LOC for the older group in contrast to the hypothesis. However, the difference between the two means is not statistically significant at the .05 level ( $t(55) = -1.10, p = .09$ ).

Additionally, an independent t test was conducted in order to evaluate the hypothesis that women would have a more external LOC than men. The mean score for women on the LOC Scale ( $M = 10.22, SD = 3.65$ ) was greater than the mean score for men on the LOC Scale ( $M = 10.00, SD = 5.20$ ), indicating that women scored with a more external LOC and supporting this hypothesis. However, the difference between the two means is not statistically significant at the .05 level ( $t(54) = .144, p = .410$ ).

The hypothesis that parental divorce during early childhood would yield a more external LOC while parental divorce at an older age would yield a more internal LOC was also explored. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between LOC and age at parental divorce, and the correlation was very close to 0, ( $r(55) = -.031, p = .707$ ), indicating that there is not a significant linear relationship between the two variables.

### **Relationship Satisfaction, Parental Marital Status, and the Role of LOC**

An independent t test was conducted in order to evaluate the hypothesis that people from divorced families of origin would have lower relationship satisfaction than people from intact families of origin. The mean score for people from divorced families of origin on the RAS ( $M = 27.57, SD = 5.50$ ) was lower than the mean score for people from intact families of origin RAS ( $M = 29.34, SD = 5.25$ ), indicating more relationship satisfaction in people from intact families of origin as was hypothesized. However, the difference between the two means is not statistically significant at the .05 level ( $t(50) = 1.07, p = .636$ ).

Finally, in order to address the hypothesis that offspring of divorced parents with an external LOC would have the lowest satisfaction in current relationships while participants from intact families with an internal LOC would report the most relationship satisfaction, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance was calculated. A one-way MANOVA was performed examining the effect of parental marital status on LOC and relationship satisfaction scores (those whose parents never married were omitted from this analysis, since it could not be determined whether the participants' parents are still in a relationship). No significant effect was found ( $\text{Lambda}(2,49) = .954, p > .05$ ). Neither LOC nor relationship satisfaction were significantly influenced by parents' marital status.



## **Conclusion**

Statistical analysis of the above hypotheses have been tested and this study did not find that the age at the time of parental divorce influences LOC, or that gender and current age influence LOC although the relationship between current age and LOC approached significance in the opposite direction of the hypothesized relationship. This study also did not find that parental relationship status was correlated with relationship satisfaction or that this relationship differs based on LOC

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

This quantitative study explored the impact of parental divorce on satisfaction in adult romantic relationships and the role of LOC on this potential impact. This chapter discusses how this study's findings compare with the current literature on LOC, relationship satisfaction, and parental marital status. The strengths and limitations inherent in the study, and implications for social work practice and future research are also discussed.

#### **Current Findings and Previous Literature**

Compared to previous literature on the impact of parental divorce on romantic relationship satisfaction and the role of LOC, some of the current findings of this study are consistent with previous literature but not statistically significant and some current findings contradict previous studies. This section addresses possible reasons for and implications of these findings.

#### **LOC and the RAS**

The literature suggests that two romantic partners with an internal LOC have higher levels of engagement, are more likely to openly confront conflict, and thus have greater relationship satisfaction (Miller, et al., 1986). Additionally, the literature states that men with an external LOC are more likely to exhibit hostility towards women, lower self-esteem, and inadequacy in relationships (Cowan & Mills, 2004), while women with a more external LOC are

more likely to remain in unsatisfactory relationships (Clements et al., 2004). It is reasonable to suggest that these factors may decrease relationship satisfaction for both partners. Based on this literature, it was hypothesized that participants with a more internal LOC would report more relationship satisfaction on the RAS, yet the results of the current study did not indicate a significant difference in relationship satisfaction based on LOC. These results indicate there is no relationship between LOC and relationship satisfaction, thus the idea that LOC influences communication skills and problem solving strategies in relationships which then influence satisfaction in relationships is not supported by this study. These findings suggest that people across the spectrum of LOC can be expected to vary in relationship satisfaction, but relationship satisfaction should not depend upon either partner's LOC. Based on these results, clinicians working with couples should focus on other elements in relationships rather than sense of control when seeking to improve relationship satisfaction.

The lack of significant difference may be attributable in part to the number of participants who scored close to the median LOC score (e.g., 9 participants had a LOC of 11, which is close to the median possible score of 11.5). Since most participants did not score as very internal or very external, the relationship between LOC and RAS may have been obscured. Future research may find a significant relationship with a larger sample and more representation of very low and very high LOC scores. An increased range in LOC scores may also increase the generalizability of the study.

Additionally, the RAS scores were clumped toward high relationship satisfaction (with a potential range of 7 to 35, the range within this study was 15 to 35, with a mode of 32). The use of a convenience sampling method may have provided a narrow scope of relationship

satisfaction, and people who have been satisfied with their romantic relationship may have been more likely to choose to participate in the study.

### **LOC and Age**

This study also explored the relationship between LOC and age. Previous literature indicates that internal LOC tends to peak at adolescence and young adulthood (Barrett & Buckley, 2009), and then decline from mid-life to old age. This is due to expected environmental factors during the aging process which may foster a more external LOC (such as unemployment, illness, and loss of a romantic partner; Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008). Therefore, it was hypothesized that younger participants (indicated by the cut point as 27 years old and younger) would score with the lowest/most internal LOC score. In contrast to the literature, the results showed that younger participants had a higher mean LOC score than the older participants (35 years old and older; this result approached statistical significance).

Although previous studies indicate that young adults have a more internal LOC than older people, this study did not find a significant relationship between LOC and age. This is likely due to the skewed age of participants (there was a mode of 24 and a mean of 29). A non-convenience sampling method may have increased the age distribution and range of participants and increased the generalizability of the study. Better representation of various age groups, in addition to a larger sample size, may have also produced a greater range in LOC scores, and, in support of previous literature, a significant relationship between LOC and age.

There is also a possibility that previous literature has been inaccurate about the relationship between LOC and age and that, as indicated by the current study, younger people are more likely to be external than older people. The potential implications of this finding are discussed further in the Implications for Practice and Policy section.

## **LOC and Gender**

Within this study, it was expected that women would score significantly higher on the LOC Scale than men, indicating a more external LOC. Congruent with the hypothesis, this study found that women had a higher mean score on the LOC than men, although the relationship was not statistically significant. Previous literature supports this finding, stating that women are more likely to have an external LOC than men (Kalter et al., 1984) and this gap in LOC increases with age and has been found cross-culturally (Barrett & Buckley, 2009). This gap in LOC has been attributed to a difference in experience of environmental factors between both genders (such as leadership opportunities, pay rates, and educational opportunities; Slagsvold & Sorensen, 2008).

Within this study, gender was skewed to mostly females, likely due to the convenience sampling method. If gender were more equally represented in the sample, perhaps the relationship between gender and LOC would have been significant. In finding, based on this small sample size and skewed representation of gender, that women tend to have a more external LOC than men, the next question is: why is there a difference in LOC based on gender? Previous literature suggests that this difference is based on societal/environmental causes, but there is a lack of literature which explores biological influences of LOC and how this may differ across gender. It is possible that this difference in LOC is due to both environment and biology and other potential factors such as socially desirable responding (men may want to present themselves as being in control of their lives and women may want to present themselves as being more accepting of life events).

## **LOC and Age at Parental Divorce**

The relationship between LOC and parental divorce was also explored in this study. Previous literature presented conflicting data on the role of parental divorce and LOC. Some

studies theorized that parental divorce may yield a more internal LOC due to the likelihood for children to blame themselves for the event (Kalter et al., 1984), and both adult and young offspring of divorced parents have been found to have a more internal LOC (Joongbaeck & Hyeyoung, 2011). In contrast, other literature suggests that children of divorced parents are more likely to experience stressful events as outside of their control (such as one parent moving out, the addition of step families, financial hardship, and parental conflict) and thus will adaptively have a more external LOC (Kim et al., 1997). It was hypothesized that parental divorce during early childhood would yield a more external LOC because younger children may have more difficulty understanding the divorce and the associated stressful events, and therefore perceive it as outside of their control. Additionally, it was hypothesized that parental divorce at an older age would yield a more internal LOC because older offspring may be more likely to blame themselves or direct their anger and upset feelings inward. In contrast to the previous literature and the hypothesis within the study, the results indicated that there was no significant relationship between age at parental divorce and LOC.

Within the study, only 14 participants (24.6%) were offspring of parental divorce; a larger representation of this group may have produced significant results. Additionally, this study did not address LOC at the time of parental divorce, thus it is possible that participants who were younger at parental divorce had an external LOC at the time but became more internal with age. The opposite effect is also possible. It is also impossible to account for every variable which may influence LOC. A longitudinal study which looks at the LOC of a large group of children over time and includes LOC scores before and after parental divorce (using children from maintained intact families of origin as a control group) would be a more powerful test design in looking specifically at the relationship between parental divorce and LOC based on age. However, the

current study indicates that there is no relationship between age at parental divorce and LOC. This result may indicate that parental divorce does not carry enough impact for offspring to alter their sense of control in the world; or other life experiences have mitigated the effects of parental divorce before adulthood. It is also possible that the effects of parental divorce on LOC does not differ based on age and that all people experiencing parental divorce perceive their sense of control in the same way.

### **Relationship Satisfaction, Parental Marital Status, and the Role of LOC**

The relationship between parental divorce and relationship satisfaction has been thoroughly explored in previous literature. Previous literature suggests that people who have experienced parental divorce have lower relationship satisfaction, likely due to negative attitudes toward marriage and commitment, learned conflict behaviors, and less exposure to modeling of effective communication skills (Ming & Fincham, 2010; Ottoway, 2010). Therefore, it was hypothesized that participants from divorced families of origin would score lower on the RAS, indicating less relationship satisfaction, than participants from intact families of origin. The results indicated that people from divorced families had a lower mean score on the RAS, but this result was not statistically significant.

Finally, because the literature suggests that an external LOC may indicate less relationship satisfaction, and parental divorce may also yield less relationship satisfaction, it was hypothesized that offspring of divorced parents with an external LOC would have the lowest satisfaction in current relationships while participants from intact families with an internal LOC would report the most relationship satisfaction. The results did not demonstrate a relationship between parental divorce and relationship satisfaction, and these two variables were not mediated by LOC.

As previously stated, a non-convenience sampling method with a larger sample size may have produced a broader range in age, LOC, parental marital status, and relationship satisfaction. A study with more power may have found the relationship between RAS and LOC across intact and divorced families of origin to be significant. Because it is generally stated in the literature that people who have experienced parental divorce will have lower romantic relationship satisfaction and success, it is useful to explore this relationship further to understand the influence of the increasingly common event of parental divorce.

However, the current study suggests that there is not a statistically significant difference in relationship satisfaction based on parental marital status and that the relationship between these two variables is not mediated by LOC. These findings suggest that children of divorced parents are not at a higher risk for poor relationship satisfaction than children from intact families. The results also indicate that LOC does not play a significant role in determining the effects of parental marital status on relationship satisfaction, thus the degree to which a child feels in control of his/her own life after a parental divorce will not alter his/her satisfaction in later adult romantic relationships.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

The research question for the study was: Does parental relationship status influence satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, and if so, is this influence mediated by LOC? After collecting and analyzing data from demographic questions, the LOC Scale, and the RAS Scale, the study did not find a significant relationship between parental relationship status and current relationship satisfaction, nor that LOC plays a mediating role between the two variables. The current findings may indicate that parental divorce does not influence LOC or relationship satisfaction, and LOC also does not influence satisfaction in adult romantic relationships.



However, it is useful to explore the strengths and limitations of the study in the process of making these conclusions based on the current findings.

For this study, quantitative data were collected. Quantitative data were chosen due to their concrete and standardized nature. This type of data could be synthesized and analyzed on SPSS and this form of data analysis yielded a more straightforward and tangible means of looking for patterns and significant results. Additionally, because the analysis was done through SPSS, there was less room for human error and subjectivity in analyzing the results.

A disadvantage to using quantitative data for this study is a lack of descriptive details about participants' responses. It is possible that more explanation from participants may have helped to identify unanticipated patterns, such as whether parental divorce affected other elements of their relationships or their lives, or that their LOC was altered for a while after their parents' divorce but then returned to baseline many years later, etc.

This study utilized an online survey for various reasons. The anonymity and convenience of this form of data collection were intended to allow for participants to feel more comfortable in disclosing personal information about their parental marital status and their relationship satisfaction, and to allow for participants to take the survey in their own time and location of their choice. The anonymous nature of the study may also minimize the participants' likelihood to exhibit socially desirable responding (giving answers that they think are appropriate or that the researcher may want to hear). A disadvantage to online, anonymous surveys is that many participants left some of the survey blank and many people could easily choose not to participate without taking personal responsibility. Additionally, because the surveys were done online, the study required that the participants were literate, had access to a computer and the internet, and had the technology skills to access, complete, and submit the surveys. It is possible that, with a

series of online questions, participants may use a response set and start answering each question with the same letter or degree of satisfaction. The LOC scale included some irrelevant questions which were not involved in the scoring process to avoid the effect of the response set (Evans & Rooney, 2008) yet the RAS did not. Also, using these online scales required manual scoring of LOC and RAS and, in manually scoring the two surveys and inputting the data, there was room for human error and inaccurate scoring.

The convenience snowball sampling online was justified based on the exploratory nature and limited resources of the current study. This form of sampling enabled the researcher to obtain the minimum number of participants for the study and also enabled participants to easily pass on the survey to others via Facebook and email with no cost. However, the resulting sample may be less generalizable to the population. Because the respondents were Facebook friends of the researcher or people who have emailed the researcher (and friends of those friends, etc.) the sample had limited range in age and potentially in other demographics. With this sampling method, it is possible that many of the participants have a similar demographic to the researcher such as being a young adult, Caucasian, college-educated, etc. Also, the study focused exclusively on heterosexual couples, therefore the data cannot be generalized to all couples.

Potential biases held by the researcher and within the study may have also had an impact of the results of the study. The researcher's personal experience of parental divorce and personal experience in romantic relationships may have created confirmation bias in finding that parental divorce does not impede satisfaction in romantic relationships. The exclusion of other types of parental relationships (e.g., never married) may have been a bias within the study resulting from a societal ideal of marriage over other forms of relationships. Additionally, only heterosexual couples were included, due to a dearth of previous literature upon which to base hypotheses

regarding non-heterosexual couples; the absence of such literature may be the result of societal heterosexism, which was therefore inadvertently continued in the current study.

Additionally, due to the limited number of people who qualified for and completed the survey, the sample size was rather small which means less power in the study. Males lacked representation in the sample with just 7 male respondents, and the elderly population was not included at all, perhaps in part because of the online medium of the survey (the oldest participant was 58). Additionally, the sample included more people from intact families than divorced families of origin. Finally, singles represented only 9 of the participants in the sample, thus the current findings cannot be generalized to single people based on only 9 participants.

For the purpose of including gender, age, and parental relationship status in the data analysis, demographic questions were included in the beginning of the online survey. In addressing parental marital status, one answer option was “never married,” however, this response does not indicate if the participant’s parents are still together which is more relevant to the research question, so these responses needed to be omitted, decreasing the sample size and excluding people whose parents have not been married. If the survey indicated whether parents were still together (regardless of being legally married) these responses could have been included in the data set.

The demographic survey also asked some questions which were not used in data analysis. For example, the participants were asked their current relationship status and how long they have had this status, but neither of these responses was used in the data analysis. Finally, one question asked the participants their age when their parents got remarried (if applicable) and this was another variable, along with step families in general, that was not considered in the data analysis. As indicated by the literature review, step families may cause more externality in LOC for males

(Greeff & Du Toit, 2009); therefore, parental remarriage was a variable that could have been included in data analysis.

Relationship status was not included in analysis but may have been a confounding variable. There are a few potential ways that relationship status may have confounded the results of LOC and relationship satisfaction. For one example, it is possible that participants with an internal or external LOC decided to leave an unhappy or unsatisfying relationship. Thus a participant's dissatisfaction in his/her relationship may have been attributed to their internal or external LOC, and it was not considered that these participants may have decided to end this dissatisfying relationship. Additionally, another example of a circumstance which was not included in analyzing relationship satisfaction is the possibility that people with an internal or external LOC reported more relationship satisfaction but also indicated that this happy relationship has ended and this possibility is not reflected in the data. Also, people who are no longer in their relationship may report their relationship satisfaction as higher than it actually was (the phenomenon of rosy retrospection) or lower than it actually was based on the terms of the break up. The length of time single or in a relationship may have also influenced relationship satisfaction responses so it would have been useful to include this variable in the analysis.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

None of the current findings of this study were statistically significant. However, the result that younger people have a higher average LOC score approached statistical significance. As mentioned above, if this result was replicated in a larger study which had more power, it could indicate that younger adults feel less in control of their own lives. This result may then yield the question: *why* do younger people feel less sense of control? Is it actually true that younger people are more under the influence of their superiors and elders than older adults, or is

this just a perception of less control? And, how does this diminished sense of control affect their psychological and emotional health, their decision making, and their interpersonal relationships? Is it possible that younger people may make less responsible decisions or maintain unsatisfactory relationships because they feel less in control of their lives than older adults?

Understanding younger adults' sense of control and how it may affect their decision making can help to inform laws based on age, such as seat belt and other safety laws, driving laws for young adults, drinking laws and legal drinking age, and voting age. Additionally, understanding the role a higher average of external LOC in younger people can also inform clinical practice. A clinician working with child, adolescent and young adult clients may want to explore their client's LOC and understand if he/she feels in control of his/her own life. In establishing the client's sense of control, a clinician would be well-advised to explore the potentially resulting effects on psychological health and decision making in these young clients.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study did not find a relationship between LOC, relationship satisfaction, and parental marital status, yet further research is needed to thoroughly explore these variables, because previous literature indicates that LOC and parental marital status affect relationship satisfaction. A larger sample size in future studies would yield more power, and non-convenience sampling methods would yield more generalizability.

In studying LOC based on age and gender, a longitudinal study following LOC throughout a lifetime of a large population of both men and women would be a better representation of how LOC changes with age and also how it changes over time based on gender. It would also be useful to include tracking major life events such as marriage and divorce, death

of loved ones, traumatic events or tragedies, birth of children and grandchildren, education and employment, etc., in order to understand the influence of these events on LOC over time.

Further research is also needed to understand how internal and external LOC may influence coping with parental divorce and also how parental divorce and other challenges may affect one's LOC. A longitudinal study following a group of children which tracks LOC over time would yield a better understanding of how parental divorce may influence LOC (ideally the sample will include children who experience parental divorce and children who do not as a control group). This study should also include a resiliency or coping scale to better understand how LOC relates to a child's ability to adapt to and cope with parental divorce. In exploring the role of parental marital status on LOC and relationship satisfaction, further research should also include parental remarriage and step families in the analysis of parental marital status, LOC, and relationship satisfaction. Although secondary families are becoming more and more common over time, there is limited research on the role of these step families on offspring's LOC and on offspring's relationship satisfaction.

In looking at LOC and relationship satisfaction, researchers should also explore whether internal or external LOC plays a role in ending unsatisfactory relationships and maintaining satisfactory relationships (and vice-versa), and also which relationship factors may be influenced by LOC (communication, conflict resolution, compromise, loyalty, etc.). It may also be useful to study couples (rather just individuals) in exploring LOC and relationship satisfaction to look at gender differences in their perceptions of these two variables and how these variables may be different or similar for same-sex couples.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the relationship between parental divorce, adult romantic relationship satisfaction, and the role of LOC. This study did not find a significant relationship between LOC, relationship satisfaction, and parental marital status. Yet, previous literature indicates that parental marital status can influence LOC, and relationship satisfaction and LOC can influence relationship satisfaction as well. Further research exploring these three variables will be useful to better understand the effects of parental divorce and the role of LOC on relationship satisfaction in later life.

## References

- Barrett, J. B., & Buckley, C. (2009). Gender and perceived control in the Russian federation. *Europe-Asia Studies*, *61*(1), 29-49.
- Bugaighis, M. A., Schumm, W. R., Bollman, S. R., & Jurich, A. P. (1983). Locus of control and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Psychology*, *114*(2), 275.
- Clements, C. M., Sabourin, C. M., & Spiby, L. (2004). Dysphoria and hopelessness following battering: The role of perceived control, coping, and self-esteem. *Journal of Family Violence*, *19*(1), 25-36.
- Cowan, G., & Mills, R. D. (2004). Personal inadequacy and intimacy predictors of men's hostility toward women. *Sex Roles*, *51*(1/2), 67-78.
- Cummings, J., & Swickert, R. (2010). Relationship between locus of control and posttraumatic growth. *Individual Differences Research*, *8*(3), 198-204.
- Double, R. (1996). Three kinds of control. *Psycritiques*, *41*(4), 360-361. doi:10.1037/002877
- Erwee, R. (1986). Achievement motivation and locus of control of black university students. *Journal of Industrial Psychology*, *12*(2), 251-263.
- Evans, A. N., & Rooney, B. F. (2008). *Methods in psychological research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Page Publications Ltd.
- Frazier, P., Keenan, N., Anders, S., Perera, S., Shallcross, S., & Hintz, S., (2011). Perceived past,



- present, and future control and adjustment to stressful life events. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 100(4), 749-765.
- Ghorbani, N., Krauss, S. W., Watson, P. J., & LeBreton, D. (2008). Relationship of perceived stress with depression: Complete mediation by perceived control and anxiety in Iran and the United States. *International Journal of Psychology*, 43(6), 958-968.  
doi:10.1080/00207590701295264
- Greiff, A. P., & Du Toit, C. (2009). Resilience in remarried families. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 37(2), 114-126. doi:10.1080/01926180802151919
- Hendrick, S. (2001). A generic measure of relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 50(1), 93-98.
- Joongbaeck, K., & Hyeyoung, W. (2011). The complex relationship between parental divorce and the sense of control. *Journal of Family Issues*. 32(8), 1050-1072.
- Kalter, N., Alpern, D., Spence, R., & Plunkett, J. W. (1984). Locus of control in children of divorce. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 48(4), 410.
- Kim, L. S., Sandler, I. N., & Tein, J. (1997). Locus of control as a stress moderator and mediator in children of divorce. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 25(2), 145-155.
- Li, H., & Chung, O. (2009). The relationship between children's locus of control and their anticipatory anxiety. *Public Health Nursing*, 26(2), 153-160. doi:10.1111/j.1525-1446.2009.00766.x
- McCann, L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). *Psychological trauma and the adult survivor*. New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Miller, P., Lefcourt, H. M., & Holmes, J. G. (1986). Marital locus of control and marital problem solving. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(7) 1161-169.

- Ming, C., & Fincham, F. D. (2010). The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships, 17*(3), 331-343. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01279.x
- Mustonen, U., Huurre, T., Kiviruusu, O., Haukkala, A., & Aro, H. (2011). Long-term impact of parental divorce on intimate relationship quality in adulthood and the mediating role of psychosocial resources. *Journal of Family Psychology, 25*(4), 615-619. doi: 10.1037/a0023996
- Myer, D. G. (2007). *Exploring social psychology* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Ottoway, A. (2010). The impact of parental divorce on the intimate relationships of adult offspring: A review of the literature. *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology, 2*(1), 36-51.
- Parish, T. S. (1982). Locus of control as a function of father loss and the presence of stepfathers. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 140*(2), 321-322.
- Parish, T. S., & Boyd, D. A. (1983). Locus of control as related to family background and marital status. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 143*(2), 287.
- Ross, C. E. & Mirowsky, R. (2002). Age and the gender gap in the sense of personal control. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 65*(2), 125-45.
- Rotter, J. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs, 80*(5), 1-28.
- Sandler, I. N., Kim-Bae, L. S., & MacKinnon, D. (2000). Coping and negative appraisal as mediators between control beliefs and psychological symptoms in children of divorce. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology, 29*(3), 336-347.  
doi:10.1207/S15374424JCCP2903\_5

- Scott, R. (2010). Locus of control and marriage. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 32(3), 133-145.
- Slagsvold, B., & Sorensen, A. (2008). Age, education, and the gender gap in the sense of control. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 67(1), 25-42.
- Storksen, I., Roysamb, E., Gjessing, H. K., Moum, T., & Tambs, K. (2007). Marriages and psychological distress among adult offspring of divorce: A Norwegian study. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 48(6), 467-476. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9450.2007.00601.x
- Van der Kolk, B. (1989). The compulsion to repeat trauma: Re-enactment, revictimization, and masochism. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 12(2), 389-411.
- Vaughn, M., & Baier, M. (1999). Reliability and validity of the relationship assessment scale. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 27(2), 137-147.
- Whitton, S. W., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2008). Effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(5), 789-793. doi:10.1037/a0012800

## **Appendix A**

### **Recruitment Note**

Title: Participate in a brief survey!

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Meghan Mole and I am conducting a study for my MSW Thesis at Smith College. This study explores the interaction of parental relationship status, perceived sense of control, and relationship satisfaction. I'm looking for participants to take a completely anonymous, online survey, which should take no more than 30 minutes. If you are at least 18 years old, and have been in a heterosexual relationship in the last year, you are eligible to participate! To confirm your eligibility and learn more about the study, please click the link below.

Please also click "share" and share this study with all of your friends on Facebook too, even if you choose not to participate! It won't take long, and you might learn something about yourself and your relationships!



Thanks for your help,  
Meghan

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Letter**

Dear Participant,

My name is Meghan Mole and I am an MSW student at Smith College. I am conducting a research study on the relationship between sense of control and satisfaction in adult romantic relationships, comparing participants from intact and divorced families of origin. The results will be used for my MSW thesis, and related publications and presentations.

You are eligible to participate if you are age 18 or older, and have been in a heterosexual romantic relationship within the past year. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer a few demographic questions, followed by 36 survey questions. The full survey will take about 30 minutes to complete and can be done at your convenience.

While the survey is not designed to be upsetting, possible risks of participating include negative emotions, discomfort or stress about your parents' relationship, or your own relationship. Attached to this letter is a list of referral resources if needed. Benefits of participating include self-awareness, and knowledge that you will be contributing useful information to expand our understanding of the study topic.

This survey is anonymous. No identifying information will be collected, and IP tracking is disabled. As a result, no one, including myself, will be able to connect your responses with your identity. The anonymous data will be accessed by me and my research advisor at Smith College. The data will be presented as a whole in publications and presentations. All data will be stored electronically and secured with a password for three years as required by Federal guidelines. If the data are needed beyond three years, they will continue to be stored securely, and destroyed when no longer needed.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time prior to submitting your responses, simply by closing your browser window without clicking "submit." Because your data is anonymous, it will not be possible to remove your responses from the study once you have clicked "submit," as they cannot be identified as yours. If you have

questions about your rights or any aspect of the study, or would like to receive results of the study, please contact me via email at (email was removed from this version). Questions about your rights may also be directed to the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) (phone number was removed from this version).

BY CHECKING "I AGREE" BELOW YOU ARE INDICATING THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE INFORMATION ABOVE AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

## **Appendix C**

### **Resources for Participants**

If you experience emotional crisis, call this toll free hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (800-273-8255)

If you are experiencing domestic violence, call this toll free hotline: 1-800-799-7233

If you experience other emotional distress, you can access a national directory of mental health providers by going to <http://www.nmha.org>

Or calling 800-THERAPIST

## Appendix D

### Human Subjects Review Board Approval Letter



---

**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

March 6, 2012

Meghan Mole

Dear Meghan,

Your project is now officially approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee. You did a complete and a professional job! I like the changes on recruitment and the rest.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

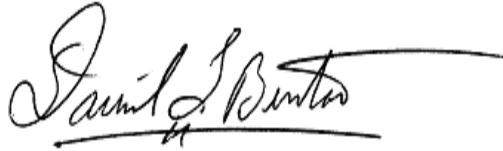
**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project!

Sincerely,



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David L. Burton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David L. Burton, M.S.W., Ph.D.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Natalie Hill, Research Advisor

## Appendix E

### Survey

**Are you 18 years or older? \*This question is required**

- Yes
- No

**Have you been in a heterosexual relationship within the past year? \*This question is required**

- Yes
- No

**(Followed by informed consent here)**

**What is your gender? (You may type "Prefer not to answer").**

**How old are you?**

**What is the marital status of your parents?**

- Never married
- Married to each other
- Remarried
- Divorced
- Separated

**If your parents are divorced or separated, how old were you when their divorce or separation occurred? Or type N/A.**

**If your parent(s) got remarried, how old were you when this occurred? Or type N/A.**

**What is your current relationship status?**

- Single
- In a relationship
- Other

**If you are single, how long have you been single? Or type N/A.**

**If you are in a relationship, how long have you been in a relationship? Or type N/A.**

For each pair of the following questions, please check the box next to the statement you most agree with.

- a. Children get into trouble because their parents punish them too much.
- b. The trouble with most children nowadays is that their parents are too easy with them.
- a. Many of the unhappy things in people's lives are partly due to bad luck.
- b. People's misfortunes result from the mistakes they make.
- a. One of the major reasons why we have wars is because people don't take enough interest in politics.
- b. There will always be wars, no matter how hard people try to prevent them.
- a. In the long run people get the respect they deserve in this world.

- b. Unfortunately, an individual's worth often passes unrecognized no matter how hard he tries.
  
- a. The idea that teachers are unfair to students is nonsense.
- b. Most students don't realize the extent to which their grades are influenced by accidental happenings.
  
- a. Without the right breaks, one cannot be an effective leader.
- b. Capable people who fail to become leaders have not taken advantage of their opportunities.
  
- a. No matter how hard you try, some people just don't like you.
- b. People who can't get others to like them don't understand how to get along with others.
- a. Heredity plays the major role in determining one's personality.
- b. It is one's experiences in life which determine what they're like.
  
- a. I have often found that what is going to happen will happen.
- b. Trusting fate has never turned out as well for me as making a decision to take a definite course of action.
  
- a. In the case of the well prepared student there is rarely, if ever, such a thing as an unfair test.
- b. Many times, exam questions tend to be so unrelated to course work that studying is really useless.
  
- a. Becoming a success is a matter of hard work, luck has little or nothing to do with it.
- b. Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time.

- a. The average citizen can have an influence in government decisions.
- b. This world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much the little guy can do about it.
  
- a. When I make plans, I am almost certain that I can make them work.
- b. It is not always wise to plan too far ahead because many things turn out to be a matter of good or bad fortune anyhow.
  
- a. There are certain people who are just no good.
- b. There is some good in everybody.
  
- a. In my case getting what I want has little or nothing to do with luck.
- b. Many times we might just as well decide what to do by flipping a coin.
  
- a. Who gets to be the boss often depends on who was lucky enough to be in the right place first.
- b. Getting people to do the right thing depends upon ability - luck has little or nothing to do with it.
  
- a. As far as world affairs are concerned, most of us are the victims of forces we can neither understand, nor control.
- b. By taking an active part in political and social affairs the people can control world events.
  
- a. Most people don't realize the extent to which their lives are controlled by accidental happenings.
- b. There really is no such thing as "luck."

- a. One should always be willing to admit mistakes.
- b. It is usually best to cover up one's mistakes.
  
- a. It is hard to know whether or not a person really likes you.
- b. How many friends you have depends upon how nice a person you are.
  
- a. In the long run the bad things that happen to us are balanced by the good ones.
- b. Most misfortunes are the result of lack of ability, ignorance, laziness, or all three.
  
- a. With enough effort we can wipe out political corruption.
- b. It is difficult for people to have much control over the things politicians do in office.
  
- a. Sometimes I can't understand how teachers arrive at the grades they give.
- b. There is a direct connection between how hard I study and the grades I get.
  
- a. A good leader expects people to decide for themselves what they should do.
- b. A good leader makes it clear to everybody what their jobs are.
  
- a. Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.
- b. It is impossible for me to believe that chance or luck plays an important role in my life.
  
- a. People are lonely because they don't try to be friendly.
- b. There's not much use in trying too hard to please people, if they like you, they like you.

- a. There is too much emphasis on athletics in high school.
- b. Team sports are an excellent way to build character.
  
- a. What happens to me is my own doing.
- b. Sometimes I feel that I don't have enough control over the direction my life is taking.
  
- a. Most of the time I can't understand why politicians behave the way they do.
- b. In the long run the people are responsible for bad government on a national as well as on a local level.

For each of the following questions, select a number on the scale of 1 to 5 based on your most recent (or current) heterosexual relationship.

**How well does/did your partner meet your needs?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very Well             | Well                  | Neutral               | Not Well              | Not At All            |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**In general, how satisfied are/were you with your relationship?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very Satisfied        | Satisfied             | Neutral               | Dissatisfied          | Very Dissatisfied     |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**How good is/was your relationship compared to most?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Very Good             | Good                  | Neutral               | Not Good              | Awful                 |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**How often do/did you wish you hadn't gotten into this relationship?**

- |                       |                       |                       |                       |                       |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Never                 | Rarely                | Neutral               | Sometimes             | Always                |
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

**To what extent has/did your relationship met your original expectations?**

Completely Met

Mostly Met

Neutral

Somewhat Met

Didn't Meet

**How much do/did you love your partner?**

A Lot

Some

Neutral

A Little

Not at All

**How many problems are/were there in your relationship?**

None At All

Few

Neutral

Some

Many

Thank you for taking my survey!