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Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce: A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract

This study represents the first longitudinal effort to use a spiritual stress and coping model to predict adults' psychosocial adjustment following divorce. A community sample of 89 participants completed measures at the time of their divorce and one year later. Though the sample endorsed slightly lower levels of religiosity than the general U.S. population, most reported spiritual appraisals and positive/negative religious coping tied to divorce. Hierarchical regression analyses controlling general religiousness and non-religious forms of coping indicated that (1) appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration at the time it occurred predicted more depressive symptoms and dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse one year later; (2) positive religious coping reported about the year following divorce predicted greater posttraumatic growth one year after divorce; and (3) negative religious coping reported about the year following divorce predicted more depressive symptoms one year after the divorce. Bootstrapping mediation analyses indicated that negative religious coping fully mediated links between appraising the divorce as a sacred loss/desecration at the time it occurred and depressive symptoms one year later. In addition, moderation analyses revealed that negative religious coping is more strongly associated with depressive symptoms among those who form high versus low appraisals of their divorce as a sacred loss/desecration. These findings are relevant to divorce education and intervention provided by professionals in legal, family, mental health, and clerical roles. Implications are discussed for clinical/counseling psychology and religious communities.

Keywords: coping, divorce, postdivorce adjustment, religion, spirituality

Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce: A Longitudinal Study

Research suggests that those who divorce experience increased psychological distress, such as greater depression and decreased happiness (Amato, 2000). However, it is also possible for divorce to relate to beneficial changes and personal growth (Amato, 2000; Bursik, 1991; Veevers, 1991). Longitudinal studies show that nearly all divorcees report divorce as distressing and experience maladaptive functioning in the year after divorce followed by considerable variation in patterns of growth or decline (Bursik, 1991). Kaslow (1991) described a dialectic model of stages in the divorce process that includes emotional, legal, economic, co-parental, community, religious, and psychic divorce. Social scientific research has examined how resources in many of these domains (i.e., emotional, psychological, economic, legal, coparental, and social factors) relate to individual differences in divorce adjustment. The most understudied domain involves the religious aspects of divorce. This is surprising, given that approximately 90% of Americans believe in God, 85% report a denominational preference, and over 30% attend religious services once per week or more (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2005). Further, many Americans find spirituality to be important in coping with major life stressors (Pargament, 1997). Therefore, spirituality may offer a distinct set of resources or burdens tied to divorce adjustment.

Despite growing recognition in the field of psychology of the importance of spirituality (Smith, Bartz, & Richards, 2007), only a handful of studies have addressed the role of spirituality in the way individuals experience divorce. In a qualitative study of 12 women, 91% described their spirituality as important for coping with divorce (Nathanson, 1995). In a survey of parents and adolescents from 98 divorced families, 51% of respondents spontaneously identified religion as an important coping resource, and the sample ranked religion fourth among factors that helped them to cope with divorce (Greeff & Merwe, 2004). In addition, the religious characteristics of

fathers have been associated with enhanced ties to their children after divorce, even when controlling demographic and background factors such as traditional attitudes (King, 2003). Unfortunately, most studies lack a guiding conceptual model to delineate the specific spiritual processes that impact divorce adjustment. The current study uses Pargament's (1997) religious coping model to predict depressive symptoms, post-traumatic growth, and dysfunctional conflict with the ex-spouse. We examine spiritual cognitive appraisals people may use to interpret the initial level of threat that divorce poses in their lives: sacred loss and desecration, and two forms of coping individuals may employ during the year following divorce: positive and negative religious coping. We first consider how these specific spiritual mechanisms directly relate to divorce adjustment over time, and subsequently test more complex mediation and moderation models. For the purpose of this study, the terms *religion* and *spirituality* are used to connote overlapping constructs.

Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce Adjustment: Direct effects

Appraisals of divorce as a sacred loss and desecration. Research has indicated that appraising divorce in more threatening terms is associated with greater deterioration in mental health (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997; Gray & Silver, 1990)**.** Religion may influence the level of threat a person attaches to divorce. Appraising divorce as immoral has been associated with heightened stress (Booth & Amato, 1991) and viewing divorce as a discontinuity between religious dogma and behavior can exacerbate emotional maladjustment (Lawton & Bures, 2001). Individuals often view their marriage as a sacred bond (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003). Via divorce, marital relationships can fall from this spiritual pedestal. Shattered assumptions about sacred family relationships can lead individuals to appraise divorce as the loss or violation of something that

was viewed as a manifestation of God or invested with sacred qualities. Cross-sectional findings from 100 divorced adults indicated that 74% of them endorsed at least one sacred loss/desecration appraisal about their divorce, and such appraisals were associated with more depressive symptoms (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009), but it is unclear if such effects persist over time.

Positive religious coping with divorce. When an event is appraised as sufficiently threatening, people employ various methods to cope with the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). One such method involves spirituality. Ample research shows that positive religious coping offers unique benefits to people facing an array of life stressors (Pargament, 1997, 2011) by decreasing emotional stress and increasing well-being over time (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001). Divorce research provides a unique opportunity to expand religious coping studies from an individual level to an examination of family stressors and relational functioning (Mahoney, 2010).

Many positive religious coping methods are relevant to divorce, such as relying on prayer, private spiritual rituals, or worship in order to transcend feelings of anger, hurt, and fear; seeking spiritual purification or forgiveness for wrong-doings to reduce debilitating guilt and re-establish a sense of integrity; and increasing a sense of connectedness with transcendent forces to lessen feelings of isolation through nature walks or meditation (Mahoney, Krumrei, & Pargament, 2008). Cross-sectional findings indicated that many divorced adults (88% of sample) engaged in some form of positive religious coping with divorce, and that these behaviors related to greater posttraumatic growth (Krumrei et al., 2009). Recently, Webb et al. (2010) examined the effects of religious coping in response to major life problems among a large (N = 9,441), nationwide sample of Seventh-day Adventists. They compared how religious coping related to depression

among those who had experienced divorce in the previous 5 years (4% of sample) and those who had not experienced divorced in the previous 5 years. Having a positive religious coping style was inversely associated with depression for the entire sample, and reduced depression to a greater extent among those who had experienced recent divorce. Thus, it seems likely that reliance on positive religious coping following divorce might buffer individuals from depressive symptoms.

Negative religious coping with divorce. Turning to spirituality in response to divorce can also take the form of struggle. Negative religious coping refers to spiritually-based coping methods that signal distress, such as viewing divorce as a punishment from God, considering God's power as unable to influence the divorce, experiencing spiritually-based guilt or confusion, or experiencing tension and conflicts within one's religious community about the divorce (Mahoney et al., 2008). Cross-sectional findings among divorcees indicated that 78% experienced some form of negative religious coping with divorce, and that this was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Krumrei et al., 2009). Thus, it is plausible that on-going negative religious coping might predict poorer psychosocial adjustment, even when controlling initial difficulties.

Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce Adjustment: Mediational effects

Building upon the main effects model of religious coping presented above, we now consider a mediation model of coping (Wheaton, 1985) in which religious coping functions as an intervening variable between interpreting the divorce as a spiritual threat and subsequent outcomes. This is based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory, which views stress as a transaction between a person and his or her environment. The impact of a stressor depends first on the person's cognitive appraisals about the level of threat of the stressor when it

occurs and his or her ability to respond to the threat. The content of initial appraisals shape the subsequent coping behaviors used to regulate the stressor. Thus, the coping behaviors that occur in the time following the event mediate the relationship between a person's initial appraisals of the stressor and his or her subsequent adjustment. Given that coping strategies differ in efficacy, we can expect that effective forms of coping will buffer maladjustment whereas maladaptive strategies will exacerbate maladjustment (Sandier, Tein, & West, 1994).

Consistent with a mediational approach, some evidence suggests that people's initial divorce appraisals shape the nature of their coping responses in secular (Birnbaum et al., 1997) and spiritual (Shortz & Worthington, 1994) models. It is likely that spiritual appraisals and religious coping will be correlated because those who interpret life events through a spiritual lens are more likely to draw upon religion to cope with stressors. Previous research has shown that religious coping can act as a mediator between spiritual appraisals and outcomes (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). Two studies have applied this mediational model to divorce. In a study of young adults, negative religious coping with parental divorce mediated links between appraising parental divorce as a sacred loss or desecration and amount of depressive symptoms, anxiety, painful feelings, and spiritual growth (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). In addition, cross-sectional results among divorced adults indicated that religious coping mediated links between appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration and amount of depressive symptoms (Krumrei et al., 2009). The current study goes one step further by examining whether initial negative spiritual appraisals predict divorce adjustment one year later, after controlling for initial post-divorce adjustment.

Spiritual Stress and Coping Model of Divorce Adjustment: Moderator effects

As an alternative to mediation, we also examine whether interactions occur between

spiritual appraisals of divorce and religious coping. Again, consistent with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory, negative cognitive appraisals of divorce may moderate the relationship between religious coping and adjustment. Namely, links between religious coping and divorce adjustment could differ for those who view their divorce as a high versus low spiritual threat. For example, positive religious coping may buffer maladjustment to a greater extent for those with high spiritual stress (i.e., high appraisals of sacred loss/desecration) compared to those with low spiritual stress about divorce, whereas negative religious coping could have the opposite effect. A previous study has examined a moderation model of non-spiritual cognitive appraisals related to divorce (Mazur, Wolchik, Virdin, Sandler, & West, 1999). Among a sample of children who had experienced parental divorce in the previous two years, negative cognitive appraisals of hypothetical divorce events intensified the relationship between stressful divorce events and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. In the opposite direction, positive cognitive appraisals buffered the effects of stressful divorce events on symptoms.

The Current Study

The current study represents a unique effort to expand research on the role of religion and spirituality for family systems that break down (Mahoney, 2010). We assessed a community sample of divorcees at the time of their divorce and one year later, due to the high frequency of maladjustment during this period (Bursik, 1991). On the basis of our spiritual stress and coping model and previous research, we hypothesized that (1) appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration would be associated with poorer adjustment; (2) appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration would be associated with higher levels of both positive and negative religious coping; (3) positive religious coping would be associated with positive adjustment; (4) negative

religious coping would be associated with poorer adjustment; (5) positive and negative religious coping would partially mediate the effects of appraisals of sacred loss/desecration on divorce adjustment; and (6) spiritual appraisals would moderate the association between religious coping and adjustment, such that positive religious coping would buffer and negative religious coping would exacerbate poor adjustment to a greater extent among those who experienced their divorce as a sacred loss/desecration in comparison to those with low spiritual appraisals of divorce. We defined poor adjustment as higher levels of depressive symptoms and dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse and lower levels of posttraumatic growth over the year following divorce; we defined positive adjustment as the inverse. Within these hypotheses, we expected that religious coping would uniquely impact divorce adjustment even after accounting for participants' (1) general religiousness, and (2) use of non-spiritual forms of coping.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 89 adults (59% female) residing in 13 states, aged 19 to 64 years (M = 39.72, SD = 10.03). Participants were 87% Caucasian, 5% African American, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 1% "other." Their income in 2006 dollars was: 29% less than $25,000; 31% between $25,001-50,000; 23% between $50,001-75,000; 9% between $75,001-100,000; and 8% more than $100,000. The sample was predominantly Christian (51% Protestant and 27% Catholic), with 4% identifying with a different religion. Thus, 18% of the sample did not identify with any particular religion as compared to 14% of adults in the nationally representative General Social Survey (GSS; Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2005). Rates of prayer were also lower in the current sample compared to the GSS of the same year. Given demographic links between religiosity and marital stability, these differences may be expected in comparing a sample of

divorced individuals to the general population.

Sixty-seven percent of participants had children with the ex-spouse. Regarding who initiated the divorce, 46% of participants identified themselves, 34% identified their ex-spouse, and 20% indicated that it was a mutual decision between both partners. Participants endorsed a variety of factors that contributed to the divorce, including 91% unhappiness in the marriage, 88% trouble communicating, 83% lack of commitment to making the marriage work, 71% conflicts and arguing, 67% difficult personalities, 57% someone not doing their part in the family, 55% infidelity, 54% financial struggles, 43% not having enough pre-marital preparation, 39% interference of work, 29% getting married too young, 29% alcohol or drug problems, 28% lack of support from family, 26% domestic violence, 16% religious differences, 16% physical illness, and 1% mental illness.

Procedure

Following Human Subjects Review Board approval, postcards were sent to addresses listed in public records for couples filing for divorce with a general invitation to participate in a study about divorce. It is unclear how many individuals received cards, given the high frequency of residential transition. All participants completed initial measures within 6 months of filing for divorce (mean of 3.32 months; T1) and were invited by e-mail and telephone to complete follow-up assessments one year later (T2). Participants completed measures online or on paper and were compensated with $20 gift cards for each assessment.

Measures

Appraisals of divorce as a sacred loss/desecration. The 28-item Sacred Loss and Desecration Scale (Pargament, Magyar et al., 2005) was used to assess cognitive appraisals at the time of the divorce that involved viewing divorce as the loss or violation of something sacred.

Participants rated how much items described their feelings about divorce on a scale from (1) "not at all," to (5) "very much." Items included terminology that was theistic (e.g., "Something sacred that came from God was dishonored.") and non-theistic (e.g., "Something that gave sacred meaning to my life is now missing."). In the original study, items were factor analyzed into separate sacred loss and desecration subscales that exhibited convergent and discriminate validity with relevant criterion and high internal consistency (sacred loss $\alpha = .93$ and desecration $\alpha = .92$). In the current sample, the two subscales were highly intercorrelated ($r = .92$). Thus, a total sacred loss/desecration score was created by summing all items.

Positive and negative religious coping in response to divorce. The RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000) was used one year following divorce (T2), to assess a broad range of religious coping methods participants had used during the previous year in response to divorce. Twenty-six items were used to assess forms of positive religious coping such as benevolent religious reappraisal (e.g., "Tried to find a lesson from God in the event."), collaborative religious coping (e.g., "Worked together with God to relieve my worries."), seeking religious direction (e.g., "Looked to God for a new direction in life."), seeking spiritual support (e.g., "Sought comfort from God."), religious focus (e.g., "Prayed to get my mind off of my problems."), and seeking support from clergy or members of their spiritual community (e.g., "Asked others to pray for me."). Twenty-four items were used to assess forms of negative religious coping such as punishing God reappraisal (e.g., "Decided that God was punishing me for my sins."), reappraisal of God's powers (e.g., "Questioned the power of God."), passive religious deferral (e.g., "Didn't try to do much; just assumed God would handle it."), pleading for direct intercession (e.g., "Bargained with God to make things better."), spiritual discontent (e.g., "Wondered whether God had abandoned me."), and interpersonal religious discontent (e.g.,

"Felt dissatisfaction with the clergy."). Participants were instructed to rate items about their divorce, on a scale from (1) "not at all," to (4) "a great deal." These measures have been used extensively in previous research, consistently yielding two higher-order factors of positive and negative religious coping. They have demonstrated strong validity and reliability (Pargament et al., 2000).

Non-religious coping with divorce. The Brief-COPE (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) was used one year following divorce (T2), to assess a broad range of coping methods participants had used during the previous year in response to divorce. Items were rated on a scale from (1) "not at all" to (4) "a great deal." Positive non-religious coping methods consisted of: active coping, use of emotional support, positive reframing (e.g. "I've been looking for something good in what is happening."), planning, humor, and acceptance (12 items). The 2-item religious coping subscale was deleted. Negative non-religious coping methods consisted of: denial, substance use, self-distraction, behavioral disengagement (e.g., "I've been giving up trying to deal with it."), venting, and self-blame (14 items). The COPE scales have displayed acceptable internal and test-retest reliability, and good validity across multiple stressors (Carver et al., 1989; Fillion, Kovacs, Gagnon, & Endler, 2002).

Depression. Participants' depressive symptoms were assessed at the time of the divorce (T1) and one year later (T2) with the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Studies - Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977; e.g., "I felt sad."). Items were rated on a scale from (0) "rarely or none of the time" to (3) "most or all of the time." Extensive research has established the validity and reliability of the CES-D in the general population (e.g., Miller, Anton, & Townson, 2008).

Dysfunctional conflict tactics. Fourteen items of the Conflict Tactics Scale-II (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) were used to assess interactions with the ex-

spouse (e.g., “I insulted or swore at my ex-spouse.”) at the time of the divorce (T1) and one year later (T2). Items were rated on a scale from (1) “not at all” to (4) “often” and were summed to create a score for dysfunctional approaches to solving conflict. The CTS2 has demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (α = .79 - .95; Straus et al., 1996).

Posttraumatic growth. The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) is a measure of positive outcomes of traumatic experiences. Nineteen items (excluding spiritual change items) were used at the time of the divorce (T1) and one year later (T2) to assess personal change that participants had experienced as a result of their divorces across four domains: relating to others (e.g., “A sense of closeness with others”), new possibilities (e.g., “I developed new interests”), personal strength (e.g., “A feeling of self-reliance”), and appreciation for life (e.g., “Appreciating each day”). Participants were asked to rate the changes that they had experienced as a result of their divorce on a scale from (1), “not at all” to (6) “to a very great degree.” Internal consistency of the PTGI is high and has been linked to psychosocial adjustment (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Demographics, relational characteristics, and general religiousness. Demographic and relational data were gathered, including age, gender, education, income, number of children with the ex-spouse, length of separation from ex-spouse, who initiated the divorce, perceived causes of divorce, and presence of new romantic relationships. Participants’ general levels of religiousness were assessed with a 4-item index of self-rated religiousness and spirituality, and frequency of religious service attendance and prayer (Mahoney et al., 1999).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Eleven of the 100 T1 participants did not complete the T2 assessment. Participants who

failed to complete the T2 assessment were more likely to be male than female: $c^2(1) = 7.12$, $p < .05$. There were no differences for any other demographic, religious, or psychological measures related to attrition. Correlational analyses were conducted between demographic variables and predictor and outcome variables. Gender was significantly correlated with posttraumatic growth ($r = .24$) and was therefore controlled in subsequent analyses with this outcome measure.

Descriptive Information and Prevalence Rates of Spiritual Variables

Table 1 displays descriptive information about the sample and the variables of interest. At each time point, approximately three-quarters of the sample were non-zero responders, indicating on at least one item that they had appraised their divorce as a sacred loss or desecration. Approximately a third of participants had a score for sacred loss and desecration that averaged item responses greater than "somewhat." At each time point, 90% of participants were non-zero responders of positive religious coping, indicating on at least one item that they used positive religious coping in response to their divorce, and at least 80% were non-zero responders of negative religious coping, indicating on at least one item that they used negative religious coping. This included 43% (T1) and 38% (T2) of the sample with scores averaging at least "quite a bit" for positive religious coping and 22% (T1) and 15% (T2) of the sample with scores averaging at least "quite a bit" for negative religious coping.

Bivariate Associations

Table 1 displays Pearson correlations between initial (T1) spiritual appraisals of divorce, religious coping that participants reported at the follow up assessment (T2) about the previous year, and participants' psychosocial adjustment at T1 and T2. Appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration was associated with higher levels of both positive and negative religious coping. Higher appraisals of the divorce as a sacred loss/desecration also related to more depressive

symptoms and dysfunctional conflict with the ex-spouse. Higher positive religious coping was correlated with more posttraumatic growth and dysfunctional conflict with the ex-spouse. Finally, higher negative religious coping was associated with more depressive symptoms.

Spiritual Appraisals Predicting Postdivorce Adjustment

Three hierarchical regression analyses examined whether appraising the divorce as a sacred loss/desecration at the time of the divorce would predict depressive symptoms, conflict tactics, and posttraumatic growth one year later when controlling relevant demographics, general religiousness, and previous levels of adjustment (Table 2, Panel A). Appraisals of divorce as a sacred loss/desecration predicted more depressive symptoms ($r^2_{change} = .07$) and dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse ($r^2_{change} = .04$), but did not predict changes in posttraumatic growth.

Positive and Negative Religious Coping Predicting Postdivorce Adjustment beyond General Religiousness and Non-Religious Coping

First, three hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether positive and negative religious coping employed during the year following divorce were predictive of levels of depressive symptoms, conflict tactics with the ex-spouse, and posttraumatic growth at the end of this one-year period, when controlling relevant demographics, general levels of religiousness, and prior levels of adjustment. The results indicated that negative religious coping predicted more depressive symptoms one year following divorce, even after accounting for general religiousness and previous levels of depressive symptoms ($r^2_{change} = .12$). In addition, positive religious coping predicted greater posttraumatic growth a year following divorce, even when controlling gender, general religiousness, and previous levels of posttraumatic growth ($r^2_{change} = .05$). Religious coping was not predictive of levels of dysfunctional conflict tactics.

On this basis, three additional hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether positive and negative religious coping employed during the year after divorce would continue to predict participants' levels of adjustment when also factoring out the variance attributable to common, non-religious forms of coping employed during the year after divorce (Table 2, Panel B). Negative religious coping continued to predict more depressive symptoms a year following divorce (r^2_{change} = .04) beyond similar, non-religious forms of coping and controls. Similarly, positive religious coping continued to predict higher levels of posttraumatic growth a year following divorce (r^2_{change} = .06) beyond similar, non-religious forms of coping and other controls. Finally, analyses involving dysfunctional conflict tactics remained non-significant.

Religious Coping as a Mediator

We hypothesized that religious coping may mediate significant links between appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and psychosocial outcome measures. Depressive symptoms represented the only outcome variable that was significantly predicted by both appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and religious coping after controlling relevant factors. Furthermore, only negative religious coping was a significant predictor of depressive symptoms. Therefore, we assessed whether negative religious coping during the year after divorce accounted for the links between initial appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and depressive symptoms one year later, controlling general religiousness and pre-existing levels of depressive symptoms. We made use of bootstrapping analyses, basing the estimate on the distribution of the statistic over 1000 resamples of the data and using 95% confidence intervals that corrected for biases in the sampling distribution (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). This method provides several advantages over the traditionally used Sobel test, including that it is sound for use in small samples, generates an empirical estimate rather than relying on theoretical assumptions, and

provides a more accurate estimation of mediated effects (MacKinnon et al., 2004; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Negative religious coping fully mediated links between appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration and levels of depressive symptoms experienced one year later (Fig. 1). That is, the direct effect of sacred loss/desecration on depressive symptoms was no longer significant when factoring out the effect of negative religious coping.

Religious Coping as a Moderator

To test the hypothesis that spiritual appraisals might moderate the association between religious coping and adjustment, we assessed whether initial appraisals of sacred loss/desecration interacted with the positive or negative religious coping that participants employed during the year following divorce in predicting depressive symptoms, dysfunctinoal conflict tactics, and posttraumatic growth. We made use of regression analyses because this offers some advantages for small sample sizes and models in which the predictor, moderator, and criterion are all continuous (Holmbeck, 1997). In addition, this method facilitates comparisons between the mediation and moderation models. To eliminate any multicollinearity effects, variables were centered into deviation form ($M = 0$) before testing the interaction term (Aiken & West, 1991).

A significant interaction emerged for appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and negative religious coping in predicting depressive symptoms (Table 3). To elucidate this finding, we examined how negative religious coping relates to depressive symptoms differently for those who initially formed high versus low appraisals of sacred loss/desecration about their divorce. Post-hoc probing resulted in a regression line for the high appraisals of sacred loss/desecration group (1 *SD* above the mean): depressive symptoms = .87 (negative religious coping) + 16.43, with t (83) = 4.32, $p < .001$; and a regression line for the low appraisals of sacred loss/desecration group (1 *SD* below the mean): depressive symptoms = .40 (negative religious

coping) + 15.19, with t (83) = 2.75, $p < .01$ (Fig. 2).

The significant interaction indicated that the slopes of the regression lines for those with high versus low appraisals of sacred loss/desecration differed significantly from one another. Further, the significance tests of the regression lines indicated that the slope for each group was significantly different from zero. The direction indicated that for all participants, greater negative religious coping in the year following divorce related to higher levels of depressive symptoms, however, this relationship was significantly stronger among those who initially appraised divorce as a high spiritual threat.

No significant interactions were observed in the other five intances. That is, sacred loss/desecration appraisals did not significantly interact with either positive (t = .79, p = .43) or negative (t = 1.25, p = .22) religious coping in predicting posttraumatic growth; sacred loss/desecration appraisals did not significantly interact with either positive (t = .76, p = .45) or negative (t = -.50, p = .62) religious coping in predicting dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse; and sacred loss/desecration appraisals did not significantly interact with positive religious coping in predicting depressive symptoms (t = -1.16, p = .25).

Discussion

The impact of divorce varies from one individual to the next and can be both positive and negative (Amato, 2000; Bursik, 1991). The current study supports a spiritual stress and coping model to account for some of these differences. Even though the community sample in this study was no more religious than adults in the General Social Survey of the same year, spirituality was relevant to their divorce experiences, with many engaging in spiritual appraisals and positive and negative religious coping. This provides support for Kaslow's (1991) theory that spirituality is a distinct aspect of divorce adjustment. As hypothesized, participants who appraised their divorces

more as a sacred loss/desecration longitudinally experienced more depressive symptoms and dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse. Additionally, engaging in negative religious coping predicted more depressive symptoms, whereas positive religious coping predicted greater posttraumatic growth over time, even after controlling general religiousness and parallel non-religious forms of coping. Negative religious coping fully mediated the links between appraising divorce as a sacred loss/desecration and levels of depressive symptoms one year later. Furthermore, negative religious coping exacerbated depressive symptoms to a greater extent among those with high appraisals of sacred loss/desecration.

An unexpected pattern among these findings is that negative spiritual predictors (appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and negative religious coping) related only to negative outcome measures (depressive symptoms, dysfunctional conflict tactics) and the positive spiritual predictor (positive religious coping) related only to a positive outcome measure (posttraumatic growth). We had hypothesized that each spiritual predictor would relate to the full range of positive and negative indices of post-divorce adjustment, albeit in opposite directions. For example, we anticipated that positive religious coping would predict not only greater posttraumatic growth, but also less depressive symptoms and dysfunctional conflict tactics. However, the findings indicated that negative spiritual appraisals and coping behaviors tied to divorce are salient to negative symptomatology but not positive psychosocial experiences. Similarly, engaging in positive religious coping appears to be helpful for promoting divorcees' post-traumatic growth, but ineffective for impacting symptoms of maladjustment. Our results on the effects of positive religious coping may explain some of the paradoxical links that have been observed between divorce and positive psychosocial growth (Amato, 2000; Bursik, 1991; Veevers, 1991) in that divorce-related distress can trigger positive religious coping, which is

associated with greater posttraumatic growth. The overall pattern of results highlights the distinctness of the positive and negative poles of the spiritual constructs for this family transition. In this context, it is important to conceptualize positive and negative religious coping as distinct constructs rather than as a unipolar phenomenon. Most divorcees engaged in both positive and negative religious coping simultaneously, with the first type of coping operating as a resource, and the second functioning as a source of distress during this difficult life experience.

Another noteworthy finding was that negative spiritual appraisals of divorce predicted dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse, whereas religious coping methods did not. It is likely that interpreting one's divorce as a sacred loss or desecration is closely aligned with one's thoughts and feelings toward the ex-spouse. For example, the ex-spouse may be viewed as the cause of the divorce, and therefore the perpetrator of the desecration. Such attributions are likely to have a more direct influence on dysfunctional conflict between former spouses than are the religious coping methods that the participant employs. Religious coping methods are likely most relevant to individual rather than couple functioning. Perhaps longer follow-up would allow for insight into potential trickle effects from the impact of religious coping on the individual to the interpersonal interactions among ex-spouses.

Often links between religion and psychological outcomes are explained as the result of psychosocial functions of religion (e.g., social networks, traditional values, personal or social resources). While these factors are important, religious coping predicted divorce adjustment above parallel, non-religious forms of coping, suggesting that spirituality uniquely contributes to divorce adjustment. Nevertheless, spirituality did not exhibit one overarching effect. As Allport (1950) and Fromm (1950) have emphasized, it matters less *whether* a person has religion and more what the *nature* of the person's religion is. The *specific* ways in which spirituality infused

perceptions and behaviors among participants accounted for variance in their wellbeing, even when controlling their general religiousness, including frequency of church attendance and prayer and their self-rated importance of religion and spirituality.

Implications

Researchers and clinicians should consider both the unique strengths and threats of spirituality following divorce (Mahoney et al., 2008). It is concerning that appraisals of sacred loss/desecration and negative religious coping exacerbate depressive symptoms during the post-divorce period. Depression is a major public health issue that causes substantial subjective suffering, increased morbidity, and impaired social and work functioning (Cassano & Fava, 2002). Experiencing greater depressive symptoms associated with spiritual appraisals and negative religious coping may detract from the emotional and mental wherewithal required of a person to efficiently adapt to the multitude of life changes that follow divorce. In addition, greater dysfunctional interactions with the ex-spouse—which were associated with appraising the divorce as a sacred loss/desecration—are likely to complicate the process of establishing a new, autonomous life after divorce and undermine coparenting children from the marriage. On the other hand, engaging in positive religious coping may aid in adjustment as it predicted higher posttraumatic growth, including personal strength, appreciation of life, openness to new possibilities, and positive interaction with others. It is likely that such qualities will equip individuals to more effectively handle the stresses and challenges embedded in the divorce process.

Community responses to divorce. This study is relevant to educational interventions for families of divorce. Forty-six of the United States have court-related education programs for divorcing parents (Pollet & Lombreglia, 2008), which cover topics such as children's reactions,

coparenting, communication, conflict management, court processes, separation and custody procedures, and changes occurring in family, finances, work, and social interactions (Blaisure & Geasler, 2006). We were unable to find any intervention programs that directly address the spiritual dimensions of divorce.

Within religious communities, the offering of educational programs that address spirituality and divorce adjustment is complicated by the high value placed on marriage by religious institutions (Murray, 2002). Thus, some religious groups struggle with tension between advocating for accountability and responsibility to sustain marriages on the one hand, and offering forgiveness and acceptance on the other when marriages dissolve (Gonzales, 1999). Perhaps as a result, relatively few religious groups systematically intervene with divorced individuals (Smith & Smith, 2000) or their children (Mahoney, Warner, & Krumrei, 2010), although a growing number of religious communities offer divorce recovery services and workshops. Additionally, some divorcees seek counseling from clergy on an individual basis. Therefore, religious leaders may benefit from information about the potential negative consequences of experiences such as sacred loss/desecration and negative religious coping. Further, they may be in a unique position to promote wellbeing among divorced individuals through the use of spiritual symbols, religious language, and a faith system that involves concepts such as repentance, guilt, grace, communion, and an awareness of the holy. With divorce frequently being a time of relocation, religious communities can provide resources such as parenting classes, youth programs, and other activities for transplanted individuals and their children (Griffith & Rotter, 1999). Increasing understanding among religious communities of the role of religion in divorce can equip these bodies to act as encouragers of healing to the divorced individuals in their midst.

Clinical and counseling psychology. This study adds the dimension of spirituality to existing knowledge that the more an individual appraises his or her divorce in threatening terms, the more distress he or she will experience (e.g., Ellis & Harper, 1975). This model is consistent with the core assumptions of cognitive-behavioral therapy. It is particularly useful in clinical and counseling settings because cognitions and behaviors related to divorce are more amendable to change than many other circumstances. The ethical codes of the American Psychological Association, American Counseling Association, and the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors all emphasize that therapists must be competent to discuss issues related to religion and spirituality with clients. An increasing number of resources are available to help clinicians fulfill this mandate by incorporating a focus on spiritual issues in treatment (Pargament, 2007), even in the specific context of divorce (Mahoney, et al., 2008). Insight gained from this study may help clinicians more fully explore divorcing clients' spiritual interpretations of divorce and religious responses. Assessing a broad range of spiritual appraisals and religious coping methods (Mahoney et al., 2010; Pargament & Krumrei, 2008) will allow clinicians to judge whether to further process topics such as emotional turmoil about the loss of what was viewed as a relationship intended by God to be permanent and distress over various forms of negative religious coping (e.g., feeling cut off from or angry at God, struggling with spiritually based guilt, or encountering conflict with a religious community about divorce). In addition, clinicians can help clients explore and access positive religious coping methods as a potential source of support (e.g., prayer or meditation seeking support from God or fellow believers). Therapeutic interventions may involve working toward making peace with the spiritual self (Kaslow, 1991) or processing how negative religious coping fits within a client's larger faith system (e.g., how does the belief that divorce is a punishment from God correspond

with a client's God image?). These recommendations are consistent with Kelly's (1992) review of how clinicians can address spirituality in the family domain. Regardless of personal religious convictions, clinicians can respectfully work with clients' core spiritual beliefs and practices by taking the posture of a learner rather than a teacher (Griffith & Rotter, 1999).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are clear limits to making causal inferences on the basis of non-randomized divorce studies. Repeated measures offer insight into directionality, but the possibility remains that unmeasured variables are producing effects. In this study, information about religious coping in the year following divorce was collected at the last time point, therefore, it would be particularly useful to add additional data points to assess how religious coping relates to long-term divorce adjustment. The generalizability of these findings is limited by a lack of diversity of race and socioeconomic status among the sample. It would be worthwhile to assess similar constructs in larger, nationally representative samples. Finally, it should be noted that the effect sizes in this study were small. Nevertheless, these results must be considered in the context of the stringency of factoring out variance attributable to (a) general religiousness, (b) common positive and negative forms of non-religious coping, and (c) pre-existing levels of adjustment.

For decades divorce has been a topic of interest for family psychology. Attention has been paid to the economic, social, vocational, physical, and emotional dimensions of divorce. The current study adds spirituality to the list of factors that have implications for well-being following divorce. These findings offer initial support that the stress of divorcing coupled with perceptions of sacred loss/violation and negative religious coping may increase the risk of psychological difficulties, whereas positive religious coping may promote personal growth. This seems a fruitful avenue to pursue further in research and clinical intervention.

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Table 1

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Scales assessing Variables at the Time of the Divorce (T1) and about the Year following Divorce (T2; N=89)

Scale	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.
1. T1 Sacred loss/desecration	-											
2. T2 Positive religious coping	.41***	-										
3. T2 Negative religious coping	.52***	.44***	-									
4. T1 Depression	.42**	.14	.37***	-								
5. T2 Depression	.22*	.07	.46***	.45***	-							
6. T1 Conflict tactics	-.07	.17	.00	.06	.11	-						
7. T2 Conflict tactics	.26*	.29**	.16	.21*	.15	.56***	-					
8. T1 Posttraumatic growth	-.05	.31**	-.01	-.27*	-.18	.10	.24*	-				
9. T2 Posttraumatic growth	-.04	.26*	.00	-.21	-.29**	-.01	.05	.46***	-			
10. T2 Positive non-religious coping	.19	.36**	.22*	.03	.28*	.24*	.22*	.41***	.24*	-		
11. T2 Negative non-religious coping	.36**	.22*	.52***	.35**	.60***	.25*	.24*	.03	-.05	.46**	-	
12. T2General religiousness	.48**	.78**	.22*	.15	-.04	-.01	.18	.18	.10	.21*	.06	-
Number of Items	28	33	17	20	20	14	14	19	19	12	14	4
Possible Range	28-140	33-132	17-68	0-60	0-60	14-56	14-56	19-114	19-114	12-48	1-56	4-27
Range	28-139	33-126	17-58	2-60	0-41	16-46	15-47	19-114	23-114	14-56	12-34	4-25
Mean	63.45	64.67	26.04	22.02	14.74	31.62	31.26	74.84	78.66	34.63	18.49	14.34
SD	36.48	24.90	8.45	13.25	10.75	7.54	7.81	21.20	21.45	9.31	4.83	5.43
α	.99	.97	.89	.93	.91	.78	.80	.95	.95	.90	.77	.69

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. *Hierarchical Regressions of Spiritual Predictors of Adjustment a Year After Divorce (N = 89)*

Panel A: Appraisals of Sacred Loss/Desecration Predicting Adjustment, Controlling General Religiousness and Prior Adjustment

	T2 Depression					T2 Dysfunctional Conflict Tactics					T2 Posttraumatic Growth				
	Unstand. B	*SE B*	*Stand. B*	*R^2 Change*	*F*	*Unstand. B*	*SE B*	*Stand. B*	*R^2 Change*	*F*	*Unstand. B*	*SE B*	*Stand. B*	*R^2 Change*	*F*
Step 1				.21	11.15***				.34	22.10***				.23	8.28***
Gender											5.86	4.28	.14		
General Religiousness	-.15	.19	-.08			.26	.13	.18*			-.18	.39	-.03		
T1 Level of Adjustment	.37	.08	.45***			.34	.05	.56***			.43	.10	.43		
Step 2				.07	7.16**				.04	4.90*				.00	.00
T1 Sacred loss/Desecration	.10	.04	.29**			.05	.02	.20			-.00	.07	-.01		

Panel B: Religious Coping Predicting Adjustment, Controlling Gender, General Religiousness, Non-Religious Coping, and Prior Adjustment

	T2 Depression					T2 Dysfunctional Conflict Tactics					T2 Posttraumatic Growth				
	Unstand. B	SE B	Stand. B	R^2 Change	F	Unstand. B	SE B	Stand. B	R^2 Change	F	Unstand. B	SE B	Stand. B	R^2 Change	F
Step 1				.20	10.63***				.33	20.54***				.23	8.22***
Gender											5.96	4.32	.14		
General Religiousness	-.15	.19	-.08			.26	.13	.18*			-.12	.39	-.03		
T1 Level of Adjustment	.36	.08	.45***			.33	.06	.54***			.444	.10	.43***		
Step 2				.23	16.37***				.01	.57				.01	.55
Positive non-Religious Coping	.07	.12	.06			.00	.09	.00			.25	.29	.11		
Negative non-Religious Coping	1.06	.22	.47***			.16	.16	.10			-.47	.50	-.10		
Step 3				.03	2.25*				.02	.98				.06	3.2*
Positive Religious Coping	-.07	.07	-.17			.06	.05	.18			.37	.16	.43*		
Negative Religious Coping	.29	.14	.23*			.05	.11	.05			-.05	.33	-.02		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Interaction between Initial Appraisals of Divorce as a Sacred Loss/Desecration and Negative Religious Coping Methods Employed During the Year Following Divorce in Predicting Levels of Depressive Symptoms One Year Following Divorce, Controlling General Religiousness and Initial Levels of Depressive Symptoms (N=89)

	Stand. Beta	**R**	**R^2 Change**	**F Change**
Step 1		.58	.33	10.42***
General Religiousness	-.12			
T1 Depression	.36**			
T1 Sacred Loss and Desecration	-.11			
T2 Negative Religious Coping	.42***			
Step 2		.61	.04	5.07*
Sacred Loss/Desecration and Negative Religious Coping Interaction	-.23*			

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

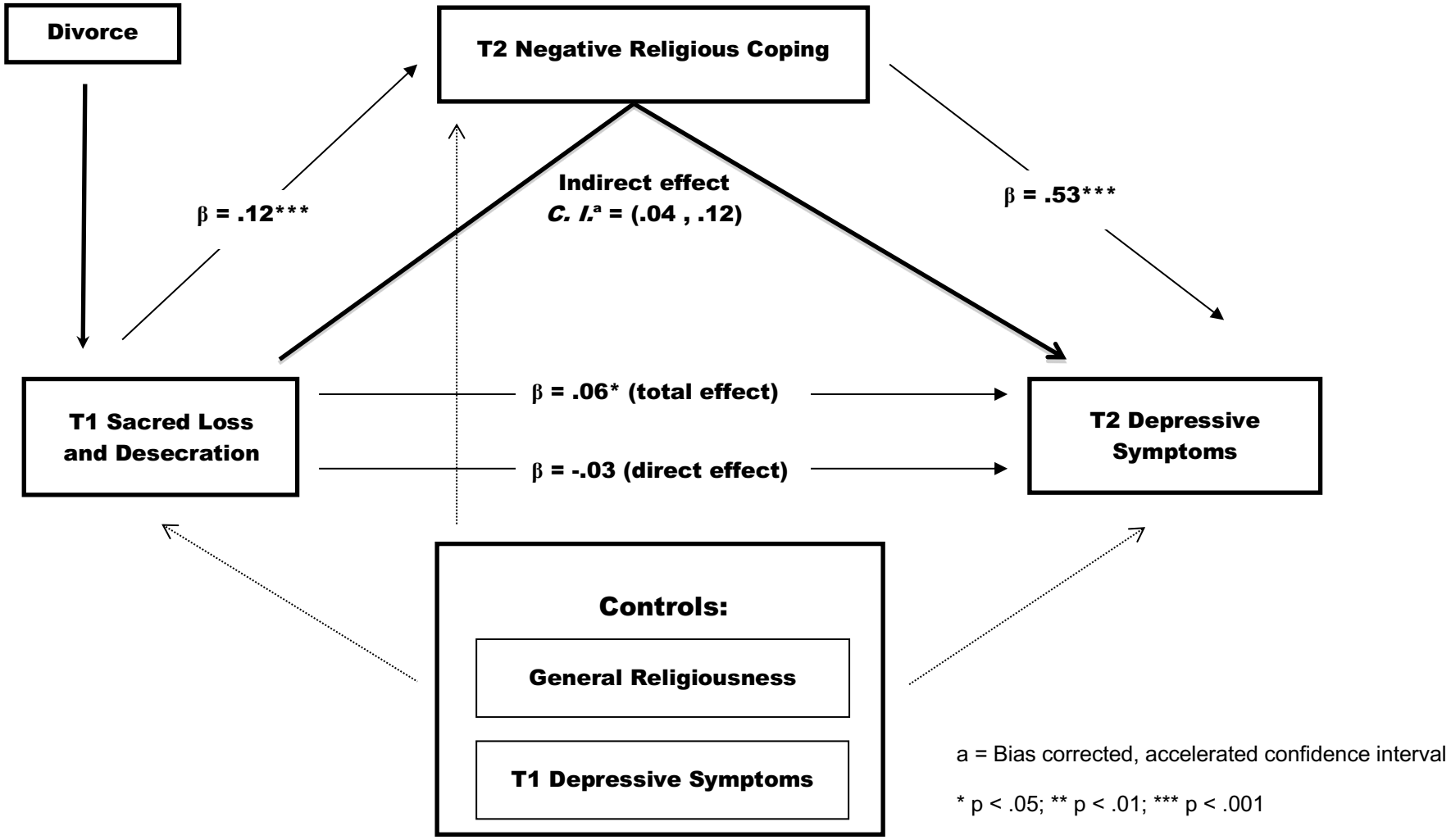

Figure 1. Negative religious coping in the year following divorce mediates links between participants' initial appraisals of the divorce as a sacred loss/desecration and levels of depressive symptoms experienced one year following divorce, after controlling participants' general religiousness and prior levels of depressive symptoms (N=89).

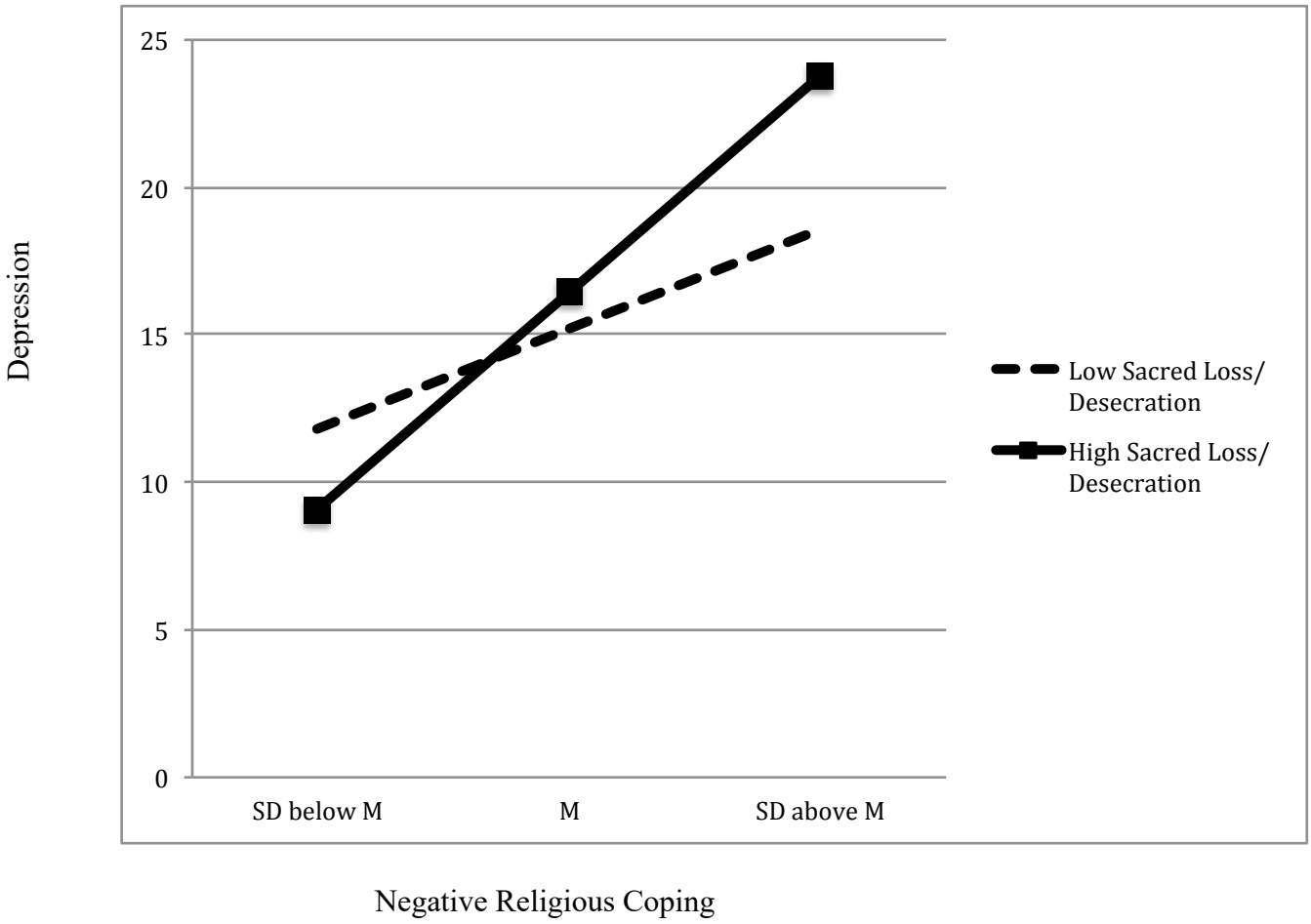

Figure 2. Regression lines for relations between negative religious coping methods employed during the year following divorce and levels of depressive symptoms one year following divorce for those with initial high and low appraisals of divorce as a sacred loss/desecration, controlling participants' general levels of religiousness and depressive symptoms at the time of divorce.