

# Troubled Ruminations About Parents: Conceptualization and Validation With Emerging Adults

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This study was designed to introduce the construct of troubled ruminations about parents and to develop a brief screening instrument. An ethnically diverse sample of 1,376 university students completed the instrument and other measures of psychosocial functioning. Troubled ruminations about mothers and fathers were related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological distress, and romantic relationship problems, and less strongly to purpose in life, friendship quality, and friendships satisfaction. Implications for counseling and future research are discussed.

Just as Erikson (1950, 1968) was concerned about adolescence and the lengthening of the adolescent period in his time, so too are many theorists and researchers today concerned about a newly titled and likewise lengthening stage of the life cycle—emerging adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2000). Emerging adulthood is conceptualized as a transitional stage between adolescence and adulthood. This new stage, in large measure, is a result of the changes in social and economic conditions that began during the latter part of the 20th century (see Côté, 2000, for an extended discussion). The most salient issues in emerging adulthood involve bridging the experiences with one's parents in childhood and adolescence with the consequences of these experiences in adulthood. This bridging is important as emerging adults prepare for the full independence and critical tasks of adulthood, including gainful employment, financial independence, committed partnership, and parenthood (Aquilino, 2006). Emerging adulthood provides young people with opportunities both to reflect on their family experiences and to look forward as they develop a coherent sense of self and plans for the future (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005).

## Attachments to Parents and Psychosocial Functioning in Adulthood

Researchers have found that experiences with parents in childhood and adolescence are associated with psychosocial functioning, self-perceptions, and relationship quality in emerging adulthood and beyond (Riggio, 2004; Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). Research grounded in attachment theory emphasizes that early experiences with parents affect later functioning through the continuity of internalizations of the parent-child relationship, as manifested in internal working models (e.g., Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Weinfield, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004). Attachment theory holds that an

internal working model of the parent-child relationship develops as a consequence of early and continuing interactions with parents and that these models shape the course of psychosocial functioning in areas such as self-esteem (Gomez & McLaren, 2007), anxiety (van Brakel, Muris, Bögels, & Thomassen, 2006), and depression (Kenny & Sirin, 2006). In this article, we introduce a new attachment-based construct that we label *troubled ruminations about parents*. Our conceptualization of these troubled ruminations is that of a negative internal working model of parent-child relationships. Drawing from the attachment literature, we contend that troubled ruminations about parents may interfere with healthy adult adjustment, relationships, and quality of life—and, indeed, perhaps with the ability or willingness to take on full adult roles at all. When troubled ruminations about parents are present, they may signal the need for counselors to focus on cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally restructuring the client's relationship with her or his parents, as well as on exploring the client's unresolved conflicts with one or both parents.

## Troubled Ruminations About Parents: Conceptual Foundations

Our conceptualization of troubled ruminations about parents draws on attachment theory (Main, 1996), parental acceptance-rejection theory (Rohner, 2004), as well as other theoretical perspectives. In our view, troubled ruminations about parents result from a confluence of a negative attachment history, a feeling of having been rejected by the parent (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2005), a sense of regret about not having enjoyed a better relationship (or more time) with the parent (Fabricius & Hall, 2000), and a fundamental sense of dissatisfaction with one's relationship with the parent (Finley & Schwartz, 2007). Although these concepts have been in the literature for some time, it may be helpful to conceptual-

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ize them together as a negative internal working model that more fully connects with later psychosocial and relational functioning in emerging adulthood. Troubled ruminations do not necessarily imply severe pathology, but they may well impair an emerging adult's quality of life. To the extent that this conceptualization is accurate, the presence of troubled ruminations about parents as a presenting symptom may alert counselors to look for problems in other areas of the client's life (e.g., self-esteem, relationships, career plans).

Although the concept of troubled ruminations may be important at all stages of the life cycle, we suspect that it is most critical in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is the stage of life when individuals are expected to focus on preparing to make enduring commitments in the areas of work and family. Strained or conflicted relationships with parents have been found to interfere with these developmental tasks in emerging adulthood (Aquilino & Supple, 2001). As a result, troubled ruminations about one's past experiences with one or both parents likely contribute to a hesitant, paralyzing, or immobilizing effect on entering the workforce or entering into relationships—particularly romantic relationships (Black & Schutte, 2006).

The concept of troubled ruminations about parents, therefore, may be helpful to counselors who work with emerging adults. Because internalized attachments to parents play important roles in determining the extent to which an emerging adult is able to address the developmental tasks of this age period, troubled ruminations about parents may represent unfortunate "baggage" that may need to be addressed as part of the counseling process. A finding that troubled ruminations about parents are significantly related to young people's recollections of their relationships with their parents—and with psychosocial and relational outcomes in emerging adulthood—would support this contention and would affirm the importance of this new construct.

Some of the concepts underlying troubled ruminations about parents are drawn from the divorce literature, such as regrets about not having had more time with one's father (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000) and wishing that one had enjoyed more of a relationship with one's father (Finley & Schwartz, 2007). Nevertheless, we believe that the concept of troubled ruminations is relevant for counseling emerging adults across family forms. Furthermore, troubled ruminations about parents may be important both for the counseling literature and for counseling practice as an attachment-based, individual difference construct.

## The Present Study

The goals of the present study were twofold: (a) to provide preliminary validation evidence for the construct of troubled ruminations and for a brief screening instrument and (b) to explore associations of troubled ruminations about parents to recollections of relationships with parents and to long-term

developmental outcomes. In doing so, we hope to provide evidence for the relevance of troubled ruminations for counseling and therapeutic practice, as well as for research. A finding that troubled ruminations about parents are associated with impaired psychosocial and relational functioning would support conceptualizing these troubled ruminations as a negative internal working model. We used a diverse sample, in terms of gender, ethnicity, and family form, to maintain consistency with the increasing ethnic diversity of the United States (see Day, 1996; Huntington, 2004) and to evaluate the extent to which the measurement and construct validity of troubled ruminations would be consistent across a variety of client characteristics.

Our brief screening instrument may be of use to counselors who wish to explore troubled ruminations about parents in their clients. Indeed, the psychosocial and relational functioning measures used to validate this construct specifically represent the kinds of negative feelings, concerns, and impaired quality of life that would lead clients to seek the help of a counselor.

On the basis of previous research and theorizing (Carlson et al., 2004; Riggio, 2004), we advanced three primary hypotheses for the present study. First, we expected retrospectively perceived parental nurturance to be strongly and negatively related to troubled ruminations about parents. That is, young people who enjoyed a positive relationship with their mother or father should not report troubled ruminations about that mother or father. Second, because we conceptualized troubled ruminations as representing a negative working model of one's parents, the sense of loss, sadness, and regret that accompanies a negative or absent relationship with a parent was likely to be associated with poor psychosocial and relational functioning (i.e., low self-esteem, purpose in life, life satisfaction, friendship quality, satisfaction with friendships, and academic performance and more psychological distress and romantic relationship problems) that persist into emerging adulthood, and perhaps beyond. Third, because we conceptualized troubled ruminations about parents as an individual difference construct, we expected that these findings would be consistent across gender, ethnicity, and family form.

Although mean differences in troubled ruminations about parents by gender and ethnicity were not the focus of this study, we nonetheless examined gender and ethnic differences in this construct as a descriptive analysis. Because we have grounded the construct of troubled ruminations about parents in the attachment literature, we searched for prior literature on gender and ethnic differences in attachment. In terms of gender differences, prior literature has been largely inconclusive, with some researchers finding no gender differences in attachment (e.g., Feldman, Gowen, & Fisher, 1998) and others reporting gender differences in some attachment dimensions (e.g., Lopez, 1995). Regarding ethnicity, Lopez and colleagues (Lopez, 1995; Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000) have found ethnic differences in emerging adults' reports of

avoidant attachment, with Blacks and Hispanics scoring higher than Whites. On the basis of this prior literature, we did not advance specific predictions regarding gender differences, but we did anticipate that Whites would report the lowest levels of troubled ruminations about parents.

## Method

### Design and Procedure

Data for the present study were taken from a larger project focusing on maternal and paternal nurturance and involvement (Finley, Mira, & Schwartz, 2008). This study used a correlational design with a university student sample, focusing both on troubled ruminations about parents and on a variety of psychosocial functioning indices germane to the lives of emerging adults. Data were gathered at two large public universities. The majority (80%) of data were gathered at a large public university in southeastern Florida, where the majority of students are Hispanic. The remaining 20% of data were gathered at another large public university in northern Florida that serves a largely non-Hispanic White student population. At the southeastern Florida site, participants came to a laboratory and completed the assessment in groups of 8 to 10. At the northern Florida site, participants completed the assessment during class. The average completion time ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. Data were collected between September 2004 and January 2006.

### Participants

Participants in this study were 1,376 young adult university students, of which 76% were female. The mean age of the sample was 19.81 years ( $SD = 3.35$ ), and 92% of the participants were between 18 and 29 years old. The sample used in the present analyses represents 80% of the total sample collected. The present sample includes all participants from intact or divorced families and who considered their biological mother and father to have been the most important parent figures in their lives. We restricted the sample to individuals rating biological parents so as to minimize confounds associated with including different parent figures (e.g., biological parents, adoptive parents, stepparents) in a single set of analyses (cf. Hofferth & Anderson, 2003).

Half of all participants (50%) were freshmen, with the remainder being sophomores (19%), juniors (17%), seniors (12%), or graduate students (2%). In terms of ethnicity, 58% of the participants were Hispanic, 24% were non-Hispanic White, 13% were non-Hispanic Black, 4% were Asian, and 1% were classified as "other." The majority (74%) of participants were born in the United States, whereas the majority of mothers (70%) and fathers (69%) were born abroad. The most common countries of origin for immigrant participants and parents (in descending order) were Cuba, Colombia, Nicaragua, Haiti, and Jamaica.

Of those participants reporting socioeconomic status (during the participant's adolescence), 13% reported annual

family incomes less than \$30,000; 23% between \$30,000 and \$50,000; 38% between \$50,000 and \$100,000; 16% between \$100,000 and \$150,000; and 10% greater than \$150,000. Thirty-eight percent of mothers and 43% of fathers were college graduates, whereas 8% of mothers and 13% of fathers had not graduated from high school.

### Measures

For this study, we identified commonly used measures of the target constructs and selected a smaller subset of items (generally between two and five) from each measure. We did this as a way of assessing an extensive range of psychosocial outcomes without the instrumentation becoming too long. Our primary motivation for using shortened scales was a concern regarding the amount of time during which students were likely to maintain concentration and to provide accurate responses.

For each scale, we and a panel of undergraduate and graduate research assistants selected those items that seemed to most directly reflect the construct of interest and that were most appropriate for the emerging adult age range. To narrow the item pool further, each student then administered the selected items to 5 to 10 pilot participants and asked them to identify the clearest and most face-valid items for each construct. We and the students then met again and selected the items that they and the pilot participants believed best represented the dimensions of psychosocial functioning that we intended to measure. Data from these pilot participants were not included in the analyses reported in this article.

*Troubled ruminations about parents.* In developing the brief screening measure for troubled ruminations about parents, we selected items from the Painful Feelings About Divorce (PFAD) measure developed by Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000), focusing on those items that (a) were applicable to participants from both intact and divorced families and (b) reflected an angry, ruminative, or regretful tone regarding past relationships with parents. We then added one item of our own to create a brief scale with four identical items for mothers and fathers. The four troubled rumination items are presented here in the order of the strength of their pattern coefficients on the underlying construct: "There have been times when I wondered if my father (mother) even loved me," "Overall satisfaction with your relationship with your father (mother)," "My father (mother) caused most of the pain in my family," and "I wish my father (mother) had spent more time with me when I was younger." The items adapted from the PFAD measure were answered using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The items indexing overall satisfaction with one's mother and father were answered using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). The overall satisfaction items were reverse coded such that higher scores reflect less satisfaction. Therefore, possible scores for troubled ruminations about each parent ranged from 4 to 17. We evaluated the internal consistency and validity of these scales as

part of the present study, and this information appears in the Results section.

*Nurturant mothering and fathering.* Adult children's retrospective reports of maternal and paternal nurturance were measured using the nine-item Nurturant Fathering Scale (Finley & Schwartz, 2004) and using a "mother" version in which *father* was replaced with *mother* (Finley et al., 2008). Each item is responded to on a 5-point scale, with the scale endpoints varying as a function of item content. A sample item on this scale is "When you needed your father's (mother's) support, was he (she) there for you?" For this item, the response choices ranged from 1 (*never there for me*) to 5 (*always there for me*). In the present data set, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for scores on the Nurturant Mothering and Nurturant Fathering scales were .90 and .93, respectively.

*Psychosocial functioning.* We indexed several dimensions of psychosocial functioning in this study: self-esteem, purpose in life, life satisfaction, psychological distress, friendship quality, satisfaction with friendships, romantic relationship problems, and academic performance. Self-esteem was measured using two items from the Coopersmith (1981) Self-Esteem Inventory, along with items assessing overall self-esteem and overall satisfaction with one's physical appearance (cf. Harter, 1999). The response scales for the items from the Self-Esteem Inventory ranged from 1 (*completely false*) to 4 (*completely true*). The response scales for the items assessing overall self-esteem and overall satisfaction with one's physical appearance ranged from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for scores on this scale was .78.

Purpose in life was measured using two items ("In life, I have very clear goals and aims for myself" and "I have discovered clear-cut goals and a satisfying life purpose") taken from the Purpose in Life Test (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969). The response scale ranged from 1 (*completely false*) to 4 (*completely true*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for responses to these items was .82.

Life satisfaction was measured using a single item that asked participants to indicate their overall satisfaction with life on a scale of 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). Single-item measures of life satisfaction have been commonly used and seem to possess adequate construct validity (e.g., Antonucci, Lansford, & Akiyama, 2001; Makinen & Pychyl, 2001).

Psychological distress was measured using four items from the Beck Anxiety Inventory (Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988), four items from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977), and three reverse-coded items from the Ego Strength Scale (Epstein, 1983). All these items were responded to using a scale ranging from 1 (*completely false*) to 4 (*completely true*). The Cronbach's alpha estimate for scores on this scale was .87.

Friendship quality was measured using three items from the Friendship Quality Scale (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Although this measure was designed for use with adolescents,

we selected those items that would also apply to emerging adults. These items were "If my closest friend and I have a fight or argument, we can apologize and everything will be OK"; "I can be completely open with my closest friend"; and "I can always count on my closest friend." These items were responded to using a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for scores on this scale was .71.

Satisfaction with friendships was measured using a single item assessing overall satisfaction with friendships on a scale of 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). This item was left separate from friendship quality because it did not correlate with the friendship quality items.

Romantic relationship problems were measured using three items from the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988), referring to the extent to which romantic partners meet the person's needs and to which the person has problems in her or his relationships and wishes she or he had not gotten into most of these relationships. We added two additional items referring to being taken advantage of in relationships and to one's relationships not lasting very long. We adapted these items to refer to romantic relationships in general, rather than a specific relationship in which participants were currently engaged. We did this because some participants may not have been in a committed relationship at the time of data collection. Each item was rated on a response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The Cronbach's alpha estimate for scores on this scale was .72.

Academic performance was assessed using items measuring (a) overall satisfaction with one's academic work, (b) one's characterization of one's grades in high school and in college (e.g., A student, B student), and (c) self-reported high school grade point average (GPA). We did not include college GPA in this scale because a large portion of the sample consisted of first-semester freshmen, who had yet to receive any grades in college. Satisfaction with academic work was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*very high*). The Cronbach's alpha estimate for scores on this scale was .69.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

The first step of analysis was to confirm that the troubled ruminations items about mother and about father clustered into internally consistent subscales. Brown (2006) and Thompson (2004) suggested that, when there is an a priori theory about the factor structure of the items or subscales being analyzed, confirmatory—rather than exploratory—factor analysis (CFA) should be used. CFA allows for direct comparison of the proposed factor structure with the covariance structure present in the data, and, as a result, it provides the most rigorous evaluation of the proposed factor structure. We estimated a CFA model with the troubled ruminations about mother and troubled ruminations about father items attached to separate

latent variables. These latent variables were allowed to covary. We evaluated this model using the comparative fit index (CFI), for which values greater than .90 reflect adequate fit (Kline, 2006) and values greater than .95 represent excellent fit (Tomarken & Waller, 2005), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), for which values less than .08 represent adequate fit (Quintana & Maxwell, 1999) and values less than .05 represent excellent fit (Hancock & Freeman, 2001). The 90% confidence interval (CI) for the RMSEA index provides added confidence in model fit, especially if most or all of the interval is less than .08 (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawura, 1996). The chi-square statistic is reported but is not used in interpretation because it is vulnerable to inflation with large sample sizes.

Additionally, modification indices suggested allowing two pairs of error terms to covary because of method effects: (a) “I wish my mother had spent more time with me when I was younger” with “I wish my father had spent more time with me when I was younger” and (b) “Overall satisfaction with your relationship with your mother” with “Overall satisfaction with your relationship with your father.” The resulting model fit the data adequately,  $\chi^2(17) = 144.73, p < .001, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .07$  (90% CI = .06 to .08). With one exception, all factor pattern coefficients were .60 or higher (see Figure 1).

We also tested the extent to which this measurement model was consistent across gender, the three largest ethnic groups in the sample (Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics), and family form (intact/divorced). To accomplish this, we conducted a series of multigroup invariance analyses (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000), in which models with all factor pattern coefficients free to vary were compared against models with all factor pattern

coefficients constrained equally across gender, ethnicity, or family form. Differences in fit between the constrained and unconstrained models were evaluated using three standard indices: the difference in chi-square values ( $\Delta\chi^2$ ), the difference in CFI values ( $\Delta CFI$ ), and the difference in nonnormed fit index (NNFI) values. Although the NNFI was not used here to evaluate the fit of a single model to the data, the  $\Delta NNFI$  is extremely sensitive to differences in fit between and among models (Little, 1997). In each model comparison conducted, for the null hypothesis of invariance across groups to be statistically rejected, at least two of the following three criteria had to be met:  $\Delta\chi^2$  significant at  $p < .05$  (Byrne, 2001),  $\Delta CFI > .01$  (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), and  $\Delta NNFI > .02$  (Vandenberg & Lance, 2000).

Results of invariance analyses indicated that the troubled ruminations measurement model was invariant across gender,  $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 8.17, p = .23, \Delta CFI = .00, \Delta NNFI < .00$ ; ethnicity,  $\Delta\chi^2(12) = 25.18, p < .02, \Delta CFI = .00, \Delta NNFI < .00$ ; and family form,  $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 34.13, p < .001, \Delta CFI = .01, \Delta NNFI = .00$ . As a result, we retained these subscales for use in further analyses. Scores on the Troubled Ruminations About Mother subscale ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and on the Troubled Ruminations About Father subscale ( $\alpha = .81$ ) both demonstrated adequate internal consistency. The finding of invariance across gender, ethnicity, and family form supported our conceptualization of troubled ruminations about parents as an individual difference construct. This finding also suggests that (a) the construct of troubled ruminations is applicable to emerging adult men and women from both intact and divorced families and across ethnic and cultural backgrounds and (b) the brief screening instrument that we have developed can be used across diverse groups of clients.

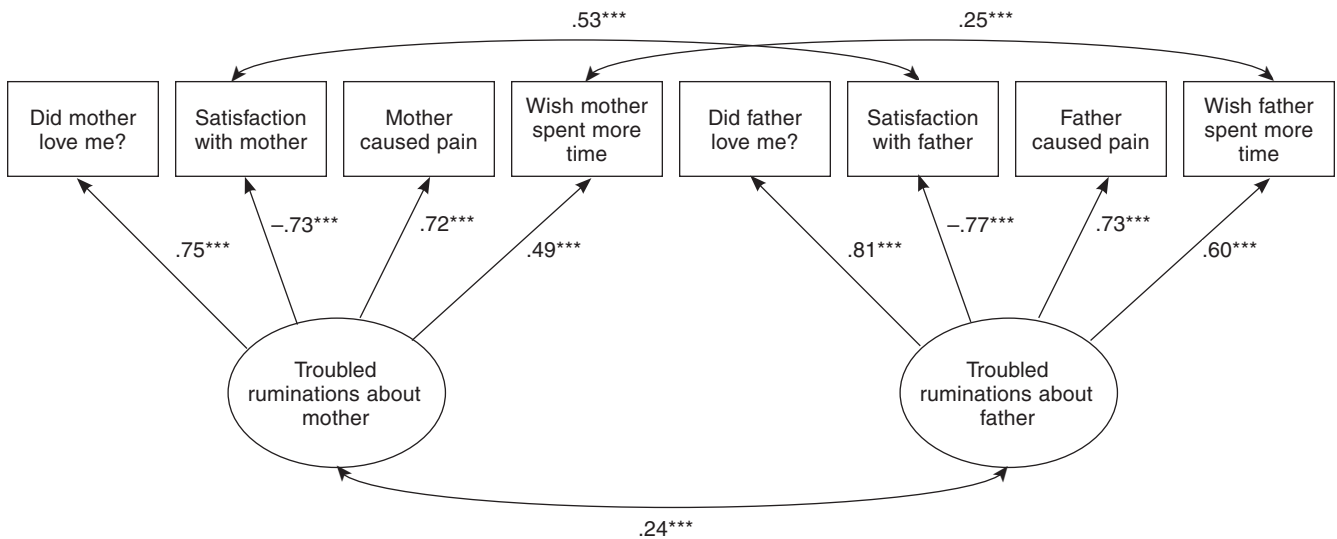


FIGURE 1

Troubled Ruminations About Parents Measurement Model

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Descriptive Statistics**

We next computed descriptive statistics and internal consistency estimates for all the constructs included in the present study. This information is presented in Table 1.

To test for gender, ethnic, and family form differences in the study constructs, we conducted a 2 (gender) × 3 (ethnicity) × 2 (family form) multivariate analysis of variance. Troubled ruminations about mother and about father, maternal and paternal nurturance, self-esteem, purpose in life, life satisfaction, friendship quality, satisfaction with friendships, romantic relationship problems, psychological distress, and academic performance were entered as dependent variables. No significant multivariate interactions emerged. Significant multivariate effects emerged for gender, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .95$ ,  $F(12, 1121) = 5.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ; ethnicity, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .95$ ,  $F(12, 1121) = 2.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ; and family form, Wilks's  $\Lambda = .95$ ,  $F(12, 1121) = 2.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ . When we examined follow-up univariate effects, however, only two univariate effects were statistically significant and associated with an effect size greater than .02. Both of these significant univariate effects involved family form. Participants from divorced families ( $M = 2.22$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ) reported significantly higher levels of troubled ruminations about their fathers than did participants from intact families ( $M = 1.64$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ),  $F(1, 1132) = 67.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . Additionally, participants from divorced families ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) reported significantly lower levels of paternal nurturance than did participants from

intact families ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ),  $F(1, 1132) = 47.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . Troubled ruminations about parents did not differ significantly across gender or ethnicity.

**Relationships of Troubled Ruminations to Parental Nurturance and to Psychosocial Outcomes**

Our next set of analyses focused on the relationships of troubled ruminations to parental nurturance and to psychosocial outcomes. We first computed bivariate correlations of troubled ruminations with parental nurturance and with psychosocial and relational outcomes (see Table 2). Troubled ruminations about each parent were strongly related to retrospective reports of nurturance from that parent, and the troubled ruminations variables were modestly correlated with a number of psychosocial functioning indices (especially self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological distress).

We were then interested in examining the extent to which troubled ruminations about mother and about father would contribute collaboratively to psychosocial functioning. We estimated a multivariate multiple regression model, consisting of relationships of troubled ruminations about mother and about father, to all the psychosocial and relational functioning indices.

**Multivariate Multiple Regression Model**

Multivariate multiple regression was used to control for multiple testing concerns involved in estimating separate regression models for each psychosocial and relational functioning variable. The form of multivariate multiple regression that we used is a special case of path analysis (Keith, 2006). As is the case in other forms of multiple regression, paths are estimated from each predictor to each dependent variable. All pairs of predictors and of dependent variables are also allowed to correlate. The result is a fully saturated model, where no paths or covariances are constrained to zero, and, by default, the model provides a perfect fit to the data. As in univariate multiple regression, the focus is on estimating path coefficients rather than on examining model fit. The result is essentially a multiple regression model with several dependent variables (see Figure 2).

Cases in which the regression coefficients for troubled ruminations about mother and about father were both statistically significant were taken to represent a cumulative risk model, in which troubled ruminations about both parents would lead to greater impairments in psychosocial functioning than would troubled ruminations about only one parent. We also sought to examine the extent to which lower levels of troubled ruminations about one parent might offset the effects of troubled ruminations about the other parent. In such a "buffering" scenario, a more positive relationship with one's father might offset the negative effects of troubled ruminations about one's mother, and vice versa. To test this possibility, we included an interaction term in the model. The troubled ruminations variables were centered prior to creating the interaction terms (Aiken &

**TABLE 1**

**Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Estimates for Study Variables**

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Troubled ruminations about parents				
Mother	6.42	2.47	4–17	.78
Father	7.75	2.42	4–17	.81
Psychosocial and relational functioning				
Self-esteem	15.49	2.67	4–18	.78
Purpose in life	6.13	1.53	2–8	.82
Life satisfaction	3.78	0.85	1–5	NA <sup>a</sup>
Friendship quality	10.43	1.70	3–12	.71
Satisfaction with friendships	3.83	0.95	1–5	NA <sup>a</sup>
Romantic relationship problems	12.21	4.07	6–25	.72
Psychological distress	18.84	6.05	12–48	.87
Academic performance	13.80	2.02	7–19	.69

*Note.* For all variables, the entire possible range was represented in the range of observed scores. NA = not applicable.  
<sup>a</sup>Cronbach's alpha cannot be computed on a single-item scale.

**TABLE 2**  
**Bivariate Correlations Among Study Constructs**

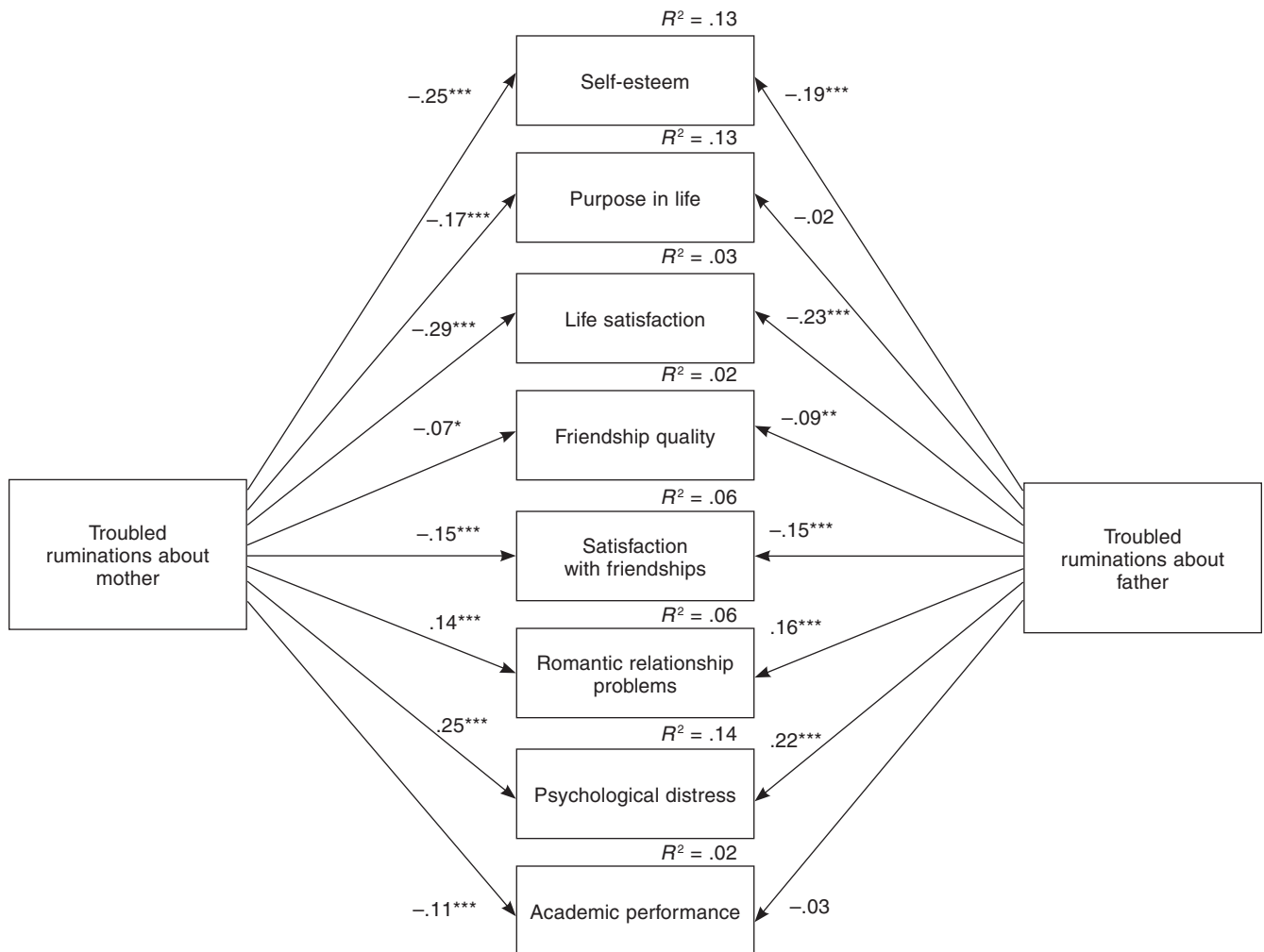
Variable	MN	PN	SE	PL	LS	FQ	SF	RRP	PD	AP
Troubled ruminations about mother	-.77***	-.15***	-.32***	-.19***	-.38***	-.10***	-.19***	.21***	.33***	-.13***
Troubled ruminations about father	-.42***	-.72***	-.33***	-.13***	-.37***	-.13***	-.22***	.24***	.35***	-.10***

Note. MN = maternal nurturance; PN = paternal nurturance; SE = self-esteem; PL = purpose in life; LS = life satisfaction; FQ = friendship quality; SF = satisfaction with friendships; RRP = romantic relationship problems; PD = psychological distress; AP = academic performance. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

West, 1991). Standard scores for the troubled ruminations variables were then multiplied by each other to create the interaction term.

Results are shown in Figure 2. Troubled ruminations about both mother and father were both negatively related to self-esteem, life satisfaction, and satisfaction with friendships

and were both positively related to romantic relationship problems and psychological distress. Troubled ruminations about mother, but not about father, were significantly and negatively related to purpose in life and to academic performance. Troubled ruminations about mother and about father were both significantly and modestly related to friendship



**Multivariate Multiple Regression Results for Psychosocial and Relational Indices by Troubled Ruminations About Parents**

Note. For ease of interpretation, covariances between psychosocial and relational functioning indices are not displayed. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

quality. The total amount of variability explained in the psychosocial functioning indices (see Figure 2) ranged from .02 (friendship quality and academic performance) to .14 (psychological distress).

One interaction effect was significant—for academic performance. To explore the significant interaction, we followed the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991) and examined the relationship of troubled ruminations about father to academic performance for individuals scoring below the 25th percentile and above the 75th percentile on the Troubled Ruminations About Mother subscale. The correlations were  $-.06$  ( $p = .09$ ) and  $-.02$  ( $p = .59$ ), respectively. Because both of these correlations were nonsignificant and trivial, we concluded that the significant interaction effect was likely an artifact.

We also sought to determine whether these regression results were statistically similar or different across family form, gender, and ethnicity. We used multigroup invariance testing procedures to evaluate this. Because the unconstrained models were saturated and fit the data perfectly, the fit statistics for the constrained models indicated the extent to which the null hypothesis of invariance should be retained or rejected. Family form and gender were tested together using a single categorical variable with four levels (intact male, intact female, divorced male, divorced female). Invariance across ethnicity was evaluated using the three largest ethnic groups in the sample (Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics).

Results indicated full invariance across ethnicity,  $\Delta\chi^2(32) = 21.48, p = .92, \Delta CFI < .00, \Delta NCFI < .00$ . Nevertheless, there was at least some noninvariance across family form and gender,  $\Delta\chi^2(36) = 166.20, p < .001, \Delta CFI = .04, \Delta NCFI < .00$ . As a result, following Byrne (2001), we returned to the fully unconstrained model and constrained one path at a time to identify the source of noninvariance. Results indicated that only one path coefficient was not invariant across groups. The regression coefficient for self-esteem on troubled ruminations about father was significantly weaker for men from divorced families ( $\beta = -.07, p = .41$ ) than for men from intact families ( $\beta = -.21, p < .002$ ) and for women from either family form (intact,  $\beta = -.19, p < .001$ ; divorced,  $\beta = -.27, p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

In this study, we have introduced the construct of troubled ruminations about parents and have provided evidence for the validity and reliability of a four-item screening instrument. We also conceptualized troubled ruminations about parents as a negative working model reflecting perceived parental rejection and as a form of distress that may impair the client's quality of life and lead her or him to seek counseling. Our findings suggest that troubled ruminations can be assessed validly and reliably and that the structure of scores generated using these items is consistent across gender, ethnicity, and family form. Furthermore, the results suggest that the presence of troubled ruminations is associated both with perceived lack

of a supportive relationship with one's parent(s) and with impaired psychosocial and relational functioning. It is critically important to note that low self-esteem, lack of purpose in life, poor life satisfaction, romantic relationship problems, and psychological distress—all important reasons why emerging adults might seek counseling—all were significantly related to troubled ruminations about parents. With only one exception, the relationships of troubled ruminations about parents to psychosocial and relational functioning were consistent across gender, ethnicity, and family form.

### Factor Structure of the Brief Screening Instrument

Although three of the four items used to index troubled ruminations were adapted from an instrument used to study emerging adults' reactions to parental divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), our results suggest that these four items are appropriate for emerging adults of both genders, from both intact and divorced families, and across various ethnic groups. The finding that troubled ruminations about parents were correlated with a range of psychosocial functioning indices suggests that scores generated using these items possess considerable construct validity.

### Relationships of Parental Nurturance to Troubled Ruminations About Parents

The strong relationships of perceived parental nurturance to troubled ruminations about parents are highly consistent with existing theory and provide additional convergent validity for the construct and measurement of troubled ruminations about parents. Specifically, these findings support the position that feelings of having been unloved, hurt, and rejected by one's mother or father are associated with (and may stem from) a belief that one's relationship with that parent was poor, insufficiently warm, or inadequate. Because parental nurturance was measured retrospectively, these findings also support the conceptualization of troubled ruminations about parents as a negative internal working model that may well persist over time.

The strong relationships of parental nurturance to troubled ruminations suggest some avenues through which counselors can help clients who present with troubled ruminations about their parents. Given the grounding of many counseling approaches in positive psychology and in focusing on human strengths (Harris, Thoresen, & Lopez, 2007), it may be possible to use strength-based techniques, focused on establishing nurturant relationships with attachment figures, to modify the negative internal working models that underlie troubled ruminations about parents. It may be possible, for example, to work with emerging adults and their parents to reinforce and increase those aspects of their relationship that are functional and adaptive, while at the same time restructuring those patterns of parent-offspring interactions that are maladaptive or hurtful (Hooper, 2007).

Where the parent to whom the ruminations refer is unavailable or unwilling to participate in counseling with the emerging

adult client, it may be possible for the counselor to serve as an attachment figure for the client (Mallinckrodt, Porter, & Kivlighan, 2005). Specifically, the counselor should help the client to “experience [her or him] as responsive, sensitive, understanding, and emotionally available; [and to] feel hopeful and comforted” (Mallinckrodt, Gantt, & Coble, 1995, p. 310). The client should be made to feel comfortable exploring sensitive and unresolved issues in the counselor’s office, such that the attachment to the counselor may be experienced as nurturant and may help to restructure and attenuate some of the troubled ruminations that the emerging adult client feels about her or his parents.

### Troubled Ruminations and Psychosocial Functioning

As hypothesized, troubled ruminations about parents were associated with impairments in a number of dimensions of psychosocial functioning, particularly self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological distress, and romantic relationship problems. Moreover, we found that the effects of troubled ruminations about one parent on psychosocial and relational functioning were not buffered by a more positive relationship with the other parent. As a result, emerging adults experiencing troubled ruminations about one parent may still need counseling, regardless of their relationship with the other parent. The regression results also support the cumulative risk hypothesis, especially for self-esteem, life satisfaction, and psychological distress. As suggested in Figure 2, troubled ruminations about both parents are associated with lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction, and greater psychological distress compared with troubled ruminations about only one parent. Emerging adults who feel rejected, hurt, or unloved by both of their parents are likely to experience more serious problems in these areas. In cases such as these, it may be especially important for the counselor to help create a warm and nurturing attachment relationship with the client to help in the process of restructuring troubled ruminations about parents.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

The present results should be considered in light of several limitations. First, although many emerging adults who seek counseling do so through university counseling centers, a university student sample does not include the “forgotten half” (Halperin, 2001) of emerging adults who do not attend university. The use of a university student sample may underrepresent individuals with financial, social, emotional, or intellectual difficulties. It is therefore important to replicate the present findings with community samples of emerging adults, some of whom attend university and some of whom do not, so that the different needs of college-attending versus working emerging adults can be identified.

Second, all variables were measured concurrently. Although nurturant parenting and troubled ruminations about parents are assumed to refer to past events—whereas the psychosocial and relational functioning items are assumed to refer to pres-

ent thoughts, feelings, and relationships—it is not possible to determine the direction of effects using the present data. Future research should use longitudinal designs in which sequentiality and directionality can be empirically determined.

Third, the use of shortened scales results in lower internal consistency reliability coefficients (Schmitt, 1996), and some of the scales were based on only two or three items. Although these short scales helped to reduce participant burden, the extent to which the results obtained using these shortened scales would match results obtained with the full versions of the scales is not known. It is important for future research to replicate the present findings with additional instruments so that maximal confidence can be placed in the present results.

Fourth, the ethnic distribution of the present sample is both a limitation and an advantage. As a limitation, the preponderance of ethnic minorities and of individuals from immigrant families in the present sample does not represent the current population of the United States. As an advantage, the demographics of the present sample may become increasingly reflective of many segments of the U.S. population, especially in major urban areas and in the Southwest and West. By 2050, it is expected that more than half of the country’s population will be composed of ethnic minorities and that 1 of every 4 Americans will be of Hispanic descent (Day, 1996; Huntington, 2004). It is therefore important to validate research and assessment instruments, and to replicate research results, across ethnic groups to ascertain the extent of applicability to an increasingly diverse and multicultural U.S. population.

Finally, the range of psychosocial outcomes examined in this study should be expanded. Clients presenting with troubled ruminations and other attachment-based problems may also report more severe personally and socially destructive behaviors, such as drug and alcohol abuse (Kassel, Wardle, & Roberts, 2007), eating disorders (Kiang & Harter, 2006), anti-social behavior (Arbona & Power, 2003), and serious criminal offending (McElhaney, Immele, Smith, & Allen, 2006).

### Implications for Professional Counseling

The present results may have important implications for counseling emerging adults, as we have discussed throughout this article. It should also be noted that the suggestions listed here apply to training new counselors as well as to providing additional resources for counselors already in practice. In summary, there are several reasons to screen emerging adult clients for troubled ruminations about parents. First, troubled ruminations may be associated with problems in other areas of psychosocial functioning, particularly depression, anxiety, romantic relationship problems, and low self-esteem and life satisfaction. All these problems are known to impair the client’s quality of life. Second, troubled ruminations also seem to represent deficits in attachment security—deficits that may be addressed through family counseling focusing on repairing the damaged attachment relationship (Hooper, 2007) and/or through creating a warm, trusting, nurturing, and uncondition-

ally positive counselor–client relationship (Mallinckrodt et al., 1995; Mallinckrodt et al., 2005).

The present results have also provided initial validation evidence for a four-item screening instrument for troubled ruminations about parents. This instrument seems valid for emerging adult clients from various backgrounds, and it can be easily added to existing assessment batteries. Given the associations of troubled ruminations with impaired psychosocial and relational functioning, it may be possible to use this brief screening instrument to lead counselors to explore issues of psychological distress, low self-worth, and relationship problems with new clients and to identify the possible parental sources of these problems. Additionally, when clients score high on the Troubled Ruminations About Parents scale, counselors may wish to incorporate attachment-building strategies into their treatment plans.

Most attachment-based approaches to counseling adolescents and young adults are rooted in the family therapy tradition (Diamond, Siqueland, & Diamond, 2003; Liddle & Schwartz, 2002). In cases in which family members are available to work with the emerging adult in counseling, family-based counseling may be effective in repairing attachment relationships and in reducing distress associated with perceived hurt, rejection, and lack of love from one or both of the parents. In cases in which family members are not available or are not willing to participate in counseling, individual-based approaches would need to be used. Such approaches may be grounded in other techniques for addressing distress and low self-regard, such as cognitive behavior therapy or interpersonal psychotherapy—both of which seem to be appropriate for emerging adults (Lee, 2005). To most effectively address troubled ruminations about parents, however, counselors would need to integrate such individual-based approaches with strategies to develop a secure counselor–client attachment relationship (cf. Mallinckrodt et al., 2005).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we have introduced, and provided preliminary validation evidence for, troubled ruminations about parents as a new construct representing a negative internal working model of the parent–child relationship. This construct draws on attachment theory, parental acceptance–rejection, and the literature on young adult children’s long-term reactions to parental divorce. As an individual difference construct, troubled ruminations about parents are applicable to clients across gender, ethnic groups, and family forms. Screening for troubled ruminations about parents—perhaps using the brief instrument that we developed to assess such ruminations—may well be helpful in developing a counseling plan for emerging adult clients. Scores on this screening instrument were significantly related to a number of indices of psychosocial and relational functioning, including many of the very feelings and concerns that lead emerging adults to seek counseling. We hope that

this new construct will be useful both in current counseling practice and in future research.

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