

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF ADOLESCENTS OF BROKEN AND INTACT FAMILIES IN GILGIT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Psychological effects on adolescents of broken families are an important topic in literature of the family. This research was conducted to compare the psychological problems of adolescents from broken families with adolescents from intact families.

Research Design: A comparative study

Place and Duration of study: Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, during January to December 2013.

Sample and Method: A total of 54 adolescents; 27 from broken family backgrounds and 27 with intact family backgrounds have participated in this study. Depression, anxiety, and stress scale was used to measure adolescents' psychological problems.

Results: According to the findings adolescents with broken family background have higher level of stress as compared to adolescents with intact family background. There were no differences in depression and anxiety in adolescents between intact and broken family background. Additionally, gender differences in psychological problems were also analyzed, but results are insignificant.

Conclusion: It is evident that adolescents with broken family background experienced higher level of stress as compared to adolescent with intact family background regardless of their gender, although, there were no differences in depression and anxiety between comparison groups.

Keywords: Adolescents, broken families, intact families, psychological problems, anxiety, depression

INTRODUCTION

There are multiple factors which are likely to disrupt families such as death and divorce of parents. In the early 1960s, around 90% children spent their childhood and adolescence with their two biological parents however, presently only 40% in United States of America and 50% in United Kingdom are living with their two biological parents (Wardsworth, 1986). After divorce most of the children (84%) are living with single parent particularly with mother (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Mental health workers, family theorists, educators and even politicians believes that children living with single parents can experience a strong and continuing harmful effects on their development (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Children living with single parent family either because of the death of one of their parents or parental divorce, however, the negative effects of parental marital conflicts and discords can take into account at least all areas of offspring maladjusted function such as low level of psychological wellbeing, more depression, behavioural problems, problems in their interpersonal relationship, and educational impairments (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Benzies, Harrison, & Magill-Evans, 2004; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & elder, 2000; Reid, & Crisafulli, 1990) because divorce affects primary bonds of children with their parents and presents a number of challenges (Hess & Camara, 1979). Unfortunately, these detrimental effects are not limited to the earlier stages of divorce and the development of children but these negative consequences can extend into offspring adulthood (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRee, 1998; Ross & Mirowski, 1999). According to the findings of a meta-analysis conducted by Amato (2001) children with divorced parents compared with children with continuously married parents consistently reportedly significantly lower scores on measures of psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations. Children of divorce families reported higher scores on the child behavior check list as compared to the control group. Their scores on social competence were lower, and scores on aggression, withdrawal, and social problems were higher as compared to the matched group (Liu et al., 2000).

More specifically, children of divorced families as judged by teachers and parents as well as self-report by children themselves have the higher level of anxiety and depression than match sample of children from intact families. Such findings suggest that children from divorced families are more susceptible to

anxiety and depression (Hoyt, Cowen, Pedro-Carroll, & Alpert-Gillis, 1990). Rumination is underlying risk factor for depression and anxiety but there is lack of literature which identifies factors that might lead to the development of ruminative response style. One of such factors is exposure to stressful life event that increases in rumination. According to the findings of the longitudinal samples study (adolescents & adults), both adolescents and adults stressful life events were longitudinally associated with increased engagement in rumination. In turn, rumination mediated the longitudinal association between stressful life events and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Michl, McLaughlin, Shepherd, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013). Even among nonclinical community adults, exposure to early life stressors in the form of family breakup accounted for significantly higher depressive and anxiety symptoms when compared with adults who reportedly have stressor free childhood regardless of participants' gender (Chu, Williams, Harris, Bryant, & Gatt, 2013). Findings of intergenerational transmission of divorce are reported by Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2008). They claimed that offspring's of divorced parents as compared to the offspring's of non divorced parents have more negative attitudes toward marriage, they have less personal relationship commitment to their own marriages, less confidence in their own abilities to maintain a happy marriage, and they were less optimistic about the long lasting healthy marriage. Further, they found that only females, from divorced families were more likely to enter marriage with relatively lower commitment and confidence as a result such factors raising risk for divorce of this kind of marriages in future.

Base on the reviewed empirical evidences, it can be concluded that parental divorce have short term as well long term negative psychological influences on the development of children. Therefore, the major objective of this research was to compare the psychological problems between adolescents of broken family background and intact families.

Research Hypothesis

Following hypotheses were established to test in this study;

- Adolescents of broken families would have higher psychological problems as defined by anxiety, depression, and stress as compared to the adolescents of intact families.
- There would be gender differences in psychological problems.

METHOD

Participants

Based on purposive sampling technique, a sample of 27 (14 males & 13 females) adolescents from broken families due to divorce was selected in this study. A match group of 27 (13 males & 14 females) adolescents with intact families also recruited from the same educational institutions to compare the psychological problems between two groups. Both groups were matched based on; equal in number, same educational institutions, same location (socio-cultural similarity), and same age range. The age of participants was ranged from 17-19 years with a mean of 18.3 and standard deviation of 1.7.

After a brief interview with the selected participants only those participants were selected for the study whose age was range between 17-19 years, adolescents have the age outside this range were not included because the minimum age ranged to administered the depression anxiety stress scale is 17 years.

Measures

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS) by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) was used to assess adolescents' psychological problems. The DASS is a widely used screening tool to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress in community settings. It has three subscales containing 14 items each: the depression subscale which measures dysphoria, hopelessness, devaluation of life, self-deprecation, lack of interest anhedonia, and inertia; the anxiety subscale which assesses autonomic arousal, skeletal muscles effects, situation anxiety, and subjective experiences of anxious affects; and the stress subscale assesses difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal and being easily upset, irritable, and impatient. Respondents are asked to use 4-point severity/frequency scale corresponding to their experiences of each state over the past week.

Regarding psychometric properties of the scale, Brown, Chorpita, Korotitsch, and Barlow (1997) found that the three scales have an excellent consistency and temporal stability for clinical samples. Factor analysis results were also highly consistent with the factor structure previously found in nonclinical samples. With other questionnaires and clinical rating measures of depression and anxiety demonstrated a good level of convergent and discriminant

validity. Tuan, Tuan, and Fisher (2003) reported a Cronbach's alpha ranged from .70 to .88 for women in the north of Vietnam. In this study the Cronbach's alpha were .73, .82, and .75 for depression, anxiety, and stress respectively.

Procedure

To identify the participants who were living in single-parent family as a result of parental divorce, after getting institutional permission, researchers have collected information about the parental marital status of participants from schools' and colleges' principals and concern teachers. Consent was taken from selected respondents and they were briefly interviewed individually and data was collected by administering DASS. In order to protect the ethical rights of participants their identifying information was not disclosed and they were assured to use the collected data only for research purpose.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data was entered and analyzed by statistical package for social sciences (SPSS 20). Cronbach's alpha, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize and ensure the response validity, while independent *t-test* was applied to compare the two means.

RESULTS

Table 1
Mean differences between broken and intact family adolescents on depression, anxiety, and stress scales (N=54)

| Scales | Groups | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>P</i> | <i>Cohen's d</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Depression | Intact family | 15.38 | 10.43 | 1.4 | .17 | .39 |
| | Broken family | 18.74 | 6.64 | | | |
| Anxiety | Intact family | 14.46 | 8.88 | 1.72 | .09 | .47 |
| | Broken family | 18.14 | 6.63 | | | |
| Stress | Intact family | 17.38 | 9.60 | 2.05 | .04 | .56 |
| | Broken family | 22.14 | 7.18 | | | |

As shown in table 1, adolescents with broken family backgrounds reported higher and statistically significant different scores on stress as compared

to the adolescents with intact family backgrounds. It indicates that adolescents from broken families have higher level of stress as compared to the adolescents from intact families. Scores on other two variables of psychological problems (anxiety & depression) showed that there are no significant differences between adolescents from broken and intact family backgrounds.

Table 2, shows the gender comparison on anxiety, depression, and stress, where no statistical differences were found between boys and girls scores. It revealed that the gender is not significant to determine participant's anxiety, depression, and stress for this sample.

Table 2
Mean differences between boys and girls on Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (N=54)

| Scales | Groups | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>P</i> | <i>Cohen's d</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Depression | Male | 15.68 | 7.44 | .87 | .38 | .35 |
| | Female | 17.88 | 4.96 | | | |
| Anxiety | Male | 15.78 | 8.22 | .37 | .71 | .10 |
| | Female | 16.64 | 7.92 | | | |
| Stress | Male | 17.21 | 9.62 | 1.6 | .10 | .46 |
| | Female | 21.26 | 7.92 | | | |

DISCUSSION

In the present study, psychological problems in terms of anxiety, depression, and stress were compared between adolescents from broken and intact families. Study findings suggested insignificant differences between two groups on depression and anxiety. However, significant difference was found in stress between comparison groups. Most of the available scientific literature in family psychology yielded somewhat contradictory findings. For example Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) concluded that children in divorced families, in comparison with children in intact families are at higher risk for developing emotional, behavioral, and social problems. After controlling several confounding variables, quality of marital relationship and parents' interpersonal conflicts associated and predicted offspring's psychopathology in early adulthood (Hayatbakhsh et al., 2013). Parental divorce has large, direct, and indirect impact

on depression of adult children through relationship commitment (Wauterickx, Gouwy, & Bracke, 2006). Family disruption as a result of parental divorce in childhood was associated with a higher lifetime risk of adult depression. The effects were stronger when the level of parental conflict increased (Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003). Participants with divorced parents in comparison of those with non divorced parents reported more negative emotional experiences (Jonsson, Njardvik, Olafsdottir, & Gretarsson, 2000).

Amato (1994) reported that children of broken families as compared to children in intact families exhibited more conduct problems, symptoms of psychological maladjustment, social difficulties, poor self-concept and lower academic achievements. Similarly, adults who experiences parental divorce as children reported higher levels of same problems including lower well-being as compared to adults raised in continuously intact families. However, a sizeable diversity was existed in children's reaction to parental divorce and the overall group differences were small. It indicates that apart from divorce other factors, such as relationship with custodial and noncustodial parents, custodial parents' psychological adjustment and parenting skills, pre and post-divorce interpersonal conflicts, economic hardships, and other life stressors are also important to explain offspring's psychological health along with parental marital status.

Parental divorce increases the depressive symptoms among adolescents, although, stressful life events after parental divorce mediated the effect of parental divorce on depressive symptoms (Xiaoja, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006). Hence, parental divorce has negative effect on adolescents' mental health, when it is added with pre-divorce parental conflicts and post-divorce negative experiences then it became more harmful. Children are at high risk to develop problems in adjustment when they are growing up in either in conflicted two-parent families or in a single-parent home. However, children can adjust well in a tuneful single-parent home than in discordant two-parent home. In absence of parental conflicts and positive parenting environment provided by a single custodial parent, children in divorced families are more likely to become competent and well adjusted (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

In Gilgit-Baltistan, family bonds are relatively strong, when divorce like unavoidable event occurs; extended family members and other relatives take a good care of children of disrupted family. Possibly, this is the reason that adolescents from broken families, reported higher level of stress but did not differ in terms of depression and anxiety when compared with adolescents from

intact families. Probably, they may experience stress as reaction to parental divorce but with the support of other family members they manage themselves and didn't suffer relatively severe psychopathology like depression and anxiety. There were no significant differences in children's behavioral profiles in association of their parental divorce status although, poor interaction with family members correlated with children's psychological well-being (Heckel et al., 2013). Additionally, some researchers found that older children are more likely to suffer in psychological problems after parents' divorce (Frost & Pakiz, 1990) but Allison and Furstenberg (1989) claimed that younger children are more vulnerable for psychological problems as a consequences of parental divorce because they are unable to understand the family dynamic and blame themselves for parental divorce and have less access to possible support in relationship outside of the family. This can also be a possible reason for this research sample where respondents were adolescents. They can, to some extent, understand family dynamics and have all possible access to support in their relations outside of primary family members.

Conclusion

In summary, parental marital dissolution has the potentials to create turmoil in offspring's lives but they vary greatly in their reactions to their parental divorce. Parental divorce leads some people to experience temporary stress as what we have found in this study and force others on a downward to psychopathology from where they are unable to recover back but in some cases, parental divorce benefits offspring as indicated by some of above mentioned empirical evidences. Additionally, it is recommended to ensure the availability of counseling services and financial support for those single-parent families who are experiencing the bitter truth of divorce to ensure the congenial environment for their developing children. It is also suggested to enhance the personal, interpersonal, and social support for children of divorced families so that they may cope with the stress of parental divorce and it may result in the prevention of psychopathology including depression and anxiety.

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