

Parental Discord, Divorce and Adolescent Development

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Summary. The impact of parental discord and divorce on adolescent well-being and behaviour was studied. School children ($n = 2194$) aged 15 to 16 completed questionnaires in the class-room. Children in divorced families and in families of discord experienced more distress symptoms than children in intact families. Lower school performance was associated with divorce, but not with parental discord. Sex differences were found in self-esteem: girls in divorced families reported the lowest self-esteem, whereas boys in families of discord reported lower self-esteem than boys in the other groups. Group differences in reported self-image were small. Compared with children in intact families, the observed differences were in girls mainly in the divorced group and in boys in the group of marital discord. In both sexes abundant alcohol use and in boys delinquent acts were more common in families of discord or divorce than in intact families.

Key words: Emotional stress – Divorce – Family – Adolescence

Introduction

Many studies have shown that parental divorce is a stressful experience for children at any age (Richards and Dyson 1982; Cooney et al. 1986). Some sequelae of divorce emerge rapidly following separation, some increase over the first years following divorce and then abate and others may show a delayed emergence (Hetherington et al. 1982). It is important to make a distinction between short-term and long-term effects and to study these effects at different developmental phases.

Relatively few studies have addressed the impact of divorce on adolescent development. Adolescence

is believed to be a period during which the intra-psychic conflicts of earlier childhood are reactivated and finally resolved (e.g. Blos 1979). Normally this is a gradual process over many years. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that family rupture during adolescence could either drive adolescent development forward at a greatly accelerated tempo or retard it. Some youngsters matured rapidly, others were unable to mature without family support and fell behind. Family functions of providing discipline, external structure and control were also weakened by divorce, and the divorce left some adolescents feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses. Contributing to the adolescent's anxiety was their divorce-related perception of their parents as sexual persons. They also experienced heightened anxieties regarding their future competence as sexual partners. In a study by Reinhard (1977) adolescents also reported that they had had to mature faster and to assume greater responsibility after parental divorce.

The possible impact of earlier divorce on adolescent development may be a complex combination of reactivations of earlier problems in relationships and the influence of present family relationships and life circumstances. In a 5-year follow-up Wallerstein (1983) reported that although no significant sex or age differences emerged there was a subgroup of girls who, upon entering adolescence, became acutely depressed. In a 10-year follow-up of children who, now in their teens, had experienced parental divorce when they were between 2.5 and 6 years old Wallerstein (1984) reported that about one-third of the children still had strong negative feelings about divorce as they spoke of a continued sense of deprivation within the divorced or remarried family. A heightened need to establish relationships with the absent father was common, especially among girls, Hetherington (1972) reported that girls in families with ab-

sent fathers due to divorce in adolescence had problems which manifested mainly as disruptions in interactions with males. Slater et al. (1983) reported that the self-concept of adolescent girls in divorced families was negatively affected whereas that of boys was not. The results of these studies suggest that if any sex differences regarding the impact of divorce in adolescence exist, girls may be more vulnerable. Quite consistently the impact of marital discord and divorce has been found to be more pervasive and enduring for boys than for girls in childhood before puberty (Hetherington 1981; Emery 1982; Rutter 1982).

Adolescents in divorced families have been reported to have more negative self evaluation (Boyd et al. 1983), poorer school performance and less optimism about the future (Saucier and Ambert 1982) than adolescents in intact families. Gibson (1969) reported delinquency to be more common among boys in divorced families. Coleman et al. (1985) reported that children from divorced families started dating at an earlier age.

Divorce is not a single event but a process that involves many aspects of the life situation long before and after the actual family break-up. Many authors have suggested that parental discord is the crucial factor for distress in children both in intact and in divorcing families (Hess and Camara 1979; Raschke and Raschke 1979; Emery 1982; Chess et al. 1983; Slater and Haber 1984; Long 1986).

We studied the impact of parental divorce and parental discord on adolescent well-being and behaviour. More specifically, the questions of the study were: do adolescents in families of discord and divorce experience more distress symptoms than adolescents in intact families? Are there differences in self-esteem, self-image, school performance, alcohol use and dating behaviour between these groups? Are the answers to these questions related to sex differences?

Method

The study population included all ninth grade pupils of secondary schools in the spring of 1983 in a Finnish town. There were 2269 pupils, most of whom were born in 1967; 2194 of the pupils (97%) filled in questionnaires in May 1983. The questionnaires were completed in class-rooms in a group setting conducted by a research worker. The mean age of the pupils was 15.9 years (SD 0.3 years). Information about parental divorce as well as other data in the study were based on self-report. Adolescents in the two-parent families were divided into two groups on the basis of reported parental discord. Those adolescents in two-parent families who agreed with the statement "my parents have many problems in their mutual relationship", formed the group of parental discord. Two-parent families without reported parental discord were called intact

families. A total of 24% of the children had experienced parental divorce or separation. Only about 10% of them had experienced parental divorce during the previous 17 months. Therefore the results reflected the long-term impacts rather than immediate responses to divorce. In intact two-parent families one in four girls and one in five boys reported that their parents had problems in their mutual relationship. Adolescents who had experienced parental death were excluded from the present study.

The score of distress symptoms covered 17 somatic and psychic complaints frequently included in symptom checklists: abdominal pains, loss of appetite, headache, lack of energy or depression, difficulties in falling asleep or awakening during the night, nausea or vomiting, anxiety or nervousness, dizziness, tremor of hands, nightmares, diarrhoea or irregular bowel function, fatigue or feebleness, excessive perspiration without physical effort, heartburn or acidity troubles, irritability or fits of anger, breathlessness and palpitations. The score had earlier been used in a nationwide Finnish study of juvenile health habits (Rimpelä et al. 1982) and also in an adult population study (Aro 1981). The respondents answered the question "have any of the following symptoms bothered you and how often during this school term?" (the term had lasted for about 4 months). The symptom score was construed by summing up the following ratings of separate items: 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = quite often, 3 = often or continuously. Girls were also asked whether some of these symptoms occurred only during menstruation; if this was the case, such symptoms were excluded from individual scores in order to obtain better comparability between the sexes. The test-retest reliability of the score assessed by 5-month correlations was $r = 0.71$.

A semantic differential scale of self-image developed by Rauste-von Wright (1975) among Finnish adolescents was used as a measure of self-image. The test consisted of 21 bipolar scales representing various personality characteristics. In the current study as well as in the original study, the factor analysis yielded 7 factors which were interpreted as: intelligence vs mediocrity; attractiveness vs unattractiveness; leadership vs submissiveness; matter-of-factness vs emotionality; presence of mind vs impulsiveness; relaxedness vs anxiety and energy vs lack of energy. The self-esteem scale was a modified version of a self-esteem scale developed for Finnish students (Helenius and Lyttinen 1974). It consisted of 7 self-assertions with a 5-point scale. The assertions were: I believe in myself and in my possibilities; I wish I were different from what I am; I suffer from feelings of inferiority, I think I have many good qualities; I feel I lack self-confidence; I am capable of doing the same as others; I am often dissatisfied with myself. In each self-image factor the theoretical range was from 3 to 15, and in the self-esteem scale from 7 to 35. Self-reported means of school marks were used as a measure of school performance. Those who reported that they had been intoxicated by alcohol monthly or more frequently during the term were included in the heavy drinking group. We further asked whether the adolescent had been apprehended breaking the law during the previous 12 months. Adolescents who reported that they had dated, for however short a period, were included in the group with dating experiences. Subjects were grouped into three social classes based on a standard classification of occupations (Central Statistical Office of Finland 1975) using primarily the father's occupation, but if it was missing the mother's.

The data were analysed by comparing means and proportions in families of discord, in divorced families and in intact families by analysis of variance and χ^2 statistics. Group differences were tested with one-way analysis of variance including

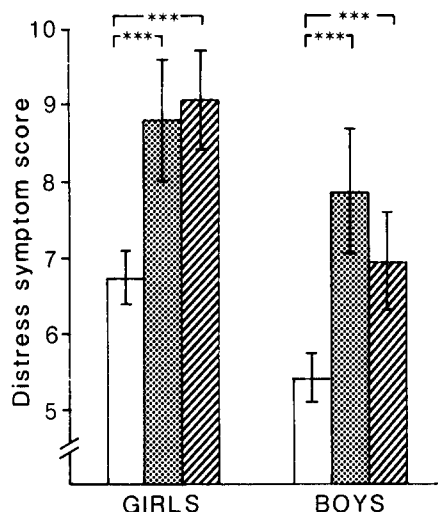


Fig. 1. Means (\pm 95% confidence interval) of distress symptoms by the family situation in girls and boys (Scheffe's test: **** $P < 0.001$). (□) Intact family, (▨) Parental discord, (▩) Parental divorce

post hoc tests using the Scheffe procedure, separately for girls and boys. Sex differences were tested with two-way (sex \times family situation) analysis of variance.

Results

Levels of distress symptoms in the three family groups are presented in Fig. 1. Significant group differences were found among girls ($F_{(2;980)} = 26.8$, $P < 0.001$) and among boys ($F_{(2;1021)} = 23.8$, $P < 0.001$). Children in divorced families and in families of discord reported significantly more distress symptoms than adolescents in intact families. Boys in families of discord had slightly higher distress symptom scores than boys in divorced families, whereas

girls in divorced families had slightly higher symptom scores than girls in families of discord. However, neither of these differences reached statistical significance, and in two-way analysis of variance sex \times family situation interaction was not significant. The results showed similar trends when somatic and psychic symptoms of the score were analysed separately.

Table 1 shows the means of school performance, self-esteem and self-image factors in the three family groups. Both girls and boys in divorced families had poorer school performance than children either in intact families or in families of discord. Girls in divorced families reported lower self-esteem than girls in intact families. Boys in families of discord reported lower self-esteem than boys in intact families or in divorced families. The two-way analysis of variance also showed significant sex \times family situation interaction on self-esteem ($P < 0.01$).

Differences in factors of reported self-image were not large, but compared with children in intact families differences were found in girls mainly in the group of divorce, and in boys in the group of marital discord. Girls in divorced families reported themselves less intelligent, more impulsive and slightly less energetic than girls in intact families. Girls in families of parental discord did not differ from girls in intact families on any other self-image dimension but reported themselves more impulsive. Boys in families of discord reported themselves more emotional, slightly less energetic, more impulsive and more anxious than boys in intact families. Boys in divorced families rated themselves slightly more emotional and less intelligent than boys in intact families. However, in two-way analyses of variance sex \times family situation interaction was not statistically significant for any self-image factor.

Table 1. Means of school performance, self-esteem and self-image factors by the family situation in girls and boys (one-way analysis of variance and Scheffe's test, compared with intact family: **** $P < 0.001$, ** $P < 0.01$, * $P < 0.05$)

	Girls				Boys			
	Intact family ($n = 539-549$)	Parental discord ($n = 175-179$)	Parental divorce ($n = 247-254$)	F	Intact family ($n = 621-634$)	Parental discord ($n = 151-157$)	Parental divorce ($n = 218-228$)	F
School performance	7.9	7.8	7.5***	25.4***	7.5	7.3	7.1***	16.5***
Self-esteem (\rightarrow low)	17.2	18.1	18.6**	7.6***	14.7	16.9***	15.1	15.5***
Self-image (\rightarrow high)								
Intelligence	9.4	9.1	8.6***	8.4***	10.3	9.9	9.7*	4.4*
Energy	10.3	9.9	9.8*	4.1*	11.1	10.4*	10.8	4.8**
Leadership	9.8	9.8	10.0	0.5	9.6	9.9	9.7	1.3
Attractiveness	9.1	9.2	9.2	0.2	9.8	9.5	9.9	1.7
Presence of mind	9.4	8.4***	8.5***	15.4***	10.4	9.8*	10.0	4.1*
Relaxedness	9.2	8.9	9.1	1.4	9.8	9.2*	9.7	4.0*
Matter-of-factness	6.8	6.5	6.4	3.3*	8.8	8.1**	8.3*	6.9**

sociations between the family situation and the outcome measures were similar in the three social class groups.

Discussion

Since the questionnaires were completed in classrooms, the situation was controlled and motivated, and possible interviewer biases were avoided. The method also gave a very high response rate. However, the results must be generalized with caution, since all data were based on self-report. Our definition of parental discord was crude, and it reflects the adolescents' perceptions of their parents' relationship which may be coloured by the adolescent's psychic status. On the other hand it may be argued that such perceptions in themselves are of importance. The absolute frequencies of alcohol use and delinquent acts may be under-reported, but it seems unlikely that the answers would be biased differently between the family groups. Our results relate only to Finnish urban children. Consequences of divorce probably differ between societies as well as historically (Richards and Dyson 1982). Further, our results concern the adolescent period, and long-term effects of divorce if they exist may be quite different in adulthood.

The judgement of parental discord was contemporaneous whereas for the great majority of children divorce had taken place earlier in childhood. Thus conclusions about their relative impact are methodologically problematic due to this different time lag (Richards and Dyson 1982). Parental discord may often mean an acute stressor, whereas divorce may reflect mainly earlier or chronic stressors. In any case the results showed that both divorce and parental discord were associated with adolescent distress and problem behaviour. Children in divorced families and families of discord reported more distress symptoms, more abundant alcohol use and (in boys) more delinquent acts than children in intact families.

Girls from divorced families reported the lowest self-esteem, whereas boys in families of discord reported lower self-esteem than boys in the other groups. Our results suggest that boys continue to be more vulnerable than girls to parental discord in adolescence. In our study adolescent boys also experienced more distress symptoms associated with stressful life events (Aro 1987). On the other hand the results suggested that the self-concept of girls in adolescence may be affected to a greater extent by earlier divorce. Pubertal development in girls is often an ambivalent process and accompanied with distress (e.g. Aro and Taipale 1987). Parental divorce may

add to the stressfulness of this process. Hetherington (1972) suggested that girls in divorced families have difficulties especially in the area of sexual development and relationships with men. In our study dating was more common in divorced families, but we had insufficient data for a more detailed analysis. On the other hand, delinquent acts in boys were more common in divorced families while in girls they were rare. This suggests that different aspects of the adolescent developmental process may be affected by divorce in girls and boys.

Lower school performance was associated with divorce in both sexes, but not with parental discord. This association remained even after controlling for social class. A decline in school performance in younger children associated with divorce has been reported in many studies (Hess and Camara 1979; Hetherington et al. 1982). Adolescents seem to be able to maintain their school performance unaffected by parental discord.

These comparisons between intact, discordant and divorced families are very crude, and our study does not enable us to reach conclusions about the mechanisms involved in explaining the observed differences between the family groups. Divorce is not a single event but a multi-stage process which radically changes family relationships and which affects children long before the actual separation of parents occurs. For instance, Block et al. (1986) found in a prospective study that children, especially boys, whose parents were going to divorce differed in behaviour from those whose parents remained together, even 11 years before the actual marital rupture. There is strong evidence that parental discord is one crucial factor producing negative consequences of divorce (Rutter 1979). Different research findings on the impact of parental loss by death and divorce suggest that it is probably not separation as such that is crucial (Emery 1982). Divorce may be followed by continued instability in family structure and lasting changes in social and economic circumstances. There may be great individual differences in vulnerability, psychological meaning, family relationships, extra-familial support and other concrete circumstances around the event of divorce (Rutter 1985). As Brown et al. (1986) have pointed out, complex chains of experiences must be studied in order to understand the mechanisms involved.

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Received June 30, 1987