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PREVIEW

The Relationship Between Parental Marital Status, Family Rapport, and the Self-Reported Psychopathology of Adolescents

Andrea L. Apuzzi, M.S.Ed.

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Pace University

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Abstract

Divorce and remarriage rates in this country are among the highest in the world, and both variations in the traditional parental marital status can place children at increased risk for developing social, psychological, behavioral, and academic problems. The existing body of research on the effects of divorce and remarriage on children is inconsistent and limited in focus, in that the climate of the family life generally was not considered in the early literature. Thus, the present study was designed to address the relationship between parental marital status and family rapport on the self-reported psychopathology in adolescents from a predominantly middle to upper middle class suburban town. A sample of 175 high school students (grades 9-12) were taken from a larger longitudinal study of adolescent development and depression. Three Parental Marital Status groups were used: Divorced/Not Remarried (N=38), Divorced/Reconstituted (N=50), and Married (N=87). All subjects completed two self-report measures: the Family Rapport Scale of the Millon Adolescent Personality Inventory, and the problem scales of the Youth Self Report. Additionally, a demographic sheet was filled out, yielding pertinent information about the students and their parents' marital status. The relationship between the two quasi-independent variables (Parental Marital Status and Family Rapport) and the dependent variable (Self-Reported Externalizing and Internalizing Psychopathology) was examined. Additional variables such as

Gender, Chronological Age, Age of the Child at the Time of Divorce, Time Elapsed Since the Divorce, and Remarriage were studied as potential predictors of clinical levels of internalizing and externalizing psychopathology. Analyses of Variance and Stepwise Discriminant Analysis procedures were used in order to test the research questions for significance. Results of the present study suggest that Family Rapport, rather than Marital Status can account for differences in levels of self-reported psychopathology in the three groups of adolescents. Family functioning is the factor most contributory to adolescent behavior problems, not parental marital status; thus, divorce is not as crippling as it has been suggested to be. No gender differences were noted across the marital status groups, and remarriage did not add to the prediction of behavior problems. Implications for school psychology and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Chapter One

Introduction

Adolescence has often been conceptualized as a developmental stage reflective of much turmoil. The main developmental task is identity formation. In order to achieve that goal, separation from one's parents must occur in such a way so that one's own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs begin to emerge. Blos (1967) refers to adolescence as a second individuation process, during which the ties to the infantile love objects must be relinquished, in the service of forming a newly integrated, self-defined identity. Kaplan (1984, p.109) speaks of adolescence as a time to bid "farewell to childhood" and revise one's past. In revising the past, the adolescent must acquire a gender identity, aim sexual desire away from the family and toward the larger social group, relinquish the idealizations of the parents, and resolve the dilemmas between personal desire and moral authority (Kaplan, 1984). As described by both Blos (1967) and Kaplan (1984), it seems that the tasks of adolescence are complex, and challenging.

"Throughout the entire adolescent period, parental monitoring of children's behavior is critical if children are to develop into self-controlled, prosocial young people" (Hetherington & Anderson, 1988, p.61). Therefore, the adolescent's parents have a significant impact on their transition into adulthood, in that their attitude toward this separation is a crucial component. Are they supportive of the adolescent's independent strivings or are they tightening their hold on them? Is

there too much chaos among family members to even notice the changes the adolescent is undergoing? In the answers to these questions lies valuable information pertaining to one's development.

Although developmentally the adolescent is making a shift away from the parents and toward his peers, the attitude of his parents still plays a critical role in his successful completion of this task. The nuclear family provides emotional and physical support, which facilitates in crossing the border between childhood and adolescence (Springer & Wallerstein, 1983). When the climate of the family is stressful, there can be detrimental outcomes for the adolescent (Forehand, Wierson, McCombs Thomas, Armistead, Kempton, & Neighbors, 1991). Parental divorce and remarriage are two examples of family stressors that have been found to have a negative impact on the functioning of adolescents.

Marriage rates in the United States are among the highest in the world, but so are divorce and remarriage rates (Roberts, 1993). Preliminary statistics for 1992 indicate that of the 2.36 million marriages performed in 1992, 1.22 million divorces occurred (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). Furthermore, the median duration of marriage reported in 1988 was 7.1 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994).

Most of the people who divorce do not remain single, and half of those who decide to remarry do so within 2 1/2 years (Roberts, 1993). In 1988, of all

the marriages performed, 54.1 % were initial marriages for the bride and groom, while the other 45.9 % involved remarriages of either the bride, groom, or both (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). In 1970, 1 in 10 families were headed by one parent, but today the ratio is about 3 in 10 (Roberts, 1993). It was estimated that in 1988, one million children were involved in divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994), and the proportion of children under age 18 living with two parents dropped from 88% in 1960 to 73% in 1990 (Roberts, 1993). However, it is estimated that as a result of remarriages and premarital births, 15% of the children living with two parents are stepchildren; thus “just over half the children in the United States today are being reared by both their biological parents” (Roberts, 1993, p.52).

Given these statistics, it is evident that divorced and reconstituted families are a reality for today's youth. Much research has been done on the children of divorce, and there are many differing viewpoints as to the most critical aspects of the divorce. Some researchers label the actual divorce as being detrimental to the adjustment of the children, whereas others think that the amount of time that passes since the divorce, or the child's age and gender are the critical factors. More recent studies are suggesting that early divorce research was too limited in focus in that the family climate and the complexity of the situation were not taken into account.

Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985, p.518 state "There have been many studies of the differences between children of divorced and nondivorced parents; however, few investigators have addressed the possible variations in the sequence of family relationships and life experiences that may occur following divorce. For most children, divorce is only one in a series of family transitions and reorganizations that follow separation and marital dissolution." Substantial research has indicated that most children experience divorce as a stressful life event and subsequently exhibit emotional distress, and behavior problems (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hetherington et al., 1985); however, the problem is too complex to simply implicate the absent parent as being the cause of these children's at risk status (Partridge & Kotler, 1987). Divorce and remarriage can place children at increased risk for developing social, psychological, behavioral, and academic problems; yet, they can also remove children from stressful and acrimonious family situations (Hetherington, 1991). In fact, Kurdek (1991, p.304) states that "there seems to be little support for the view that high-conflict parents should stay together because their children are too young, too old, or the wrong gender to experience a parent breakup."

In the following sections, different theoretical explanations of the effects of marital dissolution and remarriage will be discussed. The theories to be explored

encompass components of the psychoanalytic, family systems, and social learning schools of thought .

Theoretical Explanations of the Effects of Marital Dissolution

In addition to the identification of varying factors that potentially impact upon children of divorce, there are also diverse theoretical explanations of how the marital dissolution affects the psychological development and adjustment of the children. Aspects of Psychoanalytic, Family Systems, and Social Learning theories have been applied to this body of research. For example, identification, family role confusion, and modeling are a few specific processes that have been referred to when theorizing about the psychological effects of marital disruption on children.

One theory, taken from the psychoanalytic perspective, posits that the child or adolescent's behavior after divorce can be explained through a process of identification. The identification can be used by the child as a defense. By taking on aspects of the absent parent, there is an effort to maintain a sense of intimacy with this parent; thus lessening the painful affect associated with the loss (Chethik, Dolin, Davies, Lohr, & Darrow, 1986). This identification process can be positive, as well as negative. An example of a positive identification is when a child loses a parent through divorce, identifying with the lost object can "enhance the personality of the child by allowing him to preserve the relationship, and continue to make use of a mixture of affection and guidance given to him by that parent"

(Chethik et al., 1986, p.123). In contrast, there can be a negative identification, which refers to taking on the negative attributes of the lost parental object (Chethik et al., 1986). Loss of the intact family, in addition to the loss of the intact family that they never had and now will never have the opportunity to have are all experienced (Springer & Wallerstein, 1983) as a result of marital dissolution. Feelings of sadness and rage, fears of abandonment and rejection, and the loss of self-esteem all can potentially be aroused within the child/adolescent, and at times the anxiety that arises along with the experienced affect is defended against through a negative identification (Chethik et al., 1986).

Chethik et al. (1986) describe numerous examples of a child's use of negative identification as a defense. Acting out and withdrawal after the divorce can be explained by negative identification. For example, a child may withdraw just as his father did before the divorce. Additionally, a child/adolescent may identify with disturbed aspects of the parent so as to identify with the aggressor, and ward off the fear of being victimized. By doing this, he/she masters the pain and defends against feelings of helplessness (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). A child/adolescent may also react to the lost parent through a defensive splitting, where an idealized image of the absent object is maintained in order to ward off fear, anger and shared characteristics between them and toward that parent. Lastly, a child/adolescent may choose to consciously reject the characteristics of

the remaining parent object. In so doing, the child/adolescent unconsciously is distinguishing him/herself from the object that was rejected in hopes that he/she also will not fall victim to that same horrible fate.

Another theory from the psychoanalytic perspective, focusing on loss, has been put forth by Judith Wallerstein, one of the predominant early researchers in divorce. Dealing with the loss of the parent is the most difficult task for children, according to Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989). They suggest that at the core of the loss are feelings of rejection, humiliation, unlovability, powerlessness, blame, and anger. Handling their angry feelings becomes a critical issue. Is the anger internalized, leading the child to feel angry at him/herself rather than at the parent? Or, is it externalized, and acted out rather than expressed in words? Wallerstein & Blakeslee (1989) report that the unresolved and inhibited anger within the children of divorce manifests itself in different ways. Anger turned inward is an aspect of depression, while anger turned outward is a key part of delinquency. They theorize that children may become angry with their parents for causing their pain, and dismissing their needs, and boys specifically may become angry with their mothers for causing the divorce or driving their father out of the house (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976). However, this intense anger is also aimed at the parents that they love and desperately need. In short, these children are in a bind, due to their ambivalent feelings. They are afraid to express their anger due to the fear of

rejection and a wish to protect their parents (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). As a result of their fears, dealing with the unresolved anger becomes a core problem that will continue to manifest itself in various forms throughout the child's life.

A family systems view would explain the impact of divorce in terms of a redefinition of family relationships. Structurally, the family divides into two parts, causing one parent to be less available, and altering parent-child relationships, family roles, and responsibilities (Tschann, Johnston, Kline, & Wallerstein, 1990). The family roles and boundaries change as a result of the stress on the system. Some say there is a tendency toward an enmeshed mother-oldest child relationship, stemming from a fear of abandonment on the part of both the mother and child (Weltner, 1982). Cross-generational boundaries tend to become blurred after divorce and remarriage (Weltner, 1982), due to either the parents' unwillingness (Wallerstein, 1985) or incapability of maintaining this generational distance (Weltner, 1982; Wallerstein, 1985). Weltner (1982) suggests that the necessary parenting functions, such as limit setting and providing nurturance, become compromised because the parent does not have the emotional strength to maintain his/her position as a parent.

As the generational distance diminishes, roles are redefined in terms of symbiotic relationships between the parent and child. Weltner (1982) indicates that these enmeshed relationships are maintained partially due to the parent and

child's fears of expressing anger. According to Weltner (1982), normally anger helps to create distance in relationships; however, distance in a family that has already experienced abandonment is very risky. Thus, the anger of the child is either internalized or externalized rather than expressed appropriately at the parent (Weltner, 1982). Furthermore, Weltner (1982) and Papernow (1984) cite the need of the parent to keep the child in an enmeshed subsystem. In so doing, the parent retains a source of love, support, and nurturance through their child. With the confusion of roles and the blurring of boundaries, this family system becomes unhealthy (Zastowny & Lewis, 1989). Although these family patterns and roles are not healthy, they become familiar. Thus, any attempt to separate from the family will be resisted and seen as a threat to equilibrium (Zastowny & Lewis, 1989).

Within a single-parent family, a child can also take on a new role as a scapegoat. Here, the child becomes the convenient one to blame for parental conflicts (Fauber, Forehand, McCombs Thomas, & Wierson, 1990), or for all of the family's problems (Weltner, 1982). Fauber et al. (1990) suggest that scapegoating a child may lead to rejection of him or her by the parents, and subsequently to an increase in acting out behaviors.

Encompassing a family systems viewpoint, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) speak of divorce as a breakdown in the family structure, a detrimental