Self-Esteem in Young Adults: The Effects of Parental Divorce in Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship of parental divorce during childhood and the self-esteem of young adult offspring. It was expected that adult children of divorced parents (where the divorce occurred during childhood) would display lower levels of self-esteem than adult children of intact families, and that male students of divorced parents would display lower levels of self-esteem than female students of divorced parents. Sixty-five college students volunteered participation in the study. All students completed the same Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ). No significant difference was found between the self-esteem of adult children of divorced parents and adult children of intact parents, or between the self-esteem of males and females. Limited time and sample sizes were expected to have affected the obtained results. It is believed that future research is necessary in the area of adult self-esteem following parental divorce in childhood. It is hoped that such research will lead to improved counseling programs following parental divorce in order to decrease the detrimental developmental affects on self-esteem.

Coopersmith defined self-esteem as “a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude the individual holds toward himself” (1967, p.20). As children develop, self-esteem is formed in many ways. Children develop a sense of self through interactions with the environment and others. They determine who they are, their likes and dislikes, and their talents and skills. While this sense of self is often known as self-concept, self-esteem actually steps beyond this initial descriptive phase and becomes a feeling of internal worth. After evaluating themselves based on the personal values and ideals they have developed, children evaluate themselves based on their perceptions of others (i.e., peers, parents, and teachers). Eventually, children compare themselves to the expectations perceived from others and internally decide what the future holds in store for them (Campbell, 1984). All of these factors complexly combine to determine self-esteem. While individual life events may mildly affect self-esteem, it is generally seen to be an enduring and relatively unchanging quality throughout life after its development in childhood (Coopersmith, 1967). Understanding that self-esteem, once established (whether high or low), is a lasting quality leads to careful consideration of any childhood events that could adversely affect its development. Parental divorce is one such disruptive event.

The incidence of divorce has become a prevalent force in today's society. America's Children performed a study in 1993 that estimated only 40-45% of children born in 1980 would spend all of their years up to age 18 in an intact family (Res, 1998). The rapidly increasing divorce rate and the changing face of family structures are undoubtedly affecting the children involved. Many studies have explored the effect of divorce on child development. The results of these studies have repeatedly linked parental divorce to many childhood developmental problems. Children who experience parental divorce exhibit problems in school (Kaye, 1988), depression (Mruk, 1995; Palossari & Aro, 1996), aggression (Mckay, Rogers, Blades, & Gosse, 1984), reduced levels of social functioning (Camara & Resnick, 1988), anxiety (Stewart, Copeland & Chester, 1997), and numerous somatic symptoms (Johnston & Campbell, 1988). Instead of the home and family existing as a place where a child can securely develop without fear and emotional harm, divorce places children in an environment of conflict and uncertainty, which measurably affects development in these and many other areas. Children of divorce have also reported feelings of loneliness and rejection (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), incompetence (Forehand, 1988), and insecurity (Stewart, et al., 1997). Additionally, as suspected, previous studies have shown that parental divorce significantly affects children's levels of self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Since we know that parents play a key role in the development of self-esteem, it is not surprising that a disruption in the parental relationship would have an effect on that development. After divorce, a major change in parenting takes place simply as a result of the absence of the non-custodial parent. Mruk (1995) found that children with parents who are absent frequently or for long periods of time display lower levels of self-esteem. Children often view this parental absence as a sort of rejection and in turn question their worth (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). They may experience anxiety over the fear that if the love in the marriage relationship can end, so too could the love in the parent-child relationship. Socio-economic sta-
tus might also change with divorce. Instead of only one household to maintain, now there are two. Spending habits are often curtailed, and activities and purchases that were once commonplace now become rare. Children are often acutely aware of these changes in spending and finances. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that three-quarters of the 136 children they studied reported fears about basic needs being met. The majority of divorce cases end with maternal custody of the child, which also leads to changes in family lifestyle. Many women feel compelled to return to work or obtain training and education for a career. The effect for children is that mom is much less available in addition to dad being rarely present (McKay, et al., 1984). Routines and traditions change drastically, and the world that the child was accustomed to is suddenly turned upside down. Not only do both parents often have less time for the child, they are also both struggling with emotional issues and adjustments of their own. McKay et al. (1984) found that as the primary parent struggles to keep emotional balance and still manage the home, children receive less attention. Precisely when they need more support and nurturing, they often do without. Often under these circumstances, parenting styles and skills that were originally healthy and nurturing will shift to less optimal forms. Parents who have failed to stabilize their own lives over a period of many years are struggling to raise a child, and the child suffers (Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988).

All of these circumstances can lead to detrimental effects on self-esteem. As children feel that the world around them is uncertain and that the attention and affection of the people around them is changeable, they may begin to internalize their uncertainties and question their own worth. While some studies suggest that self-esteem and emotional well-being increase after the first year of divorce, this is often a temporary effect created when high conflict within the home is largely relieved. Longitudinal studies show later decline in these figures, indicating that even when detrimental effects are delayed, they are still present and lasting (Wallerstein et al., 1988). Stewart et al. (1987) found that immediately following divorce, children were often comforted by relational closeness, but as soon as a year later, anxiety about security and material resources jeopardized adjustment. In Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) research, it was found in a five-year follow-up that 37% of the children were found to be in poor psychological health and that all of the children in this group were moderately to severely depressed. They also found that over one third of the children were intensely unhappy with their lives. Johnston and Campbell (1988) found that 2-3 years after the divorce, children were two to four times more likely to be seriously disturbed emotionally and behaviorally than children of intact families. Another study found that two years after the divorce, children displayed lower levels of social and peer functioning as well as lower self-esteem than they did immediately following the divorce (Camara & Resnick, 1988). Johnson (1988) found that 59% of parents interviewed three years after separation believed that at least one child had been negatively affected and suffered divorce-related problems.

As the evidence suggests, parental divorce leads to lower levels of self-esteem in children. Self-esteem is an enduring quality that is established in childhood and is relatively unchanged. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that a number of years after divorce, negative effects remain and are sometimes worse than in the immediate aftermath. Considering all of these factors, it would logically follow that adult offspring of parents who divorced during their childhood would still demonstrate the effects of the divorce.

While many studies have been done investigating the effects of divorce on self-esteem during childhood, very few have been performed with adult offspring participants. Studies have shown that those whose parents divorce during childhood are more depressed, feel less satisfied with life, struggle with relationships and have poorer physical health (Beal & Hochman, 1991; Ross, 1999). Adult offspring of divorced parents also report lower levels of psychological and marital well-being than adults from intact families (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995). In 1985, Glenn and Kramer found that adults from divorced families had lower well-being scores on seven out of eight measures than adults from intact families (Amato, 1988). When paired with previous findings of studies on children and self-esteem, these findings lead to an expectation of continued self-esteem deficits in adulthood.

Differences have also been found in self-esteem between sexes of children of divorce. In 1982, Gilligan found that gender differences during development affected children's adjustment to parental divorce (Shook & Jurich, 1992). We know that significant developmental differences exist between male and female children, and should not be surprised to learn that divorce affects male and female children in different ways. Greater behavioral problems have been found among boys of divorced parents than among girls of divorced parents (Amato et al., 1995). It may be that the most common scenario of mother as custodial parent and caregiver severely limits the active role of a paternal model and support that are particularly essential to the development of self-esteem in male children. In addition, a strong relationship has been found between age at parental separation and the self-esteem of male children (Shook & Jurich, 1992). The younger the male child was at the time of divorce, the lower his self-esteem. This relationship was not found in girls. Again, it is possible that the more developmental years male children experience limited paternal contact and modeling, the more the development of self-esteem will suffer. We
can logically assume that such gender differences in childhood would naturally carry into adulthood.

The current study seeks to demonstrate that the detrimental effects of parental divorce during childhood will continue to adversely affect the self-esteem of young adult offspring. It was expected that adult children of divorced parents (where the divorce occurred during childhood) would display lower levels of self-esteem than adult children of intact families, and that male children of divorced parents would display lower levels of self-esteem than female children of divorced parents. It was anticipated that the current study would lead to an increased awareness of the long-term effects of parental divorce that would facilitate development of programs to address and correct self-esteem problems following divorce as early as possible.

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty-five students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology class at a midwestern university campus participated in this study. Students ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-six years. Participants were divided into two groups by the investigator. The first group consisted of students whose biological parents divorced before their eighteenth birthday. The second group consisted of students of intact families (whose biological parents were still married at their eighteenth birthday). Gender was evaluated as a subgroup. Forty-four female students and twenty-one male students participated. Students received course credit in Introductory Psychology for their participation.

**Design**

A quasi-experimental 2(Parental Marital Status: Divorced or Intact) X 2(Gender: Male or Female) Between Subjects Factorial was used. The first quasi-experimental independent variable was Parental Marital Status. Two levels of Divorced or intact were established. The second quasi-experimental independent variable was Gender, with two levels of Male or Female. The dependent variable evaluated was self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured through the use of the Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ).

**Materials and Procedure**

Participating students were initially informed that the purpose of the study was to determine the relationship between certain childhood factors and self-esteem in young adulthood. Participants were then given a personal information questionnaire containing fourteen questions. All students answered questions one through eight regarding age, gender, number of siblings, pets, friendships, personal marital status, and parental marital status. Students of divorced parents also completed questions nine through fourteen regarding their custodial parent, age at parental separation, parental remarriage, and presence of siblings in the restructured home. Participants then completed the Self-Esteem Questionnaire (SEQ) containing twenty-one questions of self-evaluation, such as, "Most of my friends accept me as much as they accept other people." Participants rated each question using a Likert scale of one to five. A score of one represented "No, not at all," and a score of five represented "Yes, very much." Half of the questions were reverse coded. The test publisher, Test Analysis and Development Corporation, per their requirements, scored all Self-Esteem Questionnaires and returned all statistics for analysis and compilation.

**Results**

A Two-Way ANOVA was used to evaluate the Independent Variables of Parental Status and Gender. The Dependent Variable of Self-esteem was measured using the SEQ questionnaire. Participants answered twenty-one questions using a five point Likert scale of rating. No significant interactions or effects were found (p > .05). Self-esteem scores were not significantly affected by gender or parental marital status.

**Table 1: Means of Self-Esteem Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental Status</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Intact</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.02</td>
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Based on a 5-point Likert scale, 1=low, 5=high. N = 65.

**Discussion**

While no significant effects or interactions were found between parental marital status, gender, and adult self-esteem, limitations to the current study should be considered. Due to time constraints for this study, sample sizes were limited. For example, the sample group of male children of divorced parents contained only four participants. It is expected that future research utilizing larger sample sizes will more conclusively demonstrate whether or not a significant relationship exists. Other possible confounding variables include age at parental separation, sex of custodial parent, socioeconomic situation, and the presence of a stepparent and siblings. These variables were addressed in the initial personal questionnaire that was completed immediately before the SEQ. However, limited time and sample sizes would not have led to optimal statistical analysis, so these factors were not evaluated in the current study. Again, it
is believed that future research should assess each of these variables within larger sample sizes to determine any significant relationship.

It has been established that self-esteem develops due to factors in a child’s environment. It is also understood that divorce seriously disrupts a child’s developmental environment. It is possible that, in some cases, the pre-divorce period is filled with fighting and tension that are relieved following divorce. In such cases, a child’s self-esteem may drop before the divorce and “recover” following. While this may be one possible explanation for the lack of differences in the self-esteem scores of this study, it is important to remember that the post-divorce period is still disruptive and damaging in itself. As multiple studies have found, even children who initially score higher on self-esteem scores immediately following parental divorce eventually display declining levels of self-esteem scores in later follow-ups (Camarra & Resnick, 1988; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Stewart et al., 1987; and Wallerstein et al., 1988). Future research should carefully consider these factors.

Future testing should also utilize larger sample sizes of both males and females and carefully evaluate any relationship between gender and self-esteem. While the current research may seem to indicate that there are no significant differences between male and female self-esteem, this is difficult to accept based on the complex developmental gender differences that we know exist. Based on research done by Amato et al. (1995), we know that boys and girls respond differently to parental separation and divorce. It is difficult to believe that such gender differences would not lead to differences in the development of self-esteem. Testing both males and females at the young-adult age level is optimal because we know that self-esteem is a relatively enduring quality following its development in childhood and adolescence (Coopersmith, 1967). Findings from young-adult samples may be generalized relatively confidently across adult age groups.

Without additional research it is impossible to determine whether the results of this study truly indicate a lack of relationship between self-esteem, gender and parental marital status or simply reflect the limitations of the research. The results of this study only further demonstrate the complexity of both the development and measurement of self-esteem. It is hoped that future research will lead to a better understanding of the long-term effects of parental divorce on self-esteem as well as facilitation of early intervention programs aimed at addressing and correcting self-esteem problems as early as possible following parental divorce. It is only through further understanding that advancements in programs and treatments can be made.

References


Dawn Krider graduated in May 2002 with a degree in Psychology. This paper was written for Developmental Lab in Psychology. "I became interested in this topic following the divorce of close friends with two young children (a boy and a girl). Immediately following the divorce, I noticed changes in both children’s behavior and emotional responses, but the boy’s seemed to be the most pronounced. I decided to examine existing research and develop a study evaluating possible lasting effects of divorce on self-esteem by utilizing a young adult population in my evaluation."