

Parental Discord vs Family Structure: Effects of Divorce on the Self-Esteem of Daughters

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This study investigated the effects of family structure (parents together or not) and parental discord (ratings of the happiness of the marriage of biological parents) on the self-esteem of 199 female undergraduates. Family structure and happiness ratings were substantially related, with those separated rated as less happy. Self-esteem was significantly related to parental happiness, even with family structure controlled, but not to family structure with parental happiness controlled. With the sample divided into three groups (happy-together, unhappy-together, and separated) ANOVA showed a significant effect for group, with the unhappy-together group showing significantly lower self-esteem than the happy-together group, and the separated group intermediate. Parental discord thus appears to lower the self-esteem of daughters, whereas separation of parents does not. These findings support Heatherington's idea that children may be better off in a stable family where parents are divorced than in an intact family with much parental discord.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how parental divorce may affect the psychological health of offspring has been much studied (see Muuss, 1985), although with somewhat conflicting results. While it is clear that adverse consequences have

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been found in a number of investigations (see Emery, 1982), and that these effects may be long lasting (Glenn, 1985; Kulka and Weingarten, 1979), it is not as clear which aspects of the breakup of the family produce which consequences.

Studies of the effects of parental divorce on children are often limited to a simple comparison of the offspring of divorced parents with those whose parents have not divorced, using controls for such demographic variables as sex, age, race, and/or socioeconomic class. Such designs seem oversimplified when one considers that a divorce is a complex personal-social event, involving a number of changing circumstances for family members.

One change is, of course, in relation to family structure. Children ordinarily go from a two-parent family to one that contains a single parent, usually the mother. This change in structure may have at least two important consequences: a separation from one parent (usually the father) and an economic loss (downward mobility), due to a loss or reduction of the father's financial support (see Coletta, 1979; Jenkins, 1979).

Such an economic change may increase the probability that a middle-class, single divorced mother will work at a full-time job (Weitzman, 1985). The full-time employment of a divorced mother will, of course, be of economic benefit to her children, and in addition, may also lead to her own professional advancement, as compared to middle-class wives from intact marriages who, because of the financial support of their husbands, will have less need for outside employment. Children living with divorced mothers may thus be exposed to a female role model who is professionally competent and self-supporting.

If a single custodial parent remarries, still another change in family structure will occur—a child will now become a member of a “reconstituted” family involving new relationships with a stepparent and in many cases step-siblings and eventually half-siblings. This change may be of economic benefit, with the income of the stepfather replacing that of the absent father, but the new relationships may or may not be harmonious.

Still another element frequently associated with divorce is parent discord. Parents commonly experience discord prior to, during, and after a divorce, and such discord may be more psychologically damaging to offspring than is separation from a parent (see Berg and Kelly, 1979; Emery, 1982; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Rutter, 1971). Parental discord is not, of course, found only among divorcing couples, but the level of discord may be higher among divorcing couples than among those who stay together.

A divorce, then, is a complex phenomenon. To untangle the question of how it affects the traits and behavior of offspring, researchers need to use multivariate designs so that antecedent variables may be studied one at a time, while others are controlled. The present study has employed such

a design, focusing on two aspects of divorce: family structure and parental discord.

An attempt was made to study the effects of these two variables upon the self-esteem of college females. Self-esteem was selected as a dependent variable because it was seen as a psychological trait of theoretical importance throughout the life span (see Wylie, 1974), and because it has been suggested (Kelly and Berg, 1978) that a substantial proportion of problems stemming from parental divorce may be explained in terms of a lowered self-esteem (see Boyd *et al.*, 1983; Parish and Wigle, 1985; Young and Parish, 1977, for example), although other studies report negative findings on this question (Berg and Kelly, 1979; Kulka and Weingarten, 1979; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Slater and Haber, 1984).

This conflicting evidence suggests it may not be divorce per se, but rather some aspect of divorce that produces a lowered self-esteem in children. The question thus arises as to which aspect of the situation is most closely related to this change. The present study has investigated this question in relation to family structure and parental discord.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 199 freshman women (mean age 17.7) at a small private undergraduate college for women. The original sample consisted of 215 subjects (91% of the entering freshman class). While backgrounds were diverse, most of the subjects were middle-class whites. Sixteen subjects were dropped because of incomplete questionnaires or because one or both of their parents had died. Of the remaining 199 subjects, all of whom had both parents living, 150 reported their parents to be living together, whereas 49 reported them to have separated. Of the 49 subjects from broken homes, 21 were living in reconstituted families (i.e., with a parent and stepparent), two were living with parents other than their biological ones, and 26 were living with a single parent (all but two with mother).

Procedure

In a questionnaire distributed to all entering freshmen at their first formal meeting, subjects reported whether or not their biological parents were living together, and with which parental figures they themselves were living. They rated the happiness of the marriage of their biological parents on a

6-point scale (very happy to very unhappy). Those living in reconstituted families also rated the happiness of their parents' second marriage on the same scale. Subjects reported the extent to which their mothers were employed outside the home and what kind of position. They also completed Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (see Rosenberg, 1965, for evidence of reliability and validity).

Scoring

Ratings of the happiness of parental marriages were coded with a scale from 1 (very unhappy) to 6 (very happy). Self-esteem scores were computed as suggested by Rosenberg. For the correlational analyses, family structure was coded with a 1 (together) or 0 (separated). Two 5-point scales were devised to code the extent of mother's employment (1, full-time housewife; 5, full-time job) and the professional levels of the mother's job (1, unskilled worker or no job; 5, professional position in "masculine" professions, e.g., lawyer).

RESULTS

Data were initially subjected to correlational analyses. Happiness of biological parents was found to be significantly related to self-esteem ($r = +.22$; $p = .001$); whereas family structure (parents together or not) was not ($r = +.08$, $p = .14$). Happiness of biological parents was found to be substantially related to family structure ($r = +.60$, $p = .0001$).

Partial r s showed that the happiness-*esteem* relation held up with family structure controlled (partial $r = +.22$, $t = 3.08$, $p = .005$), and that the family structure-*esteem* relation remained nonsignificant with happiness controlled (partial $r = -.07$, $t = 1.05$, ns).

For the 21 subjects in the reconstituted families, ratings of their parents' second marriage were significantly higher than were their ratings of the first ($\bar{X} = 2.76$ for first marriage; $\bar{X} = 5.23$ for second; $t = 5.71$, $p = .001$), and not significantly different from the ratings of the 150 subjects from intact families ($\bar{X} = 5.31$).

When the correlational analyses described above were repeated with the second ratings of parental happiness of the 21 subjects in the reconstituted group substituted for the first, results were substantially the same. Self-esteem correlated $+ .19$ ($p = .003$) with parental happiness, and a partial r of $+ .18$ ($t = 2.52$, $p = .02$) with family structure controlled. Family structure correlated $+ .08$ ($p = .14$) with self-esteem, and a partial r of $.00$ (ns) with parental happiness controlled. Family structure and parental happiness cor-

related ($r = +.38, p = .0001$) significantly different from zero but a lower level ($t = 4.14, p = .001$) than the $+.60$ found in the original analysis.

Dividing the sample into three parts—(1) happy-together (happiness rating of 5 or 6) ($n = 129$), (2) unhappy-together (happiness rating of 1 through 4) ($n = 21$), and (3) separated ($n = 49$)—we found that a simple analysis of variance of esteem scores differentiated the groups ($F = 3.92, df = 2/196, p = .025$). Further tests showed the unhappy-together group ($\bar{X} = 30.29$) to have significantly lower scores than did the happy-together group ($\bar{X} = 32.80$), with the separated group ($\bar{X} = 31.75$) intermediate, but not significantly different from either other group.

When the 26 subjects living with a single parent were compared with all others in the separated group ($n = 23$), the single-parent group was found to have higher esteem scores ($\bar{X} = 31.5$ vs 30.7), but this difference was not significant. The unhappy-together group did not differ significantly from the separated group for parental happiness ratings ($\bar{X} = 2.95$, unhappy together; $\bar{X} = 3.12$, separated).

When the combined-together group ($n = 150$) was compared to the separated group ($n = 49$), a significant difference was found in relation to both mother's degree of employment and to the status of her job. Forty-three percent of the separated mothers had full-time jobs, as compared with only 19% of the mothers with intact marriages ($\chi^2 = 9.5, df = 1, p = .005$). Similarly, 40% of the separated mothers held jobs at a professional level (level 4 or 5), as compared with only 22% of those mothers still living with their first husbands ($\chi^2 = 6.1, df = 1, p = .025$). Neither mother's work status nor her professional level, however, was significantly related to daughter's self-esteem.

DISCUSSION

In this study, the self-esteem of daughters was positively related at a low but significant ($p = .001$) level to their ratings of the happiness of their biological parents. Their self-esteem was not, on the other hand, found to be related to family structure (either whether or not parents had separated, or whether those in the separated group lived with a single parent or in a reconstituted family). Since happiness of biological parents was found to be substantially related to family structure (those separated were rated as less happy), partial r s were needed to test these relations with family structure (in the case of the esteem-happiness relation) and parental happiness (in the case of the esteem-structure relation) controlled. With these controls in place, the relation reported above held. The findings of this study thus support the ideas of Dancy and Handal (1984) that "physical wholeness" may be less im-

portant than "psychological wholeness" in a marriage, at least in relation to the psychological well-being of daughters.

The findings of this study replicate among older female subjects those found for children and younger adolescents of both sexes by three earlier studies (Berg and Kelly, 1979; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Slater and Haber, 1984). While those studies and the present study differed in their measures of self-esteem, all four studies measured both family structure and parental discord. In each of the four, parental discord was found to be negatively related to the self-esteem of offspring, whereas family structure was not.

The results of these studies thus differ from those of other studies that report lower self-esteem for the children of divorced parents (Boyd *et al.*, 1983; Parish and Wigle, 1985, for example). One reason for this may be that the divorced families in these latter studies may also have been unhappiest.

While it is not surprising, as seen in the present study, the marriages that break up are less happy than those that endure, only the present study and that of Raschke and Raschke (1979) seem to have investigated the relation between family structure and parental happiness. In our study, ratings of the happiness of biological parents and the parents remaining together were substantially related (+ .60), whereas the Raschkes' study found no such relation.

It should be noted that in our study it was the happiness of biological parents that was rated. The question was worded in the past tense ("How happy would you say the marriage of your biological parents was?") and was thus somewhat retrospective for all subjects, but was entirely retrospective for those subjects whose parents had separated.

When ratings of the parent's current marriage of the 21 subjects whose parent had remarried were substituted for their first ratings, the correlation between happiness and structure was significantly lower, although still significantly different from zero.

In the Raschkes' study on the other hand, where subjects were children in grades three through eight, responses in relation to family happiness were presumably in reference to the present situation (it is doubtful whether children of these ages could have made retrospective judgments). Thus, it is quite possible that both conflicting findings are valid. Current ratings of happiness may not relate to family structure, whereas retrospective ratings for biological parents may do so.

The reason for this difference may be that defensive motives and/or a response style affected by social desirability may result in the current family situation being described as "happy." A parental marriage that has already failed, on the other hand, may be less likely to elicit such motives or styles. Thus, if the parents have in fact separated, it would seem illogical to report that they had been happy (although two of our subjects in the separated group did just that!).

Since results in this study clearly show the negative effects of parental unhappiness on the self-esteem of daughters, the question about how the conflicts, alienations, and quarrels of parents can affect a daughter's feelings about herself arises. In discussing the effects of parental discord on children, Emery (1982) has suggested four general hypotheses: (1) disruptions of the bond between parent and child, (2) the child modeling her behavior on that of the parent, (3) changed discipline practices of the parent, and (4) several other ideas, including the general effects of stress.

Emery also reported that the effects of parental discord seem to be different for sons and daughters—the effect upon daughters is one of overcontrol, rather than undercontrol, which is the case for sons. That such overcontrol in girls may involve a derogation of self—the girl trying to behave “perfectly,” and repressing aggression and initiative because of a low self-regard—seems plausible, but remains to be investigated.

Another finding of this study is that mothers who are separated from their husbands are more advanced professionally. While it may be true, as suggested by Booth et al. (Booth *et al.*, 1984), that outside employment of wives leads to marital instability, it also may be true, especially among a middle-class group, that marital instability and its accompanying economic pressures lead to more outside employment and thus to professional growth for divorced wives. This question needs further investigation. It should be noted, however, that in the present study neither the degree of outside employment nor the professional level of the mothers was significantly related to the self-esteem of the daughters.

One limitation of the present study was that all information was derived from the subjects themselves. Thus, since daughters reported both parental happiness and their own self-esteem, a general response style (either positive or negative) may have affected these responses and the correlation between them. Incidentally, this aspect of the methodology seems desirable, inasmuch as one may argue that a daughter's own perception of the happiness of her parents may be more important for her self-regard than would be the perceptions of any other person.

It is possible, however, that a positive or negative general response style may have affected results, especially since both the happiness ratings and Rosenberg's self-esteem scale are fairly transparent. Our finding in relation to self-esteem and parental happiness seems to be similar to the commonly found (see Wylie, 1974) positive relations between ratings of self and ratings of others. It is of course possible that an unhappy family life could produce a long-lasting, generally negative outlook for children, and the findings of Glenn (1985) suggest that this is so. He found that adult women whose parents had divorced were significantly lower on six out of eight measures of general well-being than were women whose parents had not divorced. That such an attitude could be one of the consequences of parental discord seems plausi-

ble, but remains to be investigated, as does the relation between measures of general well-being and self-esteem.

Perhaps because of limitations in the size of the sample, the present study provides no information about differences in self-esteem between daughters living with divorced single parents, as compared with those in reconstituted families. It is interesting to note in our data, however, that while parental happiness has reportedly improved in the reconstituted families, self-esteem remains low. Since previous research has reported both that children in single-parent homes where parents have been divorced have lower self-esteem than those in reconstituted families (Young and Parish, 1977) and the opposite (Boyd *et al.*, 1977), more research on this question is obviously needed.

The present study, again perhaps because of limited sample size, did not find a significant difference in self-esteem between the unhappy-together group and the separated group, although the unhappy-together group showed lower self-esteem scores. If this difference were to be substantiated by further studies with larger samples, support would be given to Heatherington's (1979) idea that a stable home in which parents are divorced is better for a child than is a "conflict-ridden" home where both parents are present, and its consequent implication—that unhappy parents should not stay together for the sake of the child. Here again more research is needed in order to determine whether trends found in this study are in fact valid.

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