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Impact of Divorce and Mother's Psychological Well-Being on Children's Emotional, Behavioral, and Social Competences

Anda Maria JURMA¹

Abstract

Parental divorce was known for over 40 years as being the cause of some serious, long lasting behavioural, emotional, social and academic problems in children. The aim of this study was to identify the consequences of divorce upon children, mothers' wellbeing and the parenting styles. We have studied a group of 79 children and adolescents selected from one school in Timisoara (Romania), aged between 7-15 years, and their mothers. The children were divided into two groups: 41 children and adolescents from divorced families and a control group of 38 children and adolescents from two parents ("normal") families. The following instruments were used: Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure the children's emotions, behaviour and social competencies; Symptom Checklist (SCL-90-R) to measure the mother's psychological wellbeing; The Parenting Scale to identify the parenting style used by mothers in the educational process. The results showed that children from divorced families have more emotional problems compared with children coming from two parents families; the divorced mothers have higher scores at all psychological problems compared with married mother and are more likely to be over reactive or have more hostility in their parenting style, while the married mothers are more lax in their parenting style. Emotional and behavioural problems of children from divorced families were strongly correlated with their mother's problems. In conclusion, the psychological wellbeing of divorced mothers have a certain influence on the child's adjustment, and thus, on the ability of the children to cope with the divorce situation.

Keywords: divorce, children, resilience, parenting, mother wellbeing.

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Introduction

Parental divorce was known for over 40 years as being the cause of some serious, long lasting behavioural and emotional issues in children (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Amato, 2000; Kelly, 2000). The children whose parents had divorced may have several behavioural problems, internalizing symptoms, social and academic problems when they are compared to those from functional families (Lansford, Malone, Castellino, Dodge, Petit, & Bates, 2006; O'Connor, Caspi, DeFries, & Plomin, 2000; O'Connor, Dunn, Jenkins, Pickering, Rasbash, 2001). Children from divorced families may have lower academic performances, a higher risk of school dropout, difficulties establishing intimate relationships as a young adult; they can get married late and can have marital dissatisfaction and may often divorce (Amato, 2010; Hango & Houseknecht, 2005; Sun & Li, 2002). The adolescences and young adults originating from divorced families in which the conflict between the two parents was not open can have higher peer problems, problems establishing intimate relationships and emotional adaptability problems compared to those from divorced families in which the conflict was open (Lansford *et al.*, 2006; O'Connor *et al.*, 2000; O'Connor *et al.*, 2001).

Parent-child relationship plays an important role in child adjustment after divorce. A warm and positive parental environment brings support, ensures good communication, responds to the child needs, and provides a strong parental control and a good discipline (Jourdan-Ionescu *et al.*, 2013). Rushena, Prior, Sanson and Smart (2005) mentions that features of children have a strong influence on parent - child relationship, which in turn affect the child's adaptation. Children's individual characteristics such as personal strengths and relationships with others are protective factors of resilience.

An important aspect for a child, connected to the divorce is represented by the improper parenting impact and parental psychopathology during and after the divorce. As a rule, parenting is represented in literature (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011: 215) as taking place on two fundamental axes: *parental control* and *emotional support*, any parenting style being a version of a combination between the two dimensions, in varying proportions. From vary motives the parents may have difficulties responding to child needs and may resent varying degrees of stress in their role as a parent that may have implications in child functioning, parent or family functioning (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, 2011: 213). Parental stress occurs when the requirements of parenting exceeds the capacity and resources of the parents to coop. The stress can diminish the warmth and implication of the mothers in the relationship, along with socio-economic problems, social position ones and physical and mental health issues (Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

The aim of the study is to identify the consequences of the divorce on children, mothers' wellbeing and parenting styles. The study had the following objectives: identifying emotional and behavioural problems of children from divorced families and also the divorced mothers' symptoms; analysing the parental styles of the divorced mothers; exploring the relationship between mothers' symptoms, their parenting styles and the emotional and behavioural problems of the children. The study is based on the assumption that there is a strong relation between the presence of psychological symptoms of divorced mothers and the behaviour problems of their children, probably through the parenting styles. By comparison with other studies in the field of divorce's consequences to the children adjustment, this study takes into consideration the relation between mother's mental health and the parenting styles that influences the behaviour of the children and the level of their emotional, conduct and peer problems.

Methodology

Participants

In the study have been included 79 children and adolescents (along with their mothers). The age of the children varied between 7 and 15 years old. The subjects were selected from a single school in the Timisoara city (Romanian) that has allowed access to the researcher. The study was approved by the school board and all the mothers signed the informed consent for participating in the study. The participation was voluntary and no subject was paid for participating.

The subjects were divided into two groups: the study group included 41 children and adolescents from divorced families, of which 26 (63.4%) were boys and 15(36.6%) girls (age range between 7 to 15 years; $M = 10.85$ years, $SD = 2.56$). Their mothers age ranged from 29 to 45 years ($M = 36.2$ years, $SD = 2.78$). Inclusion criteria for the study group were that all children from divorced families are living only with their natural mother since the divorce, for at least 1 year. We excluded from the study the children with step mothers and the adopted children.

In the control group, out of 38 children and adolescents, 22 (57.9%) were boys and 16 (42.1%) girls (age range 7 to 15 years; $M = 10.18$ years, $SD = 2.99$). Their mother age ranged from 31 to 47 ($M = 37.8$, $SD = 2.04$). Inclusion criteria for the control group were that all children are living with both parents. We excluded from the study the children with step parents, foster parents and the adopted children.

Measures

All mothers completed the following instruments at home and brought it back to school:

- Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a behavioural screening questionnaire measuring parents' perceptions of prosocial and difficult behaviours in their children aged 3 to 16 years. It includes 25 items relating to the frequency of positive (prosocial behaviour) and negative behaviours (emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems), in normal, borderline and abnormal range (Goodmann, 1997). The Total Difficulties score (Turner, Markie-Dadds, Sanders, 1998) was adequate, internal reliability ($\alpha = .76$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .85$). The questionnaire has a Romanian version and is largely used in the field of child psychiatry.

- Symptom Checklist (SCL-90-R), is a self-report system inventory designed to reflect the physical and the psychological symptoms of a person in the last 7 days, often used in screening for psychopathology. The internal consistency of the scale in clinical situations is between $r = .79$ and $r = .89$ and test-retest reliability is between $.73$ and $.92$, and considered very good by the authors (Derogatis, 1983). The list contains 90 complains and problems that people could have. 83 of them are grouped in 9 scales: Somatization; Obsessive-Compulsive; Interpersonal Sensitivity; Depression; Anxiety; Hostility; Phobic Anxiety; Paranoid Ideation; Psychoticism. The Romanian version of SCL-90 was completed by the mothers to identify the presence of psychological symptoms.

- The Parenting Scale (Arnold, O'Leary, Wolff, Acker, 1983) is a 30-item questionnaire which measures dysfunctional disciplines styles in parents by asking about the probability that parents use particular discipline strategies; it yields a total score and three factors related to these strategies: Laxness (permissive, inconsistent discipline), Over-reactivity (harsh, emotional, authoritarian discipline and irritability), and Hostility (use of verbal or physical force). The scale has adequate internal consistency (Turner, Markie-Dadds, Sanders, 1998) for Total score ($\alpha = .84$), Laxness ($\alpha = .83$), Over-reactivity ($\alpha = .82$) and Hostility ($\alpha = .63$) scales and has good test-retest reliability ($r = .84, .83, .82$ and $.79$ respectively) (manual triple P) and has also Romanian version utilised in therapeutic programs for parents.

Analysis plan

Data was collected using the above mentioned instruments that were completed by the children' mothers, without the assistance of an evaluator, at home. In order to protect the identity of the participants, all names were replaced with identification numbers. Subjects were given assurance that their identity will be kept confidential.

Total scores were calculated according to the specific instructions of each instrument. Means and standard deviations were calculated; the statistical tests applied were the T-test (for comparison between the two groups) and the Pearson correlation test (for correlations between variables). Results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, for a confidence interval of 95%. The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS for Windows 17.0

Results

The scores of the SDQ questionnaires were analysed in order to determine the differences between the behaviours of children from divorces and non-divorced (“normal”) families. It must be noted, however, that the behaviours of children were rated (assessed) by their mothers. Considering the number of subjects in the groups, the Student (T-test) test for independent groups was used for comparison. The average scores are presented in Table 1, together with t-values, and the statistical significance of the differences. The results show that children from divorced families present significantly more emotional problems those children from normal families.

It must be observed that all children have been rated as having high scores for “hyperactivity”; this could be a bias induced by the mothers’ perception regarding the level of activity “normal” for children at this age. Also, all children have high scores at the “prosocial” behaviour item, which, again, could be due to the mothers’ perception regarding the level of social interaction “normal” for children.

Table 1. *Results and comparison of SDQ scores for children from divorced and normal families*

SDQ behaviour scores	Divorced Families	Normal Families	T-value	Statistical significance	Observations (difference)
	Mean	Mean			
Emotional problems	5.61	3.39	4.04	p=0.00	Statistically significant
Conduct problems	4.10	3.08	1.94	p=0.06	Not statistically significant
Hyperactivity	5.71	5.47	0.39	p=0.70	Not statistically significant
Peer problems	3.90	3.42	0.88	p=0.38	Not statistically significant
Prosocial behaviour	6.97	6.34	0.96	p=0.34	Not statistically significant

The results show that children from divorced families have significantly more emotional problems than children from normal families.

In order to assess the psychological state of the mothers, the SCL-90 scale was used. The SCL-90 scale has 9 subscales; each subscale rates symptoms on a Likert ascending scale from 0 to 5.

In order to compare the intensity of mothers' psychological symptoms, the T-test was used, comparing the scores at the various SCL-90 subscales. Differences were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ (Table 2).

Table 2. Results and comparison of SDQ scores for children from divorced and normal families

SCL -90 subscales (psychological areas)	Divorced Families	Normal Families	T-value	Statistical significance	Observations (difference)
	Mean	Mean			
Somatization	1.43	0.84	-3.74	p=0.00	Statistically significant
Obsessive-Compulsive	1.17	0.96	-1.43	p=0.15	Not statistically significant
Interpersonal Sensitivity	0.99	0.79	-1.66	p=0.10	Not statistically significant
Depression	1.36	0.96	-2.56	p=0.01	Statistically significant
Anxiety	1.04	0.78	-1.63	p=0.11	Not statistically significant
Hostility	0.94	0.48	-3.58	p=0.00	Statistically significant
Phobic Anxiety	0.73	0.41	-2.27	p=0.03	Statistically significant
Paranoid Ideation	0.93	0.71	-1.49	p=0.14	Not statistically significant
Psychoticism	0.63	0.58	-0.35	p=0.72	Not statistically significant

Mothers that have experienced a divorce present significantly higher intensity symptoms in the areas of somatization, depression, hostility and phobic anxiety than mothers that have not experienced a divorce.

Table 3. Results and comparison of The Parenting Scale scores for divorced and normal families

Parenting style scale score	Divorced Families	Normal Families	T-value	Statistical significance	Observations (difference)
	Mean	Mean			
Lax style	1.46	1.63	1.50	p=0.14	Not statistically significant
Over-reactive style	1.51	1.34	-1.52	p=0.13	Not statistically significant
Hostile style	1.66	1.58	-0.72	p=0.47	Not statistically significant

The results show that there is no statistically significant difference between the intensity of the various parenting styles of mothers from divorced or normal families, though it would seem that mothers that have experience a divorce tend to adopt a more hostile parenting style, while mothers that have not experience a divorce tend to adopt a more lax parenting style. The lack of statistical significance could be due to the low number of case investigated. In order to investigate the relationship between the mothers’ psychological well-being and the children’ behavioural problems, the Pearson Correlation test was used (Table 4).

Table 4. The relationship between the mothers’ psychological well-being (as measured by the SCL-90 subscales scores) and the children’ behavioural problems (measured by the SDQ questionnaire)

SDQ items (children)	Emotional problems		Conduct problems		Hyperactivity		Peer problems		Prosocial behaviour	
	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal
SCL-90 subscales (mothers)										
Somatization	0.56*	0.38*	0.30	-0.05	0.13	0.13	0.18	-0.12	0.39*	-0.01
Obsessive-Compulsive	0.36*	0.60*	0.24	0.24	0.25	0.45*	0.38*	-0.01	0.05	-0.08
Interpersonal Sensitivity	0.27	0.63*	0.35*	0.27	0.29	0.40*	0.15	0.01	-0.01	-0.19
Depression	0.50*	0.66*	0.40*	0.31	0.32*	0.41*	0.48*	-0.02	0.08	-0.08
Anxiety	0.41*	0.60*	0.32*	0.15	0.22	0.23	0.34*	-0.17	0.08	0.21
Hostility	0.42*	0.45*	0.37*	0.18	0.26	0.18	0.38*	-0.21	0.14	0.10
Phobic Anxiety	0.20	0.46*	-0.07	0.04	-0.00	0.04	-0.20	-0.25	0.42*	0.22
Paranoid Ideation	0.23	0.66*	0.26	0.20	0.18	0.34*	0.13	-0.04	0.25	0.01
Psychoticism	0.19	0.60*	0.24	0.20	0.15	0.26	0.21	-0.11	0.12	0.12

*Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$

In children from divorced families, the level of the child's emotional problems seems to be directly related to the mother's level of somatization, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, depression, anxiety and hostility. The correlation is especially high for somatization and depression, showing that for a child from a divorced family, the intensity of his/her mother's somatization and/or depression problems (symptoms) influences the intensity of the child's emotional problems. The level of mother's depression symptoms seems to be highly influential on the child's behaviour in multiple forms, inducing emotional and conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems. Mother's anxiety and hostility levels also influence, though to a lesser degree, the level of children' emotional, conduct and peer problems. For children in normal families, the intensity of their mothers' psychological symptoms in all areas has an important impact on their emotional well-being and can induce emotional problems, but do not seem to have an influence on their conduct or peer problems, or their prosocial behaviour.

Table 5. *The relationship between the mothers' psychological well-being (as measured by the SCL-90 subscales scores) and the parenting style (as measured by the Parentig scale)*

Parenting style SCL-90 subscales (mothers)	Laxness		Over-reactivity		Hostility	
	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal	Divorced	Normal
Somatization	-0.26	0.05	0.26	0.52*	0.71*	0.19
Obsessive-Compulsive	-0.44*	0.09	0.13	0.20	0.77*	0.10
Interpersonal Sensitivity	-0.16	0.23	0.21	0.25	0.41*	0.23
Depression	-0.34*	0.18	0.43*	0.29	0.80*	0.27
Anxiety	-0.25	0.09	0.33*	0.32*	0.82*	0.30
Hostility	-0.25	0.05	0.14	0.37*	0.87*	0.13
Phobic Anxiety	-0.33*	0.23	-0.24	0.50*	0.22	0.53*
Paranoid Ideation	-0.25	0.17	-0.19	0.30	0.67*	0.26
Psychoticism	-0.27	0.06	-0.18	0.18	0.60*	0.25

*Correlation is significant at $p < 0.05$

As we see in Table 5, in divorced families, the higher the level of mothers' obsessive-compulsive symptoms, depression and phobic anxiety symptoms is, the less lax the parenting style. A higher level of depression in mothers in divorced families translates into a more over-reactive and especially hostile parenting style in divorced families. High levels of anxiety also induce a more hostile parenting style, but hostility in the parenting style is also strongly influenced by the levels of all psychological symptoms of mothers, with the exception of phobic anxiety.

In normal (two-parent) families, an over-reactive parenting style is correlated directly with a higher level of somatization, anxiety, hostility symptoms in

mothers, while a hostile parenting style is strongly correlated with the level of mothers' phobic anxiety.

On the other hand, in normal families the Pearson correlation test shows that there are only two statistically significant relationships between the problems of the children and the parenting style; namely, that peer problems are less intense in children from normal families whose parents have a more lax ($P = -0.36$) or more hostile ($P = -0.34$) parenting style.

In children from divorced families, emotional problems increase with a more over-reactive ($P = 0.27$) or hostile ($P = 0.34$) parenting style, while conduct problems increase with a more lax parenting style ($P = 0.24$). Peer problems on the other hand decrease with a more lax parenting style ($P = -0.36$).

Comparing, we can say that a more lax parenting style tends to decrease the children' peer problems, but tends to increase conduct problems in children from divorced families.

Discussions

The results of the study show that mothers that have experienced a divorce present significantly higher intensity symptoms in the areas of somatization, depression, hostility and phobic anxiety than mothers that have not experienced a divorce. These symptoms have a strong influence on the children; especially the symptoms of depression and somatization seem to strongly affect children from divorced families, increasing their level of emotional problems. The depression symptoms of the mother influences the behaviour of children from divorced families in multiple forms, inducing emotional and conduct problems, hyper-activity and peer problems.

The results also show that high levels of psychological symptoms (especially depression and anxiety) in mothers in divorced families tend to induce a more hostile parenting behaviour, while mothers in normal families tend to a more over-reactive parenting style when their level of psychological symptoms (especially somatization, anxiety, hostility and phobic anxiety) increases.

On the other hand, the parenting style in itself does seem to influence only some areas of child behaviour (peer problems and conduct problems in children from divorced families), and no statistically significant differences could be identified in regard of the parenting style of mothers from divorced and normal families.

Children and adolescences coming from one parent families have a high rate of behavioural and emotional disorders and substances abuse, low self-esteem levels, low social competences and low academic performances compared to

children from families without any divorce history, with both parents present (O'Connor *et al.*, 2000; O'Connor, *et al.*, 2001, Lansford *et al.*, 2006; Sroufe, Duggal, Weinfield, & Carlson, 2000). It can be said, on one hand, that there is a strong connexion between child psychopathology and marital conflicts, low parental competences, divorce or separation and, on the other hand, there is a strong connexion between the parents' psychopathology and child adaptation (O'Connor *et al.*, 2000; O'Connor *et al.*, 2001). Our study found emotional and behavioural problems in children from divorced families and also a strong correlation between these problems and psychological problems of mothers. There are numerous researches which show that parental depression and parental dysfunctions raise the risk of occurrence of some psychopathological disorders in children (Nomura, Wickramaratne, Warner, Mufson, & Weissman, 2002; Linville, Chronister, Dishion, Todahl, Miller, Shaw *et al.*, 2010). Children that are raised by depressive mothers may have symptoms of depression, anxiety, alcohol problems or social relationship (Linville *et al.*, 2010). Nomura's study (2002) tried to determine to what extends the divorce and the depression of the parents is associated with the depression of the child. The conclusion of his study show that the existence of parental depression has an even bigger impact on child than the marital conflicts, being associated with the apparition of depression, anxiety or other psychiatric diagnosis, while depression and marital conflicts are associated with the risk of conduct disorders and antisocial behaviour appearance in children. In our study there are similarities, meaning that the presence of psychopathological symptoms in mothers, both divorced and married, correlate both with emotional disorders and with hyperactivity and peer problems in children. Also, the results show that mothers that have experienced a divorce present significantly higher intensity symptoms in the areas of somatization, depression, hostility and phobic anxiety than mothers that have not experienced a divorce; these psychological problems have an important impact on the child, especially in regard of his/her emotional problems. Especially the level of mother's depression symptoms seems to be highly influential on the child's behaviour in multiple forms, inducing emotional and conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems. Mother's anxiety and hostility levels also influence, though to a lesser degree, the level of children's emotional, conduct and peer problems.

Kushner (2009) describes five protective factors that can intervene in the process of resilience in children whose parents are divorced: the involvement of parent which not remained with the child; reduction of post-divorce parental conflict; the fact of living the most psychologically competent parent; the quality of parenting practices (existence of emotional warmth, support, adequate monitoring and discipline of the child); supervision division between the two parents, with the lack of conflict between them.

Mother-child relationships that are characterized by warmth, supportiveness, effective problem-solving skills, positive communication, and low levels of conflict and negativity are consistently associated with lower mental health problems and positive social adaptation outcomes following divorce (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger & Lorenz, 1999; Wolchik, Wilcox, Tein, & Sandler, 2000; Wolchik, Schenck, & Sandler, 2009; Velez, Wolchik, Tein, & Sandler 2011). Maternal discipline that is consistent and appropriate, rather than punitive, also facilitates children's post-divorce adjustment (Wolchik *et al.*, 2000). Although most of the research on this resilience resource has examined direct relations between maternal parenting and children's post-divorce adjustment, a few studies have shown that high quality parenting mitigates the negative effect of divorce-related stressors on mental health problems (Wolchik *et al.*, 2009). Wolchik, Wilcox *et al.* (2000) showed that relations between divorce stressors and internalizing problems and externalizing problems were stronger for children who reported both low acceptance and low consistency of discipline than for those who reported either high consistency of discipline and low acceptance or high acceptance and low consistency of discipline. Children with high levels of both acceptance and consistent discipline had the lowest levels of adjustment problems.

In our study were also identified emotional and behavioural problems in children from divorced families and also a more hostile parenting style of their mothers, related especially with the presence of anxiety and depression to the mothers. The psychopathological symptoms of the divorced mothers together with their hostile parenting style could have an influence on mother – child relationship.

Linville's (2010) study show that parental depression and parental strategies are significantly associated with the behavioural disorders of children. Similar results have been obtained by our study, showing that to divorced families there is a strong correlation between parental strategies, the symptoms of the mothers and behavioural and emotional problems of children, in families with both parents present not all of this correlations being present.

Limits of the research

The main limitation of the present study is the fact that is a cross-sectional not a longitudinal study; therefore no relation with the future success and abilities to cope with problems of the children later in life could be investigated. Also, the study was limited to children from a single setting and the sample was not statistically significant.

Conclusions

This paper highlighted some aspects related to the consequences of divorce on children, mothers and parenting strategies, knowing these aspects could be a basis for some strategies that can assist the children in the adjustment process after the parent's divorce, to prevent the long time consequences of divorce or parental separation over the mental health of the child and further on in his adult life. According with Tomita (2014: 69), adolescents are faced with challenges and difficult development tasks, also being exposed to extremely varied risk factors which, if protective factors are not sufficiently powerful, can lead to emotional and behavioural disorders, going as far as criminal behaviours. The presence of emotional and behavioural problems in children and adolescents from divorced families, allows us to consider sometimes the divorce a period of crisis in their life. In these situations we can include the children and especially adolescents in the therapeutic program named Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI) that uses children's reactions to stressful events related to: behaviour change, enhance of self-esteem, reduction of anxiety, and expanding understanding and insight into their own (and others') behaviour and feelings (Tomita, 2014: 75).

On the other hand, in order to improve the parent - child relationship, considered a protective factor related with resilience process of children after divorce, it is also necessary to include the both parents in parent education programs aimed on the one hand to develop new, positive, behaviours and to eliminate the behaviours that affect the child's development (Cojocaru & Cojocaru 2011: 213). Even the child remains to live with only one parent the resilience process needs both parents to involve in the parenting process. Participating in education programs, the parent understands that it is up to him/her how a conflict situation is handled, and this empowerment of the parent, achieved during the programme (both by developing his/her reflexive skills, as well as by enriching the range of responses to critical situations) makes the parent more responsible (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, 2011: 217). Beyond the practical aspects, the present study focused on the divorced mothers' symptoms that can be related with the behaviour of children, the relation being mediated or not by the parenting style. Our clinical experience show that, when we examine a child from a divorced family, always we also need to look closely to the mother psychological well-being and to intervene when is necessary.

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