

When Marriage Falls: How Does Parental Divorce Affect Teenagers Interpersonal Development?

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ABSTRACT

The number of divorces in China steadily increases, along with upheaval that brings children traumatic grief and hardship. The purpose of this study is to explore how parental divorce affects children's interpersonal development. 194 participants from China responded to the questionnaires. The findings revealed that, when their parents divorce, children will experience fluctuation on personalities that incline to be introverted, withdrawn, and inferior. These psychological changes could render youngsters refused to communicate or irritable and rude to the opposite extreme. Second, teenagers may be led astray and acquire undesirable habits due to the missing role of parental supervision that plays the role model through imitation and interaction. Children have gender disturbance due to a misplaced gender role identification and a lack of social adaptation.

Keywords: *Psychology, parental divorce, teenager, interpersonal development*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, marital divorce in China is prominent. According to China National Bureau of statistics, the number of divorced couples has escalated in the past 40 years, from 458,000 in 1985 to 3,733,000 in 2014 [1]. The crude divorce rate has increased from 0.44% to 3.36%, seven times the statistics in 1985. The research of Scott, Rhoades and Stanley suggested that couples divorce for various reasons, including lack of commitment, infidelity, conflict and arguing, marrying too young, financial problems, substance abuse and domestic violence [2].

Meanwhile, teenagers living in divorced families are affected due to the breakdown of the family. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, about 4.7 million families divorced in 2019 and most of the families had children[3]. Through words and behaviors, family elders convey social and cultural values, life skills, traditional moral customs to children, so that children can shape their character and improve social ability when growing up [4]. The role of family is so important for children that, if missing, the cultivation of psychological quality and the regulation of behavior is lacking or misled. Children could become withdrawn, introverted and marginalized who often display solitary behaviors and isolate themselves from peer interactions. Consequently,

the change of family structure hinders the development of children socialization [5]. Children may lose their communication skills and corporation spirit through this process.

Besides, single parents who experience psychological trauma tend to pay extreme care for their children [4]. Most single parents often ignore their children's real needs and stubbornly hope to cultivate their children into successful people. Their high expectations and abnormal love will not only make children feel mental pressure, but also be detrimental to the harmony of family relations.

In addition, adolescents living with opposite-sex parents sometimes have no concept of self-protection because their concept of the opposite sex is limited to their parents. Their vague cognition can easily make them inadvertently offend others, resulting in further communication problems or problems like sexual promiscuity [6]. Therefore, the misunderstanding of family education and the imperfection of family function are the reasons for the loss of social ability of children in some single-parent families.

In short, the impact of parental divorce on children and adolescents has become the focus of psychological and sociological researchers [7] and urges an in-depth understanding to explore how children interpersonal

development is affected by parent divorce, and help them overcome psychological barriers through the proper counseling.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Parental Divorce and Children's Adjustment

Child adjustment is multi-faceted [8], yet most theorists have conceptualized the reciprocal influences between children and parents through the lens of children's aversive behaviors and temperamental-based traits [9]. Externalizing behaviors, internalizing problems, academic achievement, and quality of social relationships are frequently included as the indicators of adjustment in the divorce literature. Cherlin [10] examined these indicators of adjustment at discrete time points and exemplified that children whose parents divorce have more externalizing and internalizing problems, lower academic achievement, and more problematic social relationships than do children whose parents do not divorce [11]. Qing believed that children from single-parent families have poorer adjustment ability than children from intact families, which is reflected in teenagers' internalization and externalization. These scholars claim that children from single parent families have more serious psychological problems than children from two parent families, such as autism, and their academic performance generally decreases after their parents divorce [12]. However, King and Deng rejected this view with their experimental results [7,13]. They pointed out that children's adaptation disorder is usually only reflected in academic achievement, and the dis-adjustment only stays for a short time.

Another negative feature generally recognized by researchers is that children from single-parent families have poor adjustment to society. This is usually caused by the stereotype of children from single-parent families on themselves and the stereotype of children from intact families on children from single parent families. This makes them feel incompatible with their surroundings. Wang [14] argued that the diversity of social culture impacts the values and moral concepts of single-parent adolescents. In the process of learning, these children label themselves as outliers because of the subtle environmental influence. On the contrary, according to the experimental Liu's [15] research, self stereotype of children in single parent families and the stereotype of others in children showed a positive nature and tended to be neutral on the overall level. There is no long-term competition or conflict between the children of single parent families and the children of two parent families. Therefore, there is less preference for internal groups and less derogation from external groups. With the continuous improvement of national quality, the cultural inclusiveness has increased significantly, the cognitive

evaluation ability of social members has become more mature, the probability of discrimination against children in single parent families has gradually decreased, their self-identity and self-evaluation have gradually improved, and their adaptability has also gradually improved.

2.2. Family Environment and Children's mental stability

First, family changes will cause children to become emotional. The Family environment is closely related to the formation of children's character. The environment of single parent family restricts the development of children's intelligence and personality, and directly affects the normal socialization of children. Studies [12] have shown that the incidence of children's foul mood is relatively high when their parents just divorced. Children's bad mood is not only a direct result of their own changes in family relations, but also an indirect reflection of their parents' more or less lousy-mood [4]. Under the long-term pressure and negative emotions, the personality of children in single-parent families will be gradually extreme, and the "tags" and attitude of others will also affect their social adaptation.

Secondly, parents' extreme emotions easily aggravate children's psychological status. Parents of single parent families experience psychological trauma and tend to have extreme emotions for their children. This extreme is usually manifested in the way of education style. For example, most single parents overindulge their children, and ignore the actual situation and needs of their children. Excessive expectations and abnormal love will make children feel tired harm family relations [4].

Thirdly, in the process of children's socialization, the formation of gender identity is an important feature. In the role education of single parent families, if single parent has inappropriate educational influence, it will cause children's psychological and behavioral deviation in gender roles, such as boy feminization and girl masculinization. The psychological and behavioral biases of boys and girls' gender roles will influence each other, and the people with these biases will not be accepted by the mainstream.

3. METHODS

This research aims to understand how parental divorce affects teenagers' interpersonal development. It is assumed that parents' divorce will greatly impact teenagers' interpersonal development through the cultivation of communication skills, personality, views on relationship, and adjustment.

3.1. Participants

First, an online questionnaire was randomly sent to the participants and self-administered. A total of 194

questionnaires were sent out, of which 153 were from intact families, 41 were from single-parent or re-married families. The majority of the respondents were young adults aged 18 to 45 (48.97%) and teenagers 13 to 17 (44.33%). In order to specify the children from different family structures, a question was set to inquire which types of family (i.e, single-parent family, intact family or re-married family) did they live in when they were at the age of 11 to 18.

3.2. Questionnaire design

The questionnaire has two folds. For participants from single-parent families, the questionnaire contains 10 items that focus on their own emotions, personality and communication skills. The specific questions designed for single-parent teenagers are: parents' educational level; reasons for parents' divorce; emotions after parents' divorce; duration of negative emotions; aggravation of negative emotions; impact of parents' divorce on other aspects; and how to overcome psychological problems.

While for children from an intact family, the questionnaire has 5 questions as representative of common public on the children from single-parent families. All questions are multiple-choice and the data will be analyzed with descriptive analysis. The specific questions designed for the children of two-parent families are perception of children of single-parent family, family factors, and suggestions.

3.3. Ethical concerns

Divorce is regarded as taboo that should be condemned in Chinese culture. People are sensitive to release their family situation. For this situation, it is important to be aware the respect and privacy toward individuals. Many participants from single parent families may not be willing to recall bad memories, so they may neither fill in the questionnaire nor open their hearts to their innermost thoughts and feelings. Therefore, in order to appease participants' feelings, the questionnaire designed as anonymous in soft and mild tone.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Single-parent family

Most of the fathers in divorced families received from 9 to 11 years of education. 34.15% of this group reached middle school, 26.83% for, high schools and 19.51% for and universities. Mother counterpart also has the same range of years of education. Respectively, the percentage for middle school, high school and universities are 31.71%, 24.39%, and 19.51%.

The reasons for parents' divorce are tiredness, awakening of mother's awareness and violence. According to the survey, 43.9% of divorced families were

broken because of tiredness, followed by awakening awareness (31.71%) and violence and abuse(26.83%). Because of divorce, 65.85% of the children felt anxious, tired of life, even suicidal thoughts. 39.02% of the children felt lonely and helpless, and their relationship with their parents was gradually alienated after their divorce. 24.39% of the children thought that their parents were not as concerned about him as before, and they felt uneasy about it and gradually formed an inferiority character. After parents divorced, more than 60% of the teenagers in the family thought their psychological problems were exacerbated. Anxiety and irritability gradually develop into depression, anxiety disorder, social phobia and inferiority.

Compared with the negative influences, parents' divorce has a lesser impact on the teenagers. 24.39% of the children felt happy and relaxed after their parents divorced, and they were eager to live with one of their parents only. Similarly, 24.39% of the children felt stronger after their parents divorced. They no longer dependent on others, and had certain resistance. But the duration of special negative emotions is inconsistent. In contrast, most people (19.51%) spent six months to a year to get out of the shadow of family breakdown, but many people only spent a few days (17.07%) or more than two years (17.07%).

The results showed that parents' divorce has the greatest impact on their children's academic performance, and more than 70% of respondents have experienced a decline in their academic performance after their parents divorce. Secondly, parents divorce has a large influence on their children's emotion and character: 51.22% of children feel lonely after the family structure fluctuates, while 41.46% of them think their personality has changed. In order to overcome these psychological problems, most people (65.85%) chose self counseling, relying on time to reduce anxiety. On the contrary, only 34.15% of the people chose to consult with professional psychiatrists.

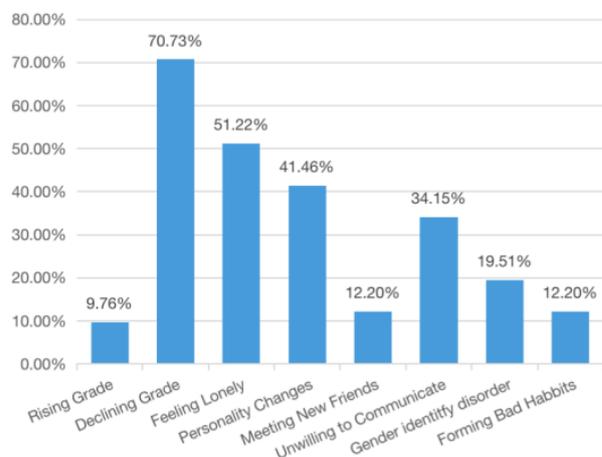


Figure 1 Changes in adolescents' behavior after parents' divorce

4.2. Intact family

More than 60% of children from intact families think that teenagers from single parent families have no communication barriers. Yet, the remaining 39.22% of the children from two parent families thought that the main communication barriers of the adolescents from single parent families were introversion, inferiority complex, frailty, desire to be recognized, insecurity, low EQ, not good at communicating with the opposite sex, and lack of independent opinions.

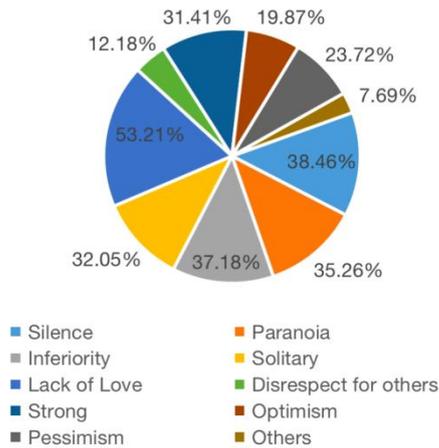


Figure 2 Personality characteristics of children from divorced families

It is generally believed that people who are not good at communication are introverted, sensitive and self-contemptuous. More than 50% of the respondents thought that the most obvious characteristic of teenagers from single parent families was lack of love. About 30% of the respondents thought that children from single parent families were not only silent, paranoid, self abased but also strong. Here, the characteristics of people who are not good at communication are mostly consistent with those of children from single parent families, so we can claim that most children from single parent families are not good at communication. In addition, 67.32% of the people think that family will affect social relations, so it is true that parents' divorce will affect children's social relations and interpersonal development.

The average score of "measures taken by school / society to protect and guide teenagers from single parent families" was 5.03. This is a compromise figure, which shows that people do not trust and adopt these measures at present, and there is still great potential for social measures to improve.

Some participants suggested that schools should let school counselors give more psychological courses, strengthen ideological guidance, protect the privacy of students from single parent families, and communicate more frequently with students' parents to help children from single parent families get out of the shadow of their parents' divorce. However, others believe that children

from single parent families should not be labeled as special. Too much protection and guidance will be counterproductive.

5. DISCUSSION

Parents' divorce will have an indelible impact on teenagers, including withdrawn and introverted personality, strong rebellious psychology, and sensitive emotions [16]. In my opinion, these psychological problems are the source of interpersonal difficulties for teenagers from divorced families. According to the survey results, it is found that the emotional changes caused by parents' divorce do affect the cultivation of communication skills, personality, views on relationships, and adjustments.

5.1. Teenagers' Personality

Studies have shown that children's personalities are mostly affected by their family environment [16]. According to the survey results, over one-third of teenagers believe that their personality has undergone great changes after their parents divorced. More than 50% of the respondents think that children from single parent families lack paternal and maternal love.

Affected by the incompleteness of the family structure, adolescents become more sensitive and refuse intervention. Over a long period of time, the healthy personality will be changed, forming an introverted, withdrawn, and inferiority character gradually. These characteristics are also the public's understanding of children from single-parent families.

This study mainly divide the personality defects of children from single parent families into three categories:

Introversion and inferiority. After parents' divorce, changes in family economic conditions, shifting of responsibility for upbringing and long-term quarrels are all important reasons for children's inferiority complex. Parents' attitude makes children feel redundant, and their departure can make the family more harmonious. Therefore, this kind of children often have the idea of suicide.

Depression and indifference. Some children feel very painful and difficult to accept the loss of their father or mother. Due to the turbulence of life or the irresponsibility of their parents, they have an uneasy mood in their minds. When they see other children have harmonious families, they often feel unfair and insecure. After a long time, such children would lack enthusiasm for their peers and collective undertakings, show indifference, be self-centered and boycott social activities.

Irritation and hostility. In some families, parents and children are hostile. Children hate their parents' neglect and endless quarrels in the family. This aversion will lead

to unhealthy psychological development of children over time, and then expand to dissatisfaction with the school and society. Furthermore, they will vent their negative emotions on irrelevant people, such as fighting with classmates at school. In the long run, children's social development will face adverse conditions, and their character will become irritable and impulsive.

Families provide emotional support for teenagers. Compared with single-parent families, harmonious intact families will be able to carry out family functions in optimally building children's character. The loss of emotional support will bring social, emotional and cognitive effects to adolescents, including but not limited to academic problems, depression, anxiety, isolation, and rebellion.

5.2. Teenagers' interpersonal development

After the formation of the withdrawn and introverted personality, these single-parent teenagers will have the traits of silence and low self-esteem. As a result, when participating in school activities, they cannot communicate well with team members and cooperate to solve problems. In the long run, they will lose the sense and spirit of the corporation, and their potential leadership skills may not be stimulated.

In addition, based on the results of the experiment, many people believe that single-parent adolescents do not respect others. The introverted personality causes their social circle to shrink gradually, lack the opportunity to communicate with others, and the broken family structure is not conducive to the development of children's emotional intelligence.

Also, teenagers living with parents of the opposite sex (e.g. a boy living with his mother) may have problems with gender role identity. Clear gender role identity makes people behave in accordance with their gender characteristics, while these children's vague gender role cognition makes them look strange and different from ordinary people. Unique characters will lead them to be alienated and not accepted by the mainstream of society.

Dialogue is encouraged and a part of daily life. It is a mean of teaching and socializing their children [17]. In single-parent family, missing role of parent may lose the opportunities to revolve topics like opinion, feeling, and emotion.

According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement. Lack an adult whose role can be learned to perform through imitation and interaction may lead teenagers to go astray and develop bad habits, such as smoking and drinking. In addition, children may experience maladjustment. Without the guidance of their

parents, they may not learn the ability to cope with stress or adjust to adverse environment.

5.3. Teenagers' view on relationship

It is difficult for adolescents to adapt to changes in the family environment and structure. Many teenagers completely closed their hearts at the moment their parents divorced. This leads to serious personality defects, weakened interpersonal skills, and shows strong resistance to the re-married family, and even affects their view of marriage. Their family does not give them enough sense of security, so these people are afraid that the relationship with their partners will eventually fail like their parents. Therefore, some children from single parent families may choose not to marry in order to be responsible to their partners. Many children of single parent families do not desire marriage, which is the result of their uncertainty and distrust of the future.

However, other children from single parent families are the opposite - they don't take their relationships seriously. Similar as the reason mentioned above, these people's families did not give them enough sense of security. As a result, they try to find love from many unfamiliar people to make up for the lack of family affection. This is their protection under the indifferent family affection, and it is the way they use to paralyze the pain brought to them by their native family.

According to the survey data, most respondents from first-tier cities such as Shanghai think that the protection and guidance measures of schools and society for teenagers from single parent families are poor, while respondents from second-tier and third-tier cities generally think that these measures are good. Scholars believe that the strategies to solve the interpersonal problems of children from single parent families are as follows: 1. Pay attention to single parent family education 2. Improve the scientificity of school education 3. Improve social security[18]. However, many participants believe that children from single parent families should not be given excessive protection or guidance. These children should not be labeled as "single parent families". Taking special measures to them will have the opposite effect, leading to more autistic personality.

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, parental divorce will affect teenagers' interpersonal development in many ways, including changing their personality, social ability and view on relationships.

Firstly, after parents divorce, children's healthy personality will change and gradually form an introverted, withdrawn and inferiority complex. These characteristics further exacerbate children's social difficulties: children gradually become quieter, inferior, impolite and refuse to

communicate. Gradually, their communication circle will shrink, their cooperation ability will become weak, and their potential leadership ability may not be explored. Secondly, The family structure without one parent is incomplete. The lack of an adult who can learn to play roles through imitation and interaction may lead teenagers to go astray and develop bad habits. In addition, children may experience maladjustment, including wrong gender role identity and poor social adaptability. Finally, the separation of the family will make the children of single parent families feel particularly uneasy and upset. This feeling will be reflected in their unique view on relationship and marriage. This is why many children of single parent families do not want to get married, which is the result of their uncertainty and distrust of the future.

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