

# Relationships between Parents' Marital Status and the Psychological Well-being of Adolescents in Greece

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between parents' marital status and various dimensions of psychological well-being of adolescents in Greece. 166 adolescents from divorced and 166 from intact families completed a) the Achenbach's Youth Self-Report Questionnaire, b) a questionnaire about their parents' relationship and their own relationship with each one of their parents, and c) a questionnaire about demographics. The results suggest adolescents from divorced families had poorer academic performance and more internalizing and externalizing problems than their counterparts. Furthermore, it was found that a positive parent-child relationship was associated with the adolescents' mental health. The parents' relationship after divorce was also associated with the subjects' mental health and more specifically with internalizing and externalizing problems.

**Keywords:** Parents' marital status; Divorce; Adolescents; Psychological well-being; Mental health

## Introduction

The rapid rise of divorce over the past three decades has been paralleled by growing research interest on its effects on children and adolescents. Nevertheless, the numerous studies that were conducted came with contradictory results. In 1991, a significant meta-analysis (4) compared the results of 92 studies in order to give an answer to the questions a) how divorce affects children and b) if children whose parents are divorced are at greater risk for problems than children whose parents are married. Recently, an updated version of Amato and Keith's study was published which includes studies that were done in the 90's in addition to earlier studies [1]. The results of the updated study are similar to the results of the original study; children from divorced families scored lower on assessments of academic achievement, adjustment, and well-being but the observed differences are modest. Moreover, it was found that there are very few differences in outcomes between boys and girls, as well as that both elementary-school-age children and adolescents may be at risk for problems following parental divorce [2].

Even though many studies have indicated that associations between divorce and problem behavior in children exist, special attention should be given to the fact that these associations are not considered as causal relationships. It is possible that these associations stem from third variables which themselves relate to factors/variables such as: socioeconomic level of the family, parental education, parental age, family's stress factors and other factors that are generally related to an increased risk for marital disruption and conflict as well as increased risk for behavioral and cognitive problems in children [3,4]. It is important neither to overestimate the magnitude of the effects nor to ignore the considerable individual variability in response to divorce [5].

The short-term effects of divorce emerge unequivocally from research to date. Divorce affects the social, emotional and cognitive adjustment of children leading to disruption of their functioning which lasts for 2 years after the divorce [6,7]. However, the results of the studies about longer-term divorce outcomes on social, emotional and cognitive development of children are contradictory. In a recent study it was found that children from divorced families reported more substance use, oppositional/aggressive behavior and depression than the children from intact families [8].

According to Kelly [9] the frequency of contact of the child with the non-custodial parent is a factor that relates with the psychological adjustment of the child. Furthermore, other researchers underline that children who have a positive relationship, at least with one of the parents, have fewer behavioral problems [10-12].

To date, there is a paucity of research from countries other than the US, UK and Australia. In Greece there is a significant research insufficiency as far as divorce is concerned. Even though the number of divorces has risen abruptly during the last decades, research about divorce remains surprisingly poor. Greece is a country where divorce is rather a social stigma [13]. Because of this fact, through this study we expect to find greater behavioral problems on children and adolescents [1,2].

In a study on schoolchildren in Greece [13], children from divorced families were shown to exhibit greater difficulties compared to their peers from intact families on behavioral problems, school performance and psychosocial competence.

The aim of the present study is to explore the psychological well-being of adolescents from divorced families as compared to their classmates from intact families. Based on the above considerations we expect to find problems in various areas of adolescents' psychological well-being.

## Method

### Sample

The sample consisted of 332 adolescents, 15-16 years of age, in public schools in Athens, Greece. 166 adolescents from divorced

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families were identified and represented the divorced group of the study. The parents of these adolescents had been separated more than two years prior to the time of the data collection. The control group consisted of 166 adolescents from intact families who had been matched to their "divorced" counterparts. The matching of the two groups was done according to the following criteria: nationality, adolescent's sex, adolescent's age, mother's education, father's education, number of siblings, mother's occupation and father's occupation. Each group consisted of 166 students 68 of whom (41.0%) were boys and 98 (59.0%) were girls. Among the "divorced" group, the majority of respondents characterized their parents' relationship before the divorce as neither bad nor good (28.3%) as well as after the divorce (24.8%). Most of the respondents whose parents had been remarried also characterized the relationship with their stepmother as very good (24.1%) as well as with their stepfather (42.2%), even though the majority of the subjects referred that their fathers (67.1%) or mothers (70.7%) hadn't been remarried. The majority of the adolescents (53.8%) also reported that the family's socioeconomic status had changed since their parents split up.

### Instruments

All subjects completed the Youth Self-Report (YSR) [14] and two other questionnaires developed specifically for the present study. The Youth Self-Report consists of two parts: The first part is a scale of general adjustment and evaluates the adolescents' participation in their various activities, social skills and academic performance. The second part consists of 112 items that examine the occurrence of problem behaviors and syndromes such as: withdrawal, somatic complaints, and aggressive behavior, which comprise two larger scales, i.e. Internalizing and Externalizing Problems.

The other two questionnaires developed for the purpose of this study are: a) An instrument that was used to gather data on variables proposed as mediating the effects of divorce on adolescents' well-being. Items elicited information about the current relationship with their parents, their relationship before and after the divorce, the quality of the mother-child and father-child relationships before and after the divorce, the subjects' age at the time of divorce, the custodial arrangements after the divorce, the amount of current contact between the child and the non-custodial parent and perceived change in socioeconomic status after the divorce. Other variables included whether and when the father or the mother had been remarried and the quality of the adolescent's relationship with the stepmother and/or the stepfather respectively. b) A demographic questionnaire which included questions about their sex, age, nationality, school and area of living, parental occupation and education, parental marital status and the number and sex of their siblings.

### Procedure

The questionnaires used in the present study were administered as part of a larger battery of measures. The students completed the questionnaires during a class period and returned them to the investigator when they left. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous.

### Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the divorced and intact family samples on the YSR Competence Scores. The results are presented in table 1.

The ANOVA did not show any significant difference in the means

of the adolescents coming from intact and divorced families for the Total Competence scale. With respect to the Competence subscales, the ANOVA revealed a significant difference only for the Academic Performance,  $F(1, 316) = 10, 89, p < 0.001$  (Table 1 and figure 1).

The analysis of variance and the means of the adolescents from married and divorced families for the YSR syndromes are presented in table 2 and figure 2.

As it is shown in the table 2, the differences between the adolescents from married and those from divorced families in almost all the syndromes are statistically significant, except for the Withdrawn, the Somatic Complaints and the Social Problems Syndromes. More specifically, the adolescents from divorced families report higher scores on the Anxious/Depressed scale,  $F(1,316)=9.61, p < 0.01$ , Thought problems,  $F(1,316)=3.26, p < 0.01$ , Attention Problems,  $F(1,316)=6.55, p < 0.01$ , Delinquent Behavior,  $F(1,316)=5.27, p < 0.001$ , Aggressive behavior,  $F(1,316)=11.48, p < 0.001$  and Self-destructive identity,  $F(1,316)=3.82, p < 0.001$ , than their peers from intact families. They also report more Internalizing,  $F(1,316)=15.67, p < 0.05$ , and Externalizing Problems,  $F(1,316)=19.87, p < 0.001$ , than their counterparts. Furthermore, a significant difference was found concerning the Total YSR syndromes' means,  $F(1,316)=51.52, p < 0.001$ , which indicates that the adolescents from the divorced families seem to have more problems in general than the adolescents from intact families.



Figure 1: Means of the YSR Competence subscales for parents' marital status.

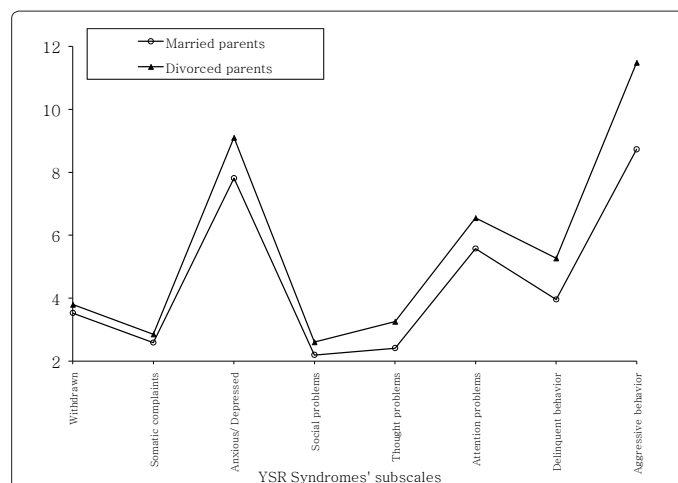


Figure 2: YSR Syndromes' Means for parents' marital status.

A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to test the effects of parents' marital status (married, divorced) and adolescents' gender (male, female) on the nine subscale scores of the YSR Questionnaire. Wilks' multivariate criterion indicated that the interaction between parents' marital status and adolescents' gender was not significant. However, examination of univariate statistics indicated a significant interaction of parents' marital status and students' gender on the Social Problems subscale, where male adolescents from divorced homes reported more Social Problems,  $F(1,324)=3.21, p<0.05$ , than male adolescents from married families, whereas the difference found in favor of female adolescents from divorced families was not significant. These results are shown in table 3 and figure 3.

Correlations between the YSR subscales and the variables concerning the quality of the parents' relationship and the quality of the relationship of the adolescent with each one of his/her parents, as well as the correlations with the variables concerning the parents' relationship before and after the divorce were performed with Pearson's product moment correlations. The quality of the parents' relationship and the quality of the relationship of the adolescent with each one of his/her parents, as well as the parents' relationship before and after the divorce was evaluated by the adolescents with a Likert-type evaluation. The Pearson r correlations of the YSR Scales with the variables concerning the quality of the parents' relationship are presented below in the table 4.

The data in table 4 indicate that significant negative correlations were obtained between the above variables both in adolescents from intact as well as in those coming from divorced families. It is interesting that most of the YSR scores were negatively related to the variable "relationship with father", in both groups.

The data in table 5 indicate that several of the YSR scores were related negatively to the variable "parents' relationship after divorce". The results suggest that the many of the YSR subscales such as: Somatic Complaints ( $r=-0.24, p<0.01$ ), Anxious/Depressed ( $r=-0.23, p<0.01$ ),

Competence subscales	Marital status		F (d.f. = 1, 316)
	Married	Divorced	
Activities	3,52	3,50	n.s.
Social competence	5,84	6,08	n.s.
Academic performance	2,45	2,26	10.89***
Total Competence	11,18	11,84	n.s.

\* $p<0.05$ . \*\* $p<0.01$ . \*\*\* $p<0.001$ . n.s.= non significant.

**Table 1:** Analysis of variance and Means of the YSR Competence scales for parents' marital status.

Syndromes	Marital status		F (d.f. = 1, 316)
	Married	Divorced	
Withdrawn	3,53	3,80	n.s.
Somatic Complaints	2,59	2,86	n.s.
Anxious / Depressed	7,81	9,61	7,58**
Social Problems	2,20	2,61	n.s.
Thought Problems	2,42	3,26	7,84**
Attention Problems	5,58	6,55	7,77**
Delinquent Behavior	3,96	5,27	12,05***
Aggressive Behavior	8,73	11,48	19,22***
Self-destructive identity	1,82	3,82	12,60***
Internalizing	13,51	15,67	4,15*
Externalizing	12,69	16,75	19,87***
Total Problems	41,83	51,52	13,84***

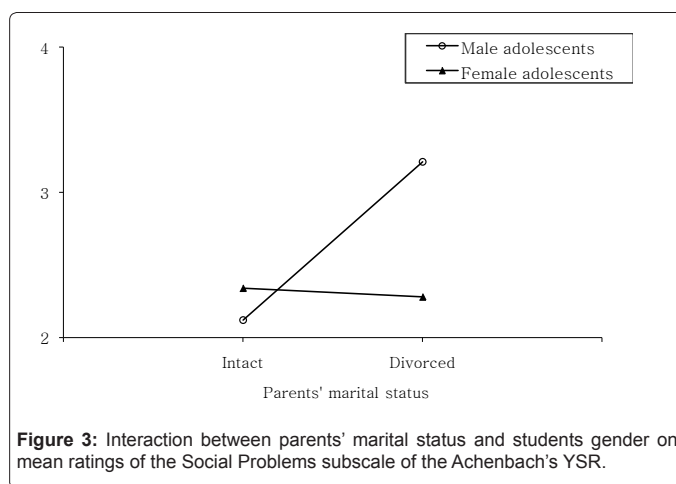
\* $p<0.05$ . \*\* $p<0.01$ . \*\*\* $p<0.001$ . n.s.= non significant.

**Table 2:** Analysis of variance and YSR Syndromes' Means for parents' marital status.

Adolescents' gender	Parents' marital status		F (d.f. = 1, 324)
	Intact	Divorced	
Male adolescents	2,12	3,21	4,95*
Female adolescents	3,34	2,28	n.s.

\* $p<0.05$ . \*\* $p<0.01$ . \*\*\* $p<0.001$ . n.s.= non significant.

**Table 3:** Mean ratings of the Social Problems subscale by parents' marital status and adolescents' gender.



**Figure 3:** Interaction between parents' marital status and students' gender on mean ratings of the Social Problems subscale of the Achenbach's YSR.

Thought Problems ( $r=-0.23, p<0.01$ ) and Aggressive Behavior ( $r=-0.16, p<0.05$ ), as well as Internalizing Problems ( $r=-0.23, p<0.01$ ), Externalizing Problems ( $r=-0.18, p<0.05$ ) and the total of Syndromes ( $r=-0.27, p<0.01$ ) are significantly and negatively correlated with the parents' relationship after divorce - as perceived by the adolescent.

## Discussion

The results of the present study suggest a rather significant role of the parents' marital status in relation to the adolescents' psychological well-being. Firstly, it seems that although poor academic performance appears to be related to parental divorce, as other researchers have suggested [13,15-17], many other areas such as social competence, or number of activities are not associated with parents' marital status.

Secondly, the results indicate that there are important differences between the adolescents from intact and those from divorced families in terms of the adolescents' psychological well-being. The adolescents from divorced families present more internalizing and externalizing problems in general and more specifically, social problems and more thought and attention problems. This finding comes partly in agreement with other studies that have found that divorce is associated with internalizing, social and cognitive problems, but not with externalizing problems [18] or others which, on the other hand, have found that externalizing problems are among the most prevalent behavior problems among children from divorced families [1-3,16,17,19] as well as internalizing ones, such as depressive symptoms and anxiety [16,17,19,20]. Moreover, the boys of divorced homes seem to have more social problems than the girls whose parents have divorced. This finding agrees with other research which supports that boys from divorced families seem to be damaged more than girls in terms of their social maturity, academic and vocational achievements, peer relationships, substance abuse and mental health [21] and generally have more adjustment problems than girls following divorce [22].

Thirdly, as far as the quality of the relationship of the parents is concerned, the results of this study suggest that this is important for

YSR subscales	Married parents			Divorced parents		
	Parental relationship	Relationship/mother	Relationship/father	Parental relationship	Relationship/mother	Relationship/father
Activities	0,02	0,08	-0,00	0,06	0,13	0,06
Social competence	0,25**	0,12	0,20*	0,16*	0,14	0,32**
Academic performance	0,10	0,22**	0,10	0,05	0,08	0,07
Competence (total)	0,16*	0,18*	0,13	0,13	0,14	0,22**
Withdrawn	-0,10	-0,09	-0,23**	-0,06	-0,19*	-0,18*
Somatic Comp.	-0,24**	-0,04	-0,22**	-0,02	-0,11	-0,24**
Anxious/ Depressed	-0,18*	-0,14	-0,26**	-0,17*	-0,24**	-0,24**
Social Probs	-0,04	-0,14	-0,12	0,00	-0,05	-0,01
Thought Probs	-0,04	-0,06	-0,15	-0,14	-0,06	-0,28**
Attention Probs	-0,20*	-0,20**	-0,20**	-0,08	-0,14	-0,16*
Delinquent Behavior	-0,08	-0,37**	-0,24**	-0,18*	-0,26**	-0,22**
Aggressive Behavior	-0,15	-0,25**	-0,27**	-0,11	-0,19*	-0,25**
Internalizing	-0,20**	-0,11	-0,29**	-0,15	-0,25**	-0,28**
Externalizing	-0,14	-0,33**	-0,28**	-0,16*	-0,24**	-0,27**
Syndromes (total)	-0,21**	-0,25**	-0,34**	-0,14	-0,22**	-0,27**

\*p < 0.05. \*\* p < 0.01

**Table 4:** Correlation (Pearson r) of the YSR subscales with variables concerning the quality of the parental relationship.

YSR subscales	Parents' relationship before divorce	Parents' relationship after divorce
Activities	-0,02	0,05
Social competence	0,18*	0,12
Academic performance	-0,03	0,04
Competence (total)	0,08	0,09
Withdrawn	-0,13	-0,13
Somatic Complaints	-0,02	-0,24**
Anxious/ Depressed	-0,06	-0,23**
Social Problems	0,08	-0,03
Thought Problems	-0,15	-0,23**
Attention Problems	-0,06	-0,10
Delinquent Behavior	-0,12	-0,14
Aggressive Behavior	-0,08	-0,16*
Internalizing Problems	-0,12	-0,23**
Externalizing Problems	-0,11	-0,18*
Syndromes (total)	-0,08	-0,27**

\*p < 0.05 . \*\* p < 0.01

**Table 5:** Correlations (Pearson r) of the YSR subscales with variables concerning the quality of the adolescent's relationship with his/her parents.

the competence and mental health of the adolescents from intact as well as from divorced families. There is a relationship between the psychological adjustment of the child and the quality of life of family members [23].

Finally, in addition to the above finding, the fact that the parents' relationship after the divorce is associated with several of the YSR scales is another important finding. In a relevant study, it was found that the quality of marital relations prior to the divorce predicted the quality of parent-child relations after divorce [24]. When parents after divorce have a good cooperative relationship, their children have few behavioral problems [25]. The results of another study [26] indicate that a family's

functioning after the divorce is a predictive factor for the children's adjustment. More specifically, it was found that children adjust successfully in their parents' divorce when: a) the parental conflict is minimal, b) the family roles remain intact and c) the parents-children relations are positive.

The results of the present study suggest that there are relationships between parental divorce and adolescents' well-being. The hypothesis that divorce remains a social stigma – although articulated twenty years ago [13] and despite the significant increase of the divorce rate the past decade – seems to be sustained. Adolescents from divorced households seem to function worse than their peers from married families in many areas. Consequently, interventions should be planned and made in order to protect adolescents, as well as children, from the possible deleterious effects of a divorce. Furthermore, it should be underlined the necessity for the intensification of research in Greece relevant to parental divorce and its relationships with the children's and adolescents adjustment.

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