

Depression and intimate relationships of adolescents from divorced families

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ABSTRACT

Aim To determine an impact of parental divorce to depression and intimate relationships of young people during adolescence, and prevalence of symptoms of depression and the level of intimacy in relations to adolescents living in intact families and those from divorced families.

Methods This prospective descriptive research was conducted on a sample of 168 examinees of which 64 (38.1%) were students of the University Zenica, and 104 (61.9%) high students schools from Zenica and Maglaj cities during May and June 2011. Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI) II, Miller Social Intimacy Scale and sociodemographic questionnaire were used.

Results Adolescents from divorced families had statistically significantly higher level of depression ($p < 0.05$), with moderate and severe depression found in 20 (24.69%) adolescents from divorced families as compared with six (6.89%) adolescents from intact families. An analysis of BDI-II scale showed that adolescents from divorced families had statistically significant difference in agitation ($p < 0.01$), difficult concentration, suicidal thoughts, grief and pessimism ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion It is necessary to carry out detailed studies on long-term effects of breakup of families due to divorce, which have negative implications on psychological and social functioning of adolescents and the development of their identity and closeness in intimate relationships, with a legislative introduction of premarital and marriage counseling for parents in the conflict.

Key words: depression, adolescents, marriage, divorce, intimacy, family

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INTRODUCTION

At the list of potentially stressful events in life divorce takes the second place, immediately after the death of a spouse and it is a traumatic event for all family members – spouses themselves, their children but also their parents. Divorce does not affect just former spouses but also two adjacent generations – both their children and their parents. Judith Wallerstein was the first who upset the public with a well-known research on effects of divorce on children and claimed that 15 years after divorce 80% of divorced mothers and 50% of divorced fathers felt that divorce was good for them, while only 10% of their children had positive feelings related to their parental divorce (1).

Young persons whose parents divorced during their adolescence claim to experience more stress, anxiety and depression and less social interactions and weaker self-concept than those from intact families – so called „spillover effect“, a conflict that spills over from parents to relations of young persons (2).

Marital status of parents and relationships between parents and adolescents, as confirmed by many studies, are linked to psychological wellbeing of adolescents. A conclusion of a meta-analysis conducted by Amato and Keith (3) investigating effects of divorce of parents on adaptation and mental health of children was that children of divorced parents showed a lower level of psychological wellbeing in the period of adolescence than children of parents who were not divorced, though the difference was relatively small.

Fagan and Rector (4) in their article also gave an insight in many research that adolescents with divorced parents experienced statistically significantly more mental problems than adolescents living in full, intact families, while Størksen et al. (5) indicate that parental divorce affected psychological stability of their children especially during adolescence resulting in negative consequences especially regarding offspring of psychosocial impairment: lower self-esteem and the feeling of consternation, frequent depressive mood or more suicidal thoughts and even more attempts of suicide (6). Various studies have shown that the experience of parents' divorce especially affects girls in the period of adolescence having in mind that conflicts of parents and a lack of understanding leading to divorce are linked to

internalized symptoms in girls in the adolescence period but not in their male peers. Internalized problems lead to various symptoms of depression such as sadness, anhedonia, exhaustion, insomnia, loss of appetite, feeling of guilt and loss of the feeling of personal worthiness, decreased concentration and suicidal ideas (7). Consequences of parental divorce and conflicts depend on gender too, thus girls react with emotional agitation and internalized problems such as consternation and self-blame while boys tend to react with anger and aggression (8).

One of the main problems of divorce is that parental conflicts have a direct and important impact on functioning and social adaptation of children and adolescents among their peers both in divorced and intact families and are considered to be a key mediator for the effect of divorce on children and adolescents. Having in mind a kind of „crisis of the institution of marriage“ and frequency of divorce worldwide – including Bosnia and Herzegovina (similar studies, to our knowledge, have not yet been carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region), it was interesting to examine an impact of parental divorce depression and intimate relationships of young people during adolescence, to determine prevalence of symptoms of depression and the level of intimacy in relations among adolescents living in intact families and those from divorced families. The results of this study can serve social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers and marriage advisors to successfully carry out their tasks related to the more widespread problem of divorce and its negative impact on the various psychological aspects of adolescents.

EXAMINEES AND METHODS

Study design and examinees

This prospective/descriptive research was conducted on a sample of 168 examinees: 64 (38.1%) students of the University of Zenica (Pedagogical Faculty, Islamic Pedagogical Faculty, Economic Faculty, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering and Faculty of Metallurgical Engineering) and 104 (61.9%) high school students of Zenica (First and Second Gymnasium, Secondary School of Economics, Secondary Nursing School, Secondary School of Industry, Catholic School Center) and Maglaj (Gymnasium “Edhem Mulab-

dić” and Mixed Secondary School) during May and June 2011. The experimental group included 81 (48.2%) adolescents from divorced families, who cooperated during the research, and the control group included 87 (51.8%) adolescents from intact families, who cooperated during the research). Among the total of 168 examinees 60 (35.7%) were males and 108 (64.3%) were females. In the experimental group 27 (33.3%) and 54 (66.7%), and in the control group 33 (37.9%) and 54 (62.1%) males and females, respectively, were included. The average age of examinees was 18.4 years ranging from 15 to 23 years. The permission for this research was signed by the Rector of the University in Zenica and Deans of the Faculties where the study was conducted, as well as the director of the Pedagogical Institute of Zenica.

Methods

Beck’s Depression Inventory (BDI) II (9), Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS) (10) and Sociodemographic questionnaire were used.

Beck’s Depression Inventory II (9) is one of the most commonly used scale of self-assessment to detect and measure the presence of the severity of depression. It consists of 21 items that measure cognitive, behavioral, affective, motivational and somatic symptoms of depression. Each item is composed of four responses that are ranked according to the gravity of symptoms from 0 to 3. Score greater than 17 indicates the presence of depression, and the highest possible score is 63 points. Standards for BDI-II are: a) 0 to 13 points - minimum depression, or no depression, b) 14 to 19 points - mild depression, c) 20 to 28 points - moderately depressed, d) over 29 points - severely depressed.

Miller Social Intimacy Scale (10) is a popular instrument in the research of intimacy, and is rated as very reliable in numerous studies (11). It consists of 17 questions based on the Likert scale of five grades. Respondents are asked to answer questions referring to their most intimate relationship to measure the maximum level of intimacy of individuals. The results can range from 17 to 85, with higher scores representing a greater level of intimacy.

The sociodemographic questionnaire contains relevant information on the respondents and their family environment: issues relating to age, gender, family status and school subjects, who they lived

with during the study, age at the time of parents’ divorce, parents’ marriage satisfaction, quality relationships with both parents, the amount of conflict between parents during the marriage and after marriage, attitude toward marriage and so on.

Data were collected using the technique of surveying with survey forms, questionnaires and scales. The examinees were informed about the purpose of the research and their voluntary consents with signature were requested. The examinees were protected as their names were not written on the questionnaires, i.e. the survey was anonymous.

The relationship between parents’ marital status and the amount of conflict between parents with the level of depression and the closeness in intimate relationships of adolescents from divorced families and adolescents from intact families was analyzed. Also, gender differences in the level of depression and closeness in intimate relationships, types of coping-mechanisms and adaptations, and the influence of emotional relationships of adolescents to better cope with parental conflicts or divorce were analyzed.

Statistical analysis

The standard parametric and non-parametric methods of descriptive statistics, t-test, Mann-Whitney U-test (nonparametric version of t-test) and the two-way ANOVA (compares the mean differences between groups that have been split on two independent variables to understand if there is an interaction between the two independent variables on the dependent variable) were used for testing statistical significance of selected variables, while Spearman’s nonparametric test of correlation was used for the analysis of a correlation. Statistically significant results were tested at the level $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Significant correlation between symptoms of depression and parental divorce was found, e. g., adolescents who had experienced their parents’ divorce more frequently showed depressive symptoms ($p < 0.05$). Six (6.89%) adolescents from married families and 20 (24.69%) adolescents from divorced families showed the presence of moderate or severe depression ($p < 0.05$).

In total, four (7.40%) girls from married families and as many as 14 (25.92%) girls from divorced

families showed moderate or severe depression (Table 1).

Table 1. Self-assessment of depression by Beck's Depression Inventory II (BDI II) scale according to the marital status of parents

Marital status of parents (No, % of respondents)	Depression (BDI-II) Mean (SD)	p	N (%) of respondents with			
			No depression	Mild depression	Moderate depression	Severe depression
Married (87, 51.78)	10.51 (7.17)		62 (71.26)	19 (21.84)	4 (4.60)	2 (2.30)
Divorced (81, 48.22)	13.59 (9.85)	0.048	45 (55.55)	16 (19.75)	14 (17.28)	6 (7.41)

SD, standard deviation

Analysis of BDI-II scale showed that adolescents from divorced families more frequently demonstrated signs of agitation ($p < 0.01$), difficulties with concentration, suicidal thoughts and wishes and grief ($p < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Intratest analysis of Beck's Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) scale according to the marital status of parents

Items of BDI-II	Marital status of parents (No)	Mean (SD)	p
Agitation	Married (87)	0.53 (0.696)	
	Divorced (81)	1.02 (1.012)	0.001
Difficulties with concentration	Married (87)	0.54 (0.661)	
	Divorced (81)	0.85 (0.868)	0.019
Suicidal thoughts and wishes	Married (87)	0.22 (0.538)	
	Divorced (81)	0.46 (0.742)	0.020
Grief	Married (87)	0.16 (0.454)	
	Divorced (81)	0.36 (0.730)	0.043

As compared with their peers from married families, girls from divorced families showed significantly more internalized problems such as agitation ($p < 0.01$), difficult concentration ($p < 0.01$) and indecisiveness ($p < 0.05$), while boys from divorced families showed only higher level of agitation ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Intratest analysis of Beck's Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) scale according to the marital status of parents and gender

Items of BDI-II	Boys		Girls			
	Marital status of parents (No)	Mean (SD)	p	Marital status of parents (No)	Mean (SD)	p
Agitation	Married (33)	0.60 (0.625)		Married (54)	0.56 (0.664)	
	Divorced (27)	0.95 (0.671)	0.047	Divorced (54)	1.04 (1.009)	0.004
Difficulties with concentration	Married (33)	0.67 (0.892)		Married (54)	0.57 (0.690)	
	Divorced (27)	0.89 (0.973)	0.385	Divorced (54)	0.98 (0.879)	0.009
Indecisiveness	Married (33)	0.57 (0.728)		Married (54)	0.46 (0.638)	
	Divorced (27)	0.75 (0.651)	0.427	Divorced (54)	0.81 (0.870)	0.018

SD, standard deviation

There was no statistically significant difference in the level of intimacy of adolescents in relationships-with regard to marital status of their parents ($p > 0.05$), e. g., the difference in the level of intimacy was almost non-existent among the examinees ($p = 0.852$). The examinees in both groups had an average level of intimacy at the Miller Social Intimacy Scale regardless of the structure of their family.

There was no statistical significance of the relationship in the structure of families with parents and the level of depression with intimacy in adolescents ($p > 0.05$). However, although marital status of parents has not proved to be a significant factor determining the level of closeness in intimate relationships in adolescents, it was found that gender of respondents proved to be a significant factor determining the level of intimacy in adolescents, whereby girls have shown a statistically significantly higher level of closeness in intimate relationships ($p < 0.01$) (Table 4).

Table 4. Relationship of intimacy with marital status of parents and gender of respondents

	Intimacy in relationship by Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS)		
	Mean value (SD)	p	
Marital status of parents (No; %)	Married (87; 51.78)	69.82 (10.694)	
	Divorced (81; 48.22)	71.37 (7.808)	0.852
Gender (No; %)	Boys (60; 35.71)	67.45 (12.266)	
	Girls (108; 64.29)	72.30 (6.857)	0.010

SD, standard deviation

The highest level of closeness in intimate relationships was shown by adolescents who were in a love relationship and whose parents were married, while those whose parents were also married, but they themselves were not in an emotional relationship showed the lowest level of closeness in intimate relations ($p < 0.01$). On the other hand, there was no statistically significant difference in the level of closeness in intimate relationships between adolescents from divorced families regardless of their intimate status ($p > 0.05$) (Table 5).

Table 5. Relationship of intimacy with marital status of parents and intimacy relationship of respondents

Marital status of parents and intimacy relationship (No)	Intimacy in relationship by Miller Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS)	
	Mean value (SD)	p
Married and alone (48)	65.88 (11.912)	
Married and in intimate relationship (39)	74.67 (6.288)	$p < 0.01$
Divorced and alone (42)	70.55 (8.854)	
Divorced and in intimate relationship (39)	72.26 (6.496)	$p > 0.05$

SD, standard deviation

The analysis of conflicts between parents showed significantly more conflicts between parents in divorced families than in married ones as stated by adolescents (Mean 113.2 and 57.78, respectively) ($p < 0.001$). The correlation between depression and conflicts between parents was positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), and the correlation between parental conflict and closeness in intimate relationships of adolescents was slightly positive ($p > 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

This is the first study in Bosnia Herzegovina to address the relationship of parental divorce on adolescent's depression and intimacy. The issue of divorce of parents and implications on adolescents' well-being is important because of theoretical considerations and clinical implications, but unfortunately received little research attention in the past. The findings of the present research indicate that parental divorce is a significant risk factor for symptoms of depression in adolescents, while, on the other hand, adolescents did not show lack of closeness in intimate relationships regardless of the structure of their parent family. The findings also suggest the highest level of intimacy shown by adolescents whose parents are married and who also have an emotional relationship.

After parental divorce adolescents showed more depression, anxiety and antisocial behavior over time (12), and it has significant impact on psychological well-being of adolescents (5), on their psychological stability, especially on lower self-esteem and the feeling of consternation, frequent depressive mood or more suicidal thoughts (6). There are differences between adolescents from divorced and intact families on a range of child outcomes, but these differences are relatively small (13). The present research has found a small but still a significant difference for the presence of depression between adolescents from divorced and intact families: adolescents from divorced families, who showed agitation, difficulties in concentration, grief and suicidal thoughts and wishes more frequently.

Qualitative research shows that the incidence of depression increases during the transition from childhood to adolescence, but only in the group of girls, and living in a one-parent family after parental divorce, as well as in general, is greater risk factor for emotional problems, including depression and

loneliness for females as compared with males (5). In accordance with many surveys of depression in adolescents (14,15), it was expected that gender would play an important role in the demonstration of depression. It is indicative that the girls from this research have shown a higher variability of the level of depression, suggesting that divorce has a particularly negative effect on girls during adolescence. The girls tend to use so called internalized mechanisms of personality defense as their own coping style (15), they show significantly more depression and they are more prone to negative impacts of stressful events from their close social environment than boys from divorced families, who only showed a higher level of agitation. Long-term effects in adults, who experienced family breakdown as children, include problems with mental health and well-being, alcohol use and problems with intimate relationships, and also family breakdown has a greater influence on girls' expectations of intimate relationships in adulthood (16).

Results of this research showed a weak link between depression and closeness in intimate relationships. Richardson and McCabe (2) claimed that adolescents from divorced families showed a lower level of satisfaction with their lives and maturity in relations from their peers who live with both parents. Kirk et al. (17) found that family structure, either intact or divorced, did not directly affect fear of individuals from establishing intimate relationships and closeness with others, but the family structure still represents a predictor of expectations of future romantic relations of young people in the period of adolescence. However, gender proved to be a significant factor in the present research, since girls, regardless of the structure of their families, have shown a significantly higher level of closeness in intimate relationships, which is in line with many studies of intimacy (18), while there was no difference in the level of closeness in intimate relations with regard to marital status of parents. Similar results were obtained by Sinclair and Nelson (19), who also found no statistically significant difference in the level of intimacy among students having in mind their family situation. Although it was not found that parental divorce had long-term impact on future intimate relations of their children, our *post-hoc* analysis has shown that interaction of parents' marital status and intimate status of examinees indicates statistically significant linkage with closeness in intimate relations. Since divorce

itself does not determine (at a statistically significant level) the future level of intimacy of adolescents in their relationships, other factors should be considered, such as emotional attachment to parents, quality of support received by adolescents from their parents and peers, then conflicts of parents and emotional quality of relations of young people with others, all of which can determine the level of closeness in intimate relationships of adolescents (20).

This research obtained a minor positive correlation between the quantity of parental conflicts and closeness in intimate relationships of adolescents. The quality of parenting with good communication, respect and willingness to resolve problems is one of the best predictors of children's well-being both in intact families as well as single-parent families and stepfamilies (13), because family functioning is more important than the family structure (16). Good quality parent-child relationships and flexible arrangements can ameliorate many of the potentially negative effects of separation on children's well-being (21), and couples who can resolve their arguments during marriage are less vulnerable to divorce and their children are less at risk of developing emotional or behavioral problems (22). Children and adolescents in homes with high conflict may have difficulties in their own social relationships, they are prone to developing poor interpersonal skills (23) with

others, such as parents (24) and, especially, in the longer term, romantic partners (25).

One of the central findings of this study is that, at adolescence and adulthood, the experience of having been through parental divorce as a child detrimentally impacts the capacity to love and be loved within a lasting, committed relationship (1). A co-operative, mutually supportive and non-confrontational co-parenting relationship benefits children generally (13). It is necessary to consider the importance of the establishment of quality communication and friendly relations with the former spouse, as well as significance of premarital counselling to compulsory parental and post marital counselling in the best interest of emotional development and mental health of their joint children, especially during the period of adolescence. Future studies should continue to explore the impact of other forms of parental psychopathology to better understand the relationship between parental divorce, parental mental illness and conflict, lack of communication between parents and adolescents and offspring of adolescent depression and intimacy in relationships.

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Depresivnost i bliskost u intimnim odnosima adolescenata iz razvedenih porodica

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SAŽETAK

Cilj Ispitati utjecaj razvoda braka roditelja na depresivnost i bliskost u intimnim odnosima mladih u periodu adolescencije, utvrditi prevalenciju depresivnih simptoma te ustanoviti postojanje razlika u učestalosti simptoma depresivnosti i nivoa bliskosti u intimnim odnosima između adolescenata koji žive u potpunim i razvedenim porodicama.

Metode Prospektivno-deskriptivno istraživanje provedeno je na uzorku od 168 ispitanika (64 (38,1%) studenta Univerziteta u Zenici i 104 (61,9%) učenika zeničkih i maglajskih srednjih škola), tokom maja i juna 2011. godine. U ispitivanju su korišteni sljedeći upitnici: Beckova skala depresivnosti (BDI) II, Millerova skala socijalne intimnosti i sociodemografski upitnik.

Rezultati Adolescenti iz razvedenih porodica imali su statistički značajno viši nivo depresivnosti ($p < 0,05$), pri čemu umjereno ili teže prisustvo depresivnosti ispoljava 20 (24,69%) adolescenata iz razvedenih porodica u odnosu na 6 (6,89%) adolescenata iz potpunih porodica. Analiza BDI-II skale pokazala je da su adolescenti iz razvedenih porodica statistički značajno više pokazali znakove uznemirenosti ($p < 0,01$), te poteškoće koncentracije, suicidalne misli i želje, žalost i pesimizam ($p < 0,05$).

Zaključak Neophodno je provesti detaljna istraživanja o dugotrajnim efektima raspada porodice zbog razvoda koji imaju negativne posljedice na psihičko i socijalno funkcioniranje adolescenata te razvoj njihovog identiteta i bliskosti u intimnim odnosima, uz potrebu za zakonskim uvođenjem predbračnih i bračnih savjetovališta za roditelje u konfliktu.

Ključne riječi: depresivnost, adolescenti, brak, razvod, intimnost, porodica