

Loneliness and Life Satisfaction in Adolescents with Divorced and Non-Divorced Parents

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Abstract

In this study, loneliness and global life satisfaction levels among high school students with divorced and non-divorced parents were examined. The study was conducted on a total of 836 high school students, 383 of whom comprised children with divorced parents and 453 comprised children with non-divorced parents in Denizli, Turkey. The data were obtained using the Satisfaction with Life Scale-SWLS, UCLA Loneliness Scale and a Personal Information Form. In the analysis of the data, hierarchical regression analyses, MANOVA, and one-way ANOVA were performed. The findings of the study showed that loneliness has higher negative effects on life satisfaction among adolescents with divorced parents. Adolescents with divorced parents are more susceptible to loneliness and global life satisfaction than are adolescents with non-divorced parents. A significant difference was found in loneliness and global life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents with respect to only number of siblings. Neither loneliness nor global life satisfaction levels significantly differed with respect to gender, grade, residential parent, contact frequency with the non-residential parent, and the age at the time of divorce.

Key Words

Divorce, Loneliness, Life Satisfaction, Adolescents.

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One of the experiences that can be considered as critical regarding mental health among children and adolescents is parental divorce. As a result of divorce, one of the parents departs from home, typically the father who provides emotional support, protection, assistance, guidance, and supervision to children. Thus, divorce is seen as a significant life experience which creates difficulty in psychological development and adjustment (Amato, 1994). A meta-analytical shows that children with divorced parents experience more problems in such variables as academic achievement, psychological adjustment, social adjustment and self-concept compared to children of continuously intact two-parent families (Amato, & Keith, 1991).

Life satisfaction is one of the psychological variables that may be negatively affected by parental divorce. Life satisfaction forms the cognitive component of the concept of subjective well-being, which is also used as synonymous with happiness in the field of positive psychology. Accordingly, subjective well-being has an emotional dimension, which constitutes positive and negative feelings, and a cognitive dimension which is also known as life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is cognitive judgments and evaluations that an individual makes about his or her life (Diener, & Suh, 1997). Numerous studies on adolescents have shown that the level of positive parental attitudes (Çivitci, in press; Suldo & Huebner, 2006), parental attachment (Nickerson & Nagle, 2004), family's socioeconomic status (Huebner, Valois, Paxton, & Drane, 2005; Seligson, Huebner, & Valois, 2003), and positive relationships with parents (Chang, Chang, Stewart, & Au, 2003; Gilman & Huebner, 2006) increase as life satisfaction increases. Limited number of existing studies conducted on life satisfaction among children with divorced and non-divorced parents show that global life satisfaction (Pardeck et al., 1991; Shek, 2007; Zullig, Valois, Huebner, & Drane, 2005) and global well-being (Demo, & Acock, 1996) levels among children from separated families are lower than those from continuously intact two-parent families. Parental divorce often causes stressful events that threaten the psychological wellbeing of children. These events include one parent leaving the home, exposure to continuing interparental conflict and discord, parental distress, remarried parents, moving to a new home even in another city, changing school, a decline in economic resources, and etc. (Amato, 2000; Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2000). It can be stated that marital dissolution has a detrimental impact on children

with regard to both psychological development and life satisfaction due to new challenging experiences brought onto children's lives.

One of the emotional states that may occur as a consequence of parental divorce among children is loneliness. Loneliness is defined as the disturbing experience which emerges when insufficiencies in quality and quantity are perceived in an individual's social relationships. In other words, loneliness is the subjective discrepancy between the level that is attained and the level that one aspires to attain in social relationships (Peplau, & Perlman, 1982). Loneliness may be considered as deficiencies in the systems of interpersonal interactions (e.g., family; Cristina, Minzi, & Sacchi, 2004). In a study conducted by Brage and Meredith (1993) on adolescents, it was found that family effectiveness and communication between mothers and adolescents are negatively related to loneliness. Because divorce leads to many changes in the family structure and relationship patterns between family members, it can be expected that it decreases the effectiveness of family relationships. Some studies conducted earlier show that children with divorced parents feel less closeness to their fathers (Guttman, & Rosenberg, 2003), perceive less support from the father, experience more conflicts with their siblings and perceive poorer family cohesion (Amato, 1987) than do children with non-divorced parents. As these studies indicate, divorce causes changes in the family system and quality of parent-child relationships and increases the risk of straining emotional ties between parents and children (Guttman, & Rosenberg, 2003). In this situation, children with divorced parents may experience increasing feelings of rejection due to the emotional distance between parents and themselves (Johnson, Joseph, LaVoie, & Mahoney, 2001), which may result in feeling lonely.

Although comparative studies have been conducted to examine such variables as anxiety (Öztürk, 2006), anger (Fiyakalı, 2008), self esteem (Kuyucu, 2007; Öztürk, 2006), and resilience (Özcan, 2005) in children and adolescents with divorced and non-divorced parents in Turkey, no study has been encountered which focuses on loneliness or life satisfaction. Considering the studies which have shown the detrimental impact of parental divorce on children, it is predicted in this study that divorce may be a risk factor with regard to life satisfaction and loneliness levels among high school adolescents. Moreover, since one of the important predictors of life satisfaction in adolescents is loneliness (Chipuer,

Bramston, & Pretty, 2003; Neto, 1993), whether parental divorce plays a moderator role in the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction is one of the focus areas of this research.

As mentioned before, parental divorce is a difficult experience and has many consequences in children's psychological development. However, the effects of divorce are not the same on every child and may differ according to personal and familial characteristics. For example, in a study conducted on 4th and 5th grade students (Aral, & Başar, 1998), it was observed that the state anxiety levels among children with divorced parents changed according to age of the child's separation from the mother and the contact frequency with the other parent. In another study conducted on 4th-8th grade students with divorced parents (Öztürk, 2006); students' anxiety and self-esteem levels did not differ according to contact frequency with parents, the residential parent, age, and gender. In a study on high school students (Kuyucu, 2007), no difference was observed in the level of self-esteem among children of divorce with respect to gender and age. Since there is no similar study, it was found worth to examine the possible changes in loneliness and life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents with respect to some personal and familial characteristics.

Briefly, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. Does parental divorce play a role in the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction among adolescents?
2. Do loneliness and life satisfaction levels among adolescents change based on whether the parents are divorced or non-divorced?
3. Do loneliness and life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents change according to gender, grade, number of siblings, residential parent, contact frequency with non-residential parent and the age at the time of divorce?

Method

Participants

The study group was comprised of a total of 836 students, who attended 19 high schools of different types in Denizli, Turkey. Three hundred eighty-three of the students had divorced parents and 453 had intact

families. The distribution of students who formed the study group is presented in Table 1.

Measures

Life satisfaction levels of the students were determined by the Satisfaction with Life Scale-SWLS developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) and adapted to Turkish by Köker (1991). The scale reflects an individual's subjective evaluation of his or her own life and measures perceived global life satisfaction. Loneliness levels were measured by the UCLA-R Loneliness Scale developed by Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona (1980). The UCLA Loneliness Scale was adapted to Turkish by Demir (1989). The information regarding independent variables, which were parental divorce/living together, gender, grade, number of siblings, residential parent, contact frequency with non-residential parent, and the age at the time of divorce were obtained using a personal information form.

Procedure

Official permission was obtained to collect the data primarily from the Ministry of National Education and local authorities. With the help of school administrators, schools' counselors, and classroom teachers, high school students with divorced parents and intact two-parent families at similar grades and gender were determined. With the school administrators, the students with divorced and non-divorced parents were gathered on previously determined dates and the data collection instruments were administered with the help of school counselors.

In order to test the moderator effect of parental divorce/non-divorce in the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction, hierarchical regression analysis was employed as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). In the study, in order to test differences between the levels of loneliness and life satisfaction among students with divorced and non-divorced parents based on the independent variables, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used. In order to test whether there was a significant difference in loneliness and life satisfaction levels among children of divorced parents with respect to independent variables, one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used.

Results

In order to test the moderator effect of parental divorce/non-divorce in the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction, the steps were used based on the hierarchical regression analysis as suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). In order to reduce problems associated with multicollinearity between the interaction term and the main effects when testing for moderator effects, the two predictor variables (loneliness and family structure) were standardized (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). To perform this procedure, z-scores were calculated for loneliness and family structure. According to Baron and Kenny's (1986) regression model, when the interaction between the predictor (loneliness) and the moderator (family structure) predicts the predicted variable (life satisfaction) at a significant level, the moderator (family structure) is effective. In this study, parental divorce/non-divorce (family structure) had an effect on the relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction (see Table 3). In other words, the negative effect of loneliness on life satisfaction is higher on adolescents with divorced parents.

Differences between the levels of loneliness and life satisfaction among adolescents with divorced and non-divorced parents with respect to gender, grade, and the number of siblings were tested using MANOVA (see Table 4). The results show that the main effect of parental divorce/non-divorce among adolescents on both loneliness [$F(2, 819) = 8.56, p < .01$] and life satisfaction [$F(2, 819) = 22.12, p < .001$] are significant (Wilks' $\lambda = .97, p < .001$). The means indicate that loneliness levels ($\bar{x} = 37.84$) among adolescents with divorced parents is higher than those with non-divorced parents ($\bar{x} = 35.92$). Global life satisfaction levels among adolescents of divorce is also lower ($\bar{x} = 22.45$) than those with intact families ($\bar{x} = 24.88$). The effect of the interaction between parental divorce/non-divorce and gender (Wilks' $\lambda = 1.00; p > .05$), grade (Wilks' $\lambda = 1.00; p > .05$) and number of siblings (Wilks' $\lambda = .99; p > .05$) on adolescents' loneliness and life satisfaction was not found significant.

According to ANOVA results (see Table 5), a significant difference was found in the levels of loneliness [$F(4, 378) = 4.56, p < .01$] and global life satisfaction [$F(4, 378) = 2.88, p < .05$] among adolescents with divorced parents only with respect to number of siblings. There were no significant differences in either loneliness or global life satisfaction levels with respect to gender, grade, residential parent, contact frequency with non-residential parent and the age at the time of divorce.

According to Tukey HSD test, which tests between groups differences, loneliness levels of adolescents with four and more siblings (\bar{x} = 44.80) were found to be significantly higher than those with no siblings (\bar{x} = 36.22), those with one sibling (\bar{x} = 37.26), and those with two siblings (\bar{x} = 36.47). Global life satisfaction levels of the only-children (\bar{x} = 23.45) are higher than adolescents with three siblings (\bar{x} = 20.55), and those with four or more siblings (\bar{x} = 20.35).

Discussion

One fundamental finding of this study indicates that the negative role of loneliness on life satisfaction among adolescents with divorced parents is higher compared to those with continuously intact two-parent families. Considering that loneliness is an important predictor of life satisfaction among adolescents (Chipuer et al., 2003; Neto, 1993) and that divorce has negative effects on children's psychological development (Amoto, & Keith, 1991), a stronger relationship between loneliness and life satisfaction among adolescents with divorced parents is an expected result. In addition, adolescents with divorced parents were found to have higher levels of loneliness and lower levels of life satisfaction than do adolescents with intact two-parent families. These results are consistent with previous studies which found that children with divorced parents are more at a disadvantage regarding not only loneliness (Garnefski, & Diekstra, 1997) and life satisfaction (Pardeck et al., 1991; Zullig et al., 2005), but also numerous other psychological variables such as anxiety, anger, self-esteem and adjustment (e.g., Fiyakalı, 2008; Goodman, & Pickens, 2001; Guttman, & Rosenberg, 2003; Mahon, Yarcheski, & Yarcheski, 2003; Öztürk, 2006; Sardoğan, Karahan, Dicle, & Menteş, 2007).

In this study, loneliness levels among adolescents with divorced parents who had four or more siblings were found to be significantly different from the loneliness levels among adolescents with no siblings and those with one or two siblings. In the study conducted by Amato (1987), the adolescents from divorce families made more negative evaluation of their relationships with their siblings compared to those from intact families. In the study conducted by Polit (1984), it was found that siblings do not help each other in coping with the difficulties of divorce process; on the contrary, they exhibit competitive attitudes to attract

their mothers' attention (cited in Amato, 1987). As the number of siblings increases, it can be expected that parents' attention decreases as it is divided across siblings and competition for the attention from parents increases. Therefore, the lack of support from siblings, who are thought to be an important source of support in the process of divorce, can be considered to cause experiences of higher levels of loneliness.

In this study, global life satisfaction levels of single-child were found higher compared to adolescents with three siblings and those with four and more siblings. A study conducted on adolescents (Çivitci, in press) indicated that family satisfaction among students who are the single child and those with one sibling is higher compared to those with four and more siblings. The single-child adolescents with divorced parents may be receiving more intense attention and support from their parents because they have no siblings. This may be thought to be one reason why single-child adolescents perceive their lives generally more positively.

No significant difference was found in the loneliness and life satisfaction levels of adolescents with divorced parents according to contact frequency with the nonresidential parent. In studies consistent with these findings, no relationship between the child's adjustment (Trinder, Kellet, & Swift, 2008), anxiety, self-esteem levels (Öztürk, 2006) and contact frequency with the non-residential parent was found. On the other hand, Healy, Malley, and Stewart (1990) found that children who met with their fathers regularly and frequently (younger children and males) had higher self-esteem levels and fewer behavioral problems. Considering some studies which show that the quality of parent-children relationship is more important than the length of time spent with non-residential parent (e.g., Stewart, 2003), it can be stated that the quality of parent-children relationship may play a stronger role in decreasing loneliness and increasing life satisfaction levels among adolescents, rather than the frequency of contact with the non-residential parent.

According to two of the findings of this study, which can be evaluated together, loneliness and global life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents do not show significant differences with respect to grade levels and the age at the time of divorce. Some of the studies which showed that anxiety (Öztürk, 2006) and self-esteem (Kuyucu, 2007; Öztürk, 2006) did not differ according to age, and that trait anger (Fiyakalı, 2008) did not differ according to grade level among children

and adolescents with divorced parents are consistent with the findings of this study. The strongest effects after the divorce emerge in the first two years following divorce and these effects decrease in the following years (Clarke-Stewart, & Brentano, 2006). It seems that preschool period is the most disadvantageous period with regard to short term effects of divorce in the first two years proceeding divorce. Adolescents experience the effects of divorce less severely because they are less dependent on their parents and more peer-oriented (Amato, 1994). A majority of the participants who participated in this study (approximately 85%; see Table 1) are in a period when the short term intense effects of divorce decrease and when they experience long term effects of divorce because a period of more than two years have passed after the divorce of their parents. This may be thought as a reason for differences in loneliness and global life satisfaction levels according to grade level and the age at the time of divorce.

Neither loneliness nor global life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents showed significant differences according to residential parent. Studies which indicated that anxiety (Aral, & Başar, 1998; Öztürk, 2006) and self-esteem (Öztürk, 2006) among children and adolescents with divorced parents do not differ according to residential parent are consistent with the findings in this study. In a meta-analytical of children of divorce (Amato, 1994), it was reported that the psychological health of the residential parent and positive parental attitudes and skills have an effect on the child's adjustment after divorce. A study conducted by Peterson and Zill (1986) shows that the negative effects are lower if the child maintains a good relationship with parents. Therefore, it can be stated that living with the mother or the father is not effective alone, but the psychological state and child rearing attitudes of the residential parents equally play a role.

No significant difference was found in the loneliness and global life satisfaction levels among adolescents with divorced parents according to gender. The studies which found that anxiety (Öztürk, 2006), anger (Fiyakalı, 2008), self-esteem (Kuyucu, 2007; Öztürk, 2006), and adjustment to divorce (Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981) among children and adolescents with divorced parents do not differ according to gender are partially consistent with the findings of this study. Boys generally show more maladjustment and more sustained problems than girls in response to divorce (Lowery & Setle, 1985). It has been reported that

short-term effects of divorce may differ according to gender, yet in the long term, these differences decrease and reach a certain balance in boys and girls; however, this process takes a longer time among boys compared to girls (Kurdek et al., 1981). Considering that almost all of the participants in this study are in the period when they are experiencing the long term effects of divorce, it can be thought that boys and girls may have reached a more equal level with respect to life satisfaction and loneliness levels.

In light of this study which suggests that high school adolescents with divorced parents may be at risk with regard to loneliness and life satisfaction, some suggestions may be made towards practice. It is important that school counselors inform the parents of adolescents who are separated or divorced about the possible emotional states (e.g., loneliness) children may experience after divorce. Particularly, a good parent-child relationship after divorce may help children feel less lonely and perceive their lives as less negative. Moreover, these students may be encouraged to participate in individual or group counseling where they can share their feelings and experiences.

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