

Fall 12-11-2020

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Divorce, Academic Performance, and Attachment Styles in College Students

By

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Psychology

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science
In the HTC Honors College at
Coastal Carolina University

Fall 2020

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Abstract

For years, social scientists have pondered the impacts of a parental divorce on the students' academic performance, as well as their attachment style (Fomby, 2010). In the current study, it is hypothesized that students who experience a parental divorce will perform lower on academic performance and higher on the insecure attachment styles than students whose parents are still intact or remarried. Participants were 73 college students, ages ranging in age from 18-29. More than half of the study consisted of student's ages 18-19 years. 65% of students who participated were female, and an overwhelming majority of participants were white, with nearly 80%. Non-LatinX students also comprised a large part of the study, this number also being over 80%. Students answered items from the Perceived Academic Performance Scale (Verner-Filion & Vallerand 2016). As well as the Attachment Styles Questionnaire (Verbeke, Bagozzi, & van den Berg 2014). The results were analyzed using several one-way ANOVAs. Results indicated no significant findings, with students in all three groups (divorced, remarried, intact) performing similarly on academic performance as well as similarly on attachment styles. Future directions for similar studies could perhaps be more inclusive of divorce timing, pre-divorce conditions, socioeconomic status of the parent, quality of the union being dissolved and post-divorce environment, as the research has indicated these elements are most critical.

Divorce, Academic Performance, and Attachment Styles in College Students

With divorce rates at an all-time high (Amato, 1995) the impacts and ramifications of divorce need to be considered, particularly on those who suffer the most from divorces. Children suffer the most from a parental divorce because not only does their performance in school suffer, but their ability to form meaningful relationships in the future also suffers (Babalis, 2014). This can negatively impact something known as attachment style as well (Ozen, 2003). However, it is when bridging the two that the gaps in the literature start to appear. It seems that researchers focus their efforts on academic performance or attachment style with divorce, they never seem to marry (no pun intended) the two elements.

The ramifications of a divorce can be quite serious. It leads to lower test scores and larger effects on social and emotional development which continue for several years (Anthony, 2014), and can exacerbate the problems that many young students already have (Nusinovic, 2018). These are not limited to simply academic problems but can also manifest themselves in social development hindrance as well as severe emotional trauma (Babalis, 2014). These issues can persist for several years (Arkes, 2015). These problems are also not only found in young students but also in college students. With students coming from divorced families being less likely to pursue their studies after their first year, and having a lower cumulative GPA than their counterparts whose parents stayed intact (Soria, 2014). Perhaps the largest breakthrough comes from Potter (Potter, 2010) who found that a divorce negatively affects a student's psychosocial wellbeing, which is ultimately what impacts their academic performance.

Prior to a divorce, the literature seems to indicate that staying together may not be the answer, as the quality of the union seems to play a large role. For example, problems and instability leading up to the divorce, and not so much the divorce itself causes many problems

(Arkes, 2015 & Brown, 2004). These problems prior to the divorce may actually affect girls worse than boys. (Neighbors, 1992). If the union between the parents is a happy, stable one not filled with fighting and arguing then the students will perform best under these conditions. However, if the opposite is true and the parents' marriage is laden with arguments, fights, and general conflict then the students will not perform optimally. Amato (Amato, 1995) also seems to support these results. Garriga (Garriga, 2020) takes this information another step farther and was able to conclude that a high quality union that ends in divorce will actually negatively impact academic performance compared to if this high quality union was to stay intact. Similarly, a low quality union ending in divorce will actually benefit academic performance compared to a union of similar low quality that were to stay together, which would hurt the students' academic performance further.

Another interesting factor to take into consideration is that timing of the divorce. The earlier in the students life that the divorce occurs, the more their academic performance will suffer. Delaying the divorce impacts the students' academic performance the least, and when conducted with siblings the older siblings scored higher on reading and mathematics tests. The reasoning behind this is that the older sibling had more time to spend in what was perhaps a high quality union and thus benefitted more from both parents than did the younger sibling, who had less time to spend in this environment (Sigle-rushton, 2014). Lansford (Lansford, 2006) conducted similar research (although not with siblings) and found that the earlier in the student's life that the divorce had occurred, the more that their academic performance suffered.

What may be the most critical to the child's development in not academics, but also socially and emotionally is the post-divorce environment. Jeynes (Jeynes, 1999) concluded that a student that ended up living with neither parent suffered the most. More research indicates that

students who live in single parent households are worse off than students whose parents have remarried or never divorced in the first place (Shriner, 2010). Levels of conflict after a divorce must also be taken into consideration, according to Booth (Booth, 2001). Research done by Sun (Sun, 2009) also indicates that a stable post-divorce environment is the best, and that any further radical changes may worsen the effects on their academic performance, social development, and emotional development. The quality of the relationship is also an important factor that must be taken into account, with students who have more quality relationships with their parents seeming to suffer the least academically and developmentally, and those who have either parent alienated seem to have the most difficult time adjusting (Babalis, 2014). Some of the most interesting results however, come from Battle (Battle, 2002) which state that socioeconomic status of the parent who wins custody is the most important factor in determining how a student will adjust after a divorce, meaning how their academic performance and other developmental aspects will be impacted. With a higher socioeconomic status positively correlating with a better performance, and vice versa. More interesting results come from Amato (Amato, 2015) which seem to indicate that the level of education of the cohabiting parent is indicative of the student's future success. The higher level of education of the parent, the better the student will perform in the future.

Beyond the academic performance issues that divorce can bring about, there are also developmental issues it can harbor, issues with emotional trauma and an inability to form meaningful relationships in the future. Babalis in 2014 found that students who had experienced a parental divorce had a much more difficult time forming relationships with their fellow peers (Babalis, 2014). A poor union among parents can lead to increased aggressiveness (Fomby,

2010). All of these can impact the way that the student forms relationships, which can negatively impact what is known as their attachment style.

Attachment is defined as the emotional bond developing between the parent and the child (Ozen, 2003). Attachment style is largely something that is developed during the first several years of life, based on one's relationship with their parents, where an affectionate, positive, supportive relationship is required with the caregivers. However, significant emotional losses and disparaging experiences such as divorce may transform the internalized schemas of the person regarding close relationships (Ozen, 2003). Having a parental divorce experience is closely associated with developing a poor relationship with the parent in adolescence, reduces the probability of a secure attachment to the parent, as well as displaying psychosocial distortions like high-level anxiety and fear of rejection (Ozen, 2003). McNeilis (McNeilis, 2019) also indicates that a poor attachment style can lead to difficulty future relationships, marriages, and an increased difficulty in reconnecting with a partner after a divorce.

In the current study, it was hypothesized that students whose parents are divorced will perform lower academically than students whose parents are still intact or remarried. It was also hypothesized that students whose parents are divorced will score higher on the insecure attachment styles (i.e., anxious and avoidant attachment styles) and lower on the secure attachment style. This study addresses these hypotheses by testing subjects both in academic performance and attachment style, and aims to add to the literature by bridging the two components and examining what relationship, if any at all, exists among them.

Method

Participants

All participants of this study were psychology students at a mid-sized southeastern university. Seventy-three participants were surveyed through an online portal provided by the University. Age ranges were quite diverse. 52% of participants were 18 years old, 27% were 19 years old, 9% were 20 years old, 7% were 21 years old, and 1% of participants were 22 and 29 years old. The mean age for participants was 18.89 years old, with a standard deviation of 1.56. In regards to gender the sample was predominantly female, with 89% identifying as female. 10% identified as male. Regarding race, a large majority were White, with 79%. 12% of participants were Black, 4% identified themselves as Mixed Race, and 1% identified themselves as Asian. Ethnically, a majority of the participants were non-latinx, 85% identifying as so. 10% identified themselves as Latinx.

Measures

Divorce

To measure whether participant's parents were divorced participants selected one of three choices (i.e., married/together, divorced, or remarried) to the query "which of the following best describes your biological parent's marital status?"

Academic Performance

To measure academic performance, participants rated their own perceived academic performance on the Perceived Academic Performance Scale (Verner-Filion & Vallerand 2016). Respondents indicate their level of agreement/disagreement with five statements (e.g., "I meet the official performance requirements expected out of a student") on a scale ranging from 1 = *Very Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Very Strongly Agree*, with 4 = *Neutral*. The internal reliability of

the scale was acceptable in previous research, ranging from an alpha level of 0.83 to 0.87 (Verner-Filion & Vallerand 2016). The measured internal reliability reported in this study was 0.931. This is a very good internal reliability.

Attachment Style

To measure the participant's attachment styles, they answered questions from the Attachment Style Scale (Verbeke, Bagozzi, & van den Berg 2014). Participants were asked to rate how well 10 statements described their attachment styles (e.g., "My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away," "I try to avoid getting too close to others," and "It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need"). The participants responded to these statements on a scale ranging from 1 = *Very Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Very Strongly Agree*, with the midpoint of 4 = *Neutral*. In a previous study, the Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for the subscales were 0.69 for anxious attachment style, 0.81 for avoidant attachment style, and 0.67 for secure attachment (Verbeke, Bagozzi, & van den Berg 2014). The measured internal reliability reported in this study was 0.298 for anxious attachment style, 0.856 for avoidant attachment style, and 0.886 for secure attachment style.

Procedure

A correlational design was used in the current study. Data were collected from participants during the fall semester of the school year (August-December). Informed consent was obtained from the participants and data collection began immediately following their consent in the online software, Sona Systems. Participants were administered both surveys and upon completion were awarded with ½ a Sona Systems credit. All procedures were approved for by the Institutional Review Board overseeing the research.

Results

The average score on the Anxious attachment style for all groups was 4.25, (SD = 0.77) meaning that most participants felt truly neutral when responding to the anxious attachment style questions. Since the items are scored on a 1-7 scale, a 4 would represent “neutral”. Anything below a 4 would be in the “disagree” category, and anything above a 4 would be in the “agree” category. The average score on the avoidant attachment style for all groups was 3.77 (SD = 1.38). This means that most participants felt neutral when answering the avoidant style questions. When it came to secure attachment style, the average score for all groups was 5.32, (SD = 1.22) meaning that most participants actually agreed with the statements regarding secure attachment style. The average score on the academic performance portion of the surveys was 5.48 (SD = 1.04), meaning that generally, the participants agreed with the statements on the survey and that they perceive themselves as relatively competent students. In regards to parents’ marital status, 24 of the participants stated that their parents were divorced. 7 participants reported that their parents were remarried, and 37 participants reported their parents’ marriage still intact.

Two aims of the current study were to identify any relationship between parent status (divorced, remarried, or married) and academic performance, and whether parental marriage status was related to participants’ attachment styles. To test these research questions, several One-Way ANOVAs were conducted. In these analyses the outcome variable was participants academic performance, and their attachment style (secure, anxious, avoidant) and the subject variable was their parent’s marital status (divorced, remarried, or married).

In regards to academic performance, participants in the divorced group ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 0.97$) Remarried group ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 0.71$) and married group ($M = 5.50$, $SD = 1.10$) scored similarly, $F(3, 69) = 1.139$, $p = 0.339$.

On the Anxious attachment style questions, participants from the divorced group ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.68$), remarried group ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.57$) and the married group ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.89$) scored similarly, $F(3, 69) = 0.645$, $p = 0.589$. When it came to the avoidant attachment style questions, participants from the divorced group ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.09$) remarried group ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.43$) and married group ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.38$) all scored similarly, $F(3, 69) = 1.173$, $p = 0.326$. Finally, in regards to the secure attachment style, participants from the divorced group ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.28$), remarried group ($M = 5.85$, $SD = 1.57$), and married group ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 1.08$) also all scored similarly, $F(3, 68) = 1.300$, $p = 0.281$

Discussion

For decades, social scientists have questioned the relationship between parental divorce, academic achievement, and attachment style. In the current body of literature, parental divorce seems to indicate problematic attachment styles across development (Ozen, 2003) and even more indicative that a parental divorce will lead to academic deficiencies (Arkes, 2015) or perhaps developmental problems, emotional issues, and more general mental health deficiencies (Babalis, 2014).

However, in the current study, this did not seem to be the case. Results indicated that students whose parents were divorced, remarried, or still intact scored similarly in the academic domain. Results also indicated that students whose parents were divorced, remarried, or still intact scored similarly on the attachment styles as well. These findings are inconsistent with the

current body of literature. One reason that this perhaps is the case is that most of the research that exists has taken place with young children, typically elementary school aged children, (Babalis 2014) and the students in this study were significantly older, at least 18 years old. Thus, divorce might have less of an impact on older individuals than younger children.

Most of the literature pertaining to attachment style also utilizes very young kids. This is the case perhaps because during the earliest years of life are the most critical for attachment style and is when the child does the most developing of their attachment style. Attachment theory explains that when we are younger it is critical to develop healthy attachments to one or two caregivers (typically the parents). From this, we are able to conclude that a divorce would impact a young child's attachment style more than an older individual's attachment style because a young child's attachment style is easier to shape than that of an older individual. There were also several other factors which were not considered in the current study, such as timing of the divorce, age of the student when the divorce happened, the post-divorce environment, the socioeconomic status of the parents after the divorce.

Perhaps an alternate interpretation of these findings is not that parental divorce is meaningless in regards to academic performance or attachment style, instead it could be indicative of recovering from a divorce or otherwise separation. Perhaps only the mentally strongest and those who recovered the best, or were the least impacted, attend college. Perhaps there is something we do not know about attachment style. Up until now it has been this concrete thing, which is one of three potential items. What has not been considered previously is that perhaps attachment style is this inconsistent thing, which has the ability to evolve and change over time in response to traumatic events and healing. Another possible interpretation is that

perhaps as student's age, parental divorce becomes less and less traumatic to them and begins to impact them less.

There were some considerable limitations on this study. The first, and most important one, was the amount of students that participated in the study. One hundred students were projected to participate, instead only 73 actually participated. Not only does a small sample size decrease statistical power, it also increases the likelihood of a type II error skewing the results. A smaller sample size is also less representative of the population. Another considerable limitation that was placed on the study was the questions that were being considered. The previously mentioned factors of the timing of the divorce, the age of the child, the post-divorce environment, and socioeconomic status of the family were not measured at all in the current study, and all of these factors seem to be influential in the future academic performance and attachment style in the children of divorced parents (Ozen 2003).

One strength of the study to consider is the usage of older students instead of younger students. This is considered a strength and not a weakness because this is perhaps indicative that many of the effects seen in the literature on younger children will not extend into early adulthood. This is a positive impact because this means that their mental health is able to recover and they become mentally healthy and fully functioning adults. Another strength of the study is that it only measured two variables, academic performance and attachment style. There were no other previously mentioned factors to consider, such as timing of the divorce, post-divorce environment, quality of the union being dissolved, or socioeconomic status of the custodial parent.

Some future directions for a similar study would be to firstly remove all of the hindrances previously discussed. Firstly, the amount of participants must be increased, secondly, factors

such as the timing of the divorce, the age of the student, the post-divorce environment, and socioeconomic status of the family must all be considered, especially when dealing with a collegiate age population. Another interesting direction to take a similar study would be perhaps a longitudinal study. To track all of the students from a young age and track them well into young adulthood. Another aspect to consider would be their attachment style as it develops through the years, is it possible to outgrow an unhealthy attachment style? Or is it possible for it to develop into a healthy attachment style without intervention?

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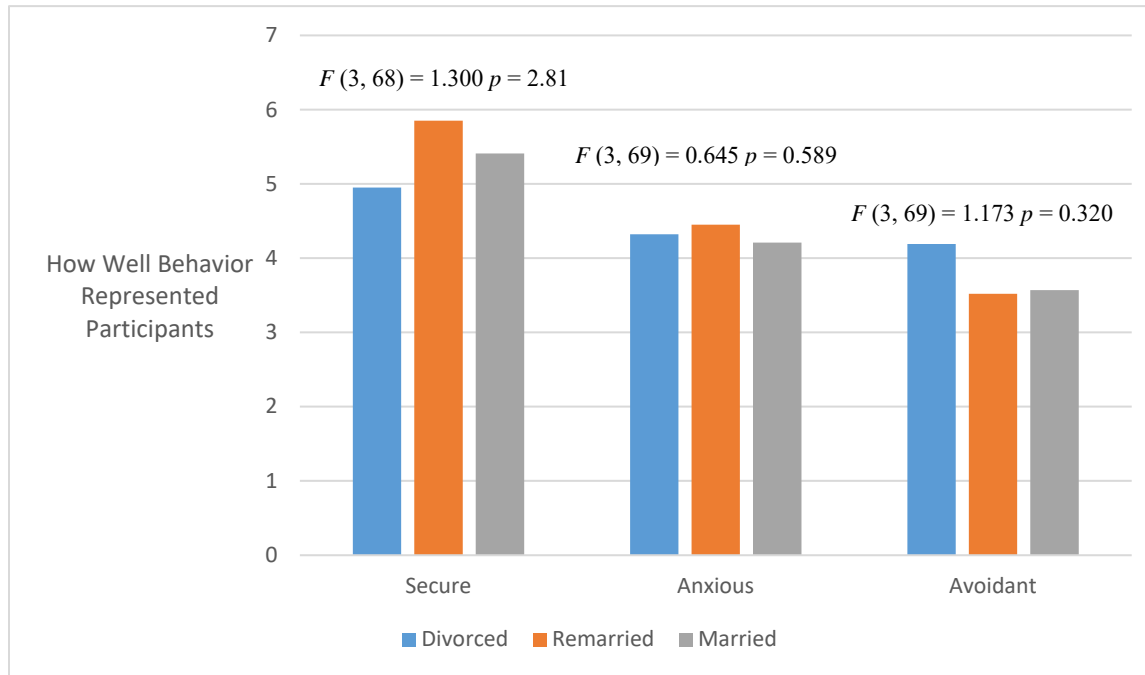
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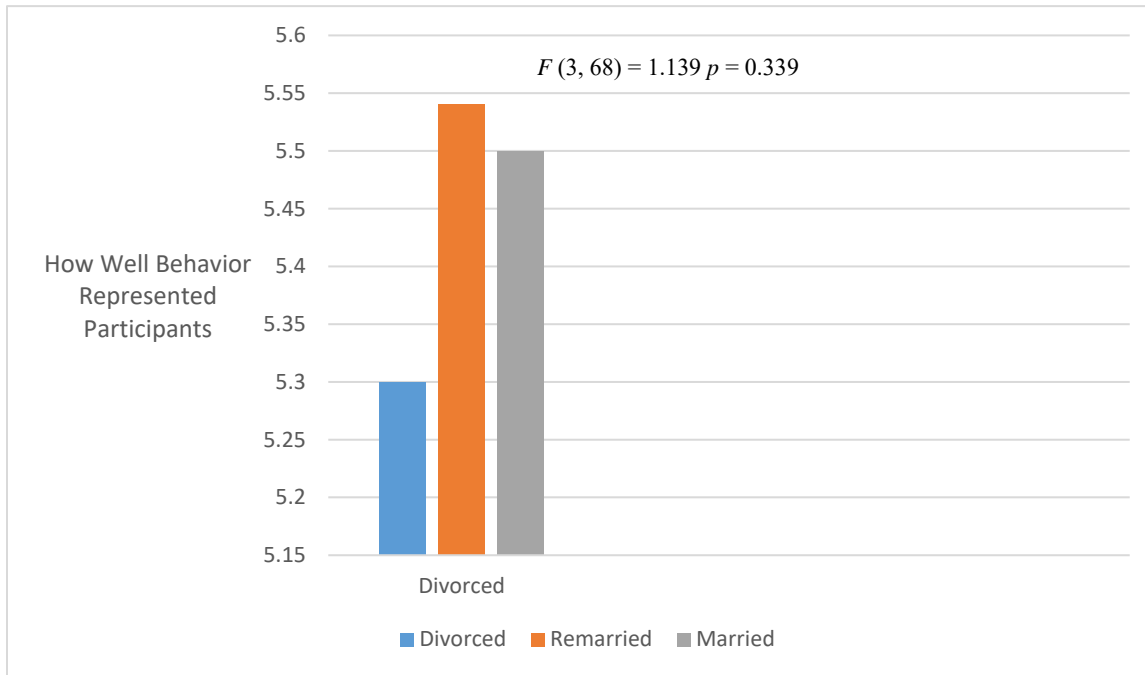
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Table 1*Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables*

	Overall <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Divorced <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Remarried <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Married <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Anxious Attachment	4.25 (0.77)	4.32 (0.69)	4.45 (0.57)	4.21 (0.89)
Avoidant Attachment	3.77 (1.38)	4.20 (1.09)	3.52 (1.43)	3.57 (1.38)
Secure Attachment	5.32 (1.22)	4.95 (1.28)	5.85 (1.57)	5.41 (1.08)
Academic Performance	5.48 (1.04)	5.30 (1.00)	5.54 (0.71)	5.50 (1.10)

Figure 1*Attachment Style Scores Based on Parent's Marriage*

Note. Compared Attachment Style Scores in Participants Whose Parents were Divorced, Remarried, and Married Using One-Way ANOVAs.

Figure 2*Academic Performance Scores Based on Parents Marriage*

Note. Compared Academic Performance Scores in Participants Whose Parents were Divorced, Remarried, and Married Using One-Way ANOVAs.