



Investigating the psychological status of children of divorce in adulthood using a qualitative method

Sahar. Khandandel¹, Rajabali. Mohammadzadeh*², Ali Asghar. Abbasi Asfajir³ & Jamal. Sadeghi⁴

1. PhD student in Educational Psychology, Babol Branch, Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran
2. *Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran
3. Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Babol Branch, Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran
4. Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Babol Branch, Islamic Azad University, Babol, Iran

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Corresponding Author's Info
Email:

r.mohammadzadeh@pnu.ac.ir

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Background and Aim: Divorce is one of the most important phenomena of human life, which disturbs not only couples' mental balance, but also children's mental balance. Based on this, it becomes important to study the psychological status of children of divorce in adulthood, with the understanding of this importance, the present study was conducted to investigate the psychological status of children of divorce in adulthood. **Methods:** This research is a type of qualitative study that uses foundational data theory. The participants included the children of divorce in Tehran, who had been divorced for 10 years, and 18 people were selected as key informants through the purposeful sampling method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The reliability and validity of the data were obtained from the two methods of review by participants and recoding by experts. Data were analyzed by open, central and selective coding. **Results:** The research findings showed that the psychological status of children of divorce has positive and negative indicators in both childhood and adulthood dimensions. **Conclusion:** The positive aspect of childhood is companionship and empathy with the guardian parent, support and warmth of the guardian parent, liberation and satisfaction of the guardian parent. Among other positive indicators, we can mention the feeling of satisfaction with life without conflict and conflict, support from others (family and friends). Negative indicators such as loss of family, fear of telling the truth because of people's judgments, children experience a kind of fear and apprehension after the divorce and following the events that happened during the separation process and after; Not having or lack of intimate relationships, being rejected, losing a supporter, having difficulty in arranging the daily affairs of life, creating contexts according to personal values and needs.



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Introduction

The family is the smallest social unit whose stability or instability affects the members of the family and society, and the collapse of this small unit sometimes has such a profound effect on the children that it is unbelievable. Apart from the effects that divorce has on couples, in cases where couples have children, it also affects them, it can even be said that children are the most affected by this phenomenon. The proportion of delinquency in broken families is much higher than in stable families, and neglect in children creates mental complexes, and the negative side of divorce is very wide (Razavi & Livarjani, 2020). Today, the index of divorce statistics is very significant, so that according to the statistics of the Civil Registration Organization, one marriage out of every 5.5 marriages leads to divorce, and this figure shows a worse situation in Tehran. In Tehran, one out of every 2.9 marriages leads to divorce. Based on this, statistics show a high rate of divorce followed by an increase in children of divorce (Yahiazadeh & Hamed, 2015).

Therefore, early childhood development can affect later life, such as happiness, health, intelligence, and risky behavior (Morrison et al., 2014). A systematic review of 19 studies found that 1 in 5 children have mental health problems due to factors such as poverty, family and neighborhood environment, family conflicts, parental mental health, and school performance. These have the potential to increase rates of suicide and substance abuse in adults (Heydariyan & Ghorbanzadeh, 2022; Burr et al., 2014). Parents are considered to have a huge impact on children's mental health, social adjustment, academic performance, and even career choices and future success. Parent-child relationships during children's formative years affect not only their current relationships with peers, teachers, partners, and others in their lives, but also their future interpersonal relationships (Lorsen & Collins, 2009, Merz & Jack, 2013). A better parent-child relationship is considered the most important protective factor because it occurs in the first and longest stage of life (Thornton et al., 1995). A study found that one of the major causes of behavioral disorders in children and adolescents is parenting, including low involvement in the child's life, irritability, poor supervision, and inappropriate punishment (Rocks & McMahon, 2011). In the literature, parental support and family conflict

have often been studied and associated with children's internalizing symptoms (Wang & Liu, 2014; Yap et al., 2014), but the child's future life has rarely been considered.

Parental divorce, as a set of conflicts and challenges between families before and after the divorce, has been associated with an increased risk of mental health problems in the child involved (Shimkowski & Led Better, 2018). Examples related to: depression (Harland et al., 2002; Liu et al., 2014; Sands et al., 2017); anxiety (Towhig et al., 1989); Alcohol and drug use (Tebka et al., 2016); social problems (Tebka et al., 2016); Aggressive behavior (Harland et al., 2002; Tabka et al., 2016). In addition, a longitudinal study found long-term effects of parental divorce on increased risk of frequent changes in children's premarital occupations and marital separation (Rogers, 1994).

A new study has conducted the effect of parental divorce in childhood on children's behavior in adulthood. This study found that adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood reported that: They have a lack of well-being, a lack of resilience, and an increase in the level of childhood trauma and more sensitivity to rejection compared to non-divorced (Shan & Voghele, 2016). Research shows that the amount of emotional and social development of children who grow up in divorced families is usually lower compared to other children who grow up in normal families (McCabe, 1997).

Divorce for any reason, right or wrong, has consequences for both family members and society, it creates economic, psychological, emotional and social problems for both men and women and isolates separated couples (Yahiyazadeh & Hamed, 2015). The effect of divorce on children is very complex, the child of a single parent is unintentionally involved in conflicts that he has neither the ability to understand nor the patience to cope with them. In addition to having special needs, the children of such marriages are exposed to many psychological and social harms. It is one of the most important and malignant injuries and problems of families in industrialized or transitioning societies, such as Iran (Gorjinpour et al, 2020).

Although divorce leads to the disintegration of the family, and this family breakup has many harmful effects on both parents and children of that family, but this phenomenon is increasing

in many countries. The first damage of divorce directly affects the children, and in fact, the weakest and main victims of the divorce crisis are the children; Especially in cases where they are used as tools and tactics, children should be brought up in a suitable environment and with continuous care, because any kind of deficiency in this regard will cause them to deviate. The family plays a very important role in forming the social habits and thoughts of their children, and the influence of the family on various aspects of children's development is undeniable (Vershon, 1996).

A recent meta-analysis on the effect of parental divorce on affective disorders suggests the need to assess disorders clinically, for example using structured clinical interviews, rather than relying on self-report assessments (Sands et al., 2017). Const (2022) studied the impact of divorce on emotional problems. The research sample consisted of teenagers between 12 and 17 years old whose parents were separated, the results showed that parental divorce was associated with more emotional problems and teenagers faced more problems and challenges. According to Shawn et al.'s (2019) research, parental divorce has been associated with a decrease in well-being in adults. Therefore, this study investigated whether young people with divorced parents are at risk of developing mental disorders. In addition, differences in parental care, social connectedness, chronic stress, and traumatic experiences between children of divorced and non-divorced parents were examined. The results showed that in young adults with divorced parents, compared to young adults with non-divorced parents, there is a higher risk for the first axis but not the second axis disorder. Participants in divorced families had more depression, loneliness, childhood trauma, attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety, chronic stress and less father care compared to non-divorced families. The increased vulnerability of children of divorced parents in causing mental disorders and experiencing more chronic stress, loneliness, attachment avoidance, attachment anxiety and traumatic experiences in childhood is worrying and shows the importance of prevention and psychotherapy programs during the process. Parental Divorce Parental support is necessary with regard to the necessary care to help parents better support their children during

and after their divorce. Considering the important consequences of parental divorce on the mental health of adult children, it is very important to understand its psychological impact on the family and the child's social development. This is the first study to investigate the vulnerability of children of divorce in adulthood and in comparison for mental disorders using a structured clinical interview and a self-report questionnaire in a combined and exploratory manner. In addition, the long-term consequences of divorce on the mental state of children of divorce will be investigated for the first time in the form of a structural and exploratory model. A better understanding of the consequences of parental divorce regarding children in the occurrence of mental disorders and specific traumatic experiences can help to develop special programs to prevent children from staying healthy during parental divorce. Therefore, according to the presented materials, the aim of the current research is to answer the main question, what are the indicators and characteristics of the model of the psychological state of children of divorce in adulthood?

Method

The present research was conducted in a qualitative manner using the data-driven theory method. In the first part, by reviewing the research literature, semi-structured interview questions on the mental state of children of divorce were compiled. It was discussed in meetings by researchers, professors and experts, in order to check the accuracy of the content and their adequacy, and a consensus was reached regarding the content of the interview and its questions; In such a way that with the accuracy of the content and the adequacy of the formulated questions, the psychological condition of the children of divorce can be inquired from the experts' point of view. Therefore, in this research, in order to cover all areas of vulnerability of children of divorce and to extract similar types of data, and also due to flexibility, semi-structured interviews were used. The participants of the study were children of divorce in Tehran, who had been divorced for 10 years. Using the purposeful sampling method, 18 people were interviewed. Sampling in this part of the research continued until the saturation of the category, that is, until no new information was obtained during the

interviews. A systematic method was used to analyze the content of the interviews, conceptualization and extraction of categories. The systematic research plan in data-driven theory emphasizes the use of data analysis steps through open coding, central coding, and selective coding.

Implementation

After coding, it was necessary to determine whether the theoretical explanation of the researchers of the article is meaningful or not from the participants' point of view. It was also necessary to ensure the accuracy of the events and their sequence in the theory process. In order to achieve this goal, the results of the analysis were presented to 4 participants and the process of reaching the diagram was explained to them, the findings of this work confirmed the general findings of the research. Christiansen's angulation technique was also used to evaluate the validity and quality of the findings. In this regard, it has been tried to make the breadth of information and the deepening of information possible by continuous mental engagement with data. To achieve this goal, after coding the data by the researcher, two people were asked to code some of the interviews to evaluate the accuracy and validity of the coding and the obtained categories. The results of this section were similar to the coding done in the previous step.

Results

The demographic characteristics of the research participants show that 61% of them are women and 39% are men, their average age is 30 years and the average time of their parents' divorce is 20 years.

During the open and axial coding phase, the data were carefully examined, the main categories and their related subcategories were identified, dimensions and characteristics were determined, and the pattern was examined. For these analyses, the analytical techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin (2006) were used. The main unit of analysis for open and central coding were concepts. During the detailed analysis of the data, concepts were developed through thematics by the researcher, directly from the participants' interview transcripts (live codes) or according to their common usage.

According to the guide provided by Strass and Corbin (2015) regarding open and axial coding, it should be said that first, by separating the

interview text into elements with messages inside lines or paragraphs, an attempt was made to extract open codes. In the next stage, those concepts were classified into larger categories. In the second stage, which is central coding, first the main category was determined, then other categories were categorized in the form of main components. Finally, in the stage of selective coding, the theory emerged from the data. It should be noted that many open codes were obtained, but after each stage of classification and data review, duplicate concepts were removed and similar concepts were merged until we reached the desired model. Data analysis was done with accuracy more than ten times to reach theoretical saturation for the main categories, sub-categories and their dimensions. The boundaries of each main category and categories were not definitively determined at the beginning of the analysis, and these categories were revised throughout the analysis. Open and axial coding was stopped when:

- a) a meaningful classification was obtained after reviewing the transcripts of the interviews several times;
- b) sub-categories and features were duplicated;
- c) Relevant and new information was not found from the interview transcripts, even if new information was found, it would match the existing classification.

The following tables show the adoption and final classification according to the research questions raised. This classification should not be considered as the only possible classification with absolute limits. However, it can be considered sufficient for the next stages of data analysis and questionnaire design. Based on the open coding process, the extracted codes for the research questions are divided as follows:

After the open coding of the interview and extracting the interviewees' codes, at this stage the extracted codes were arranged and categorized under the central categories. To categorize the extracted codes, first, the categories were divided in the central field of psychological state. According to this model, the psychological status of children of divorce in adulthood was evaluated separately.

For this purpose, the first questions were "What were the best and worst moments that you experienced when your parents separated?" And second, "what was and is your feeling about their decision to separate". The interview was

devoted to the mental state and categories investigated in this field. In the second stage, the situation was divided into childhood and adulthood, and psychological status was divided into two positive and negative states, or

according to the words presented by Rif (1995), into two states, high and low. The results of the extracted core codes are presented as described in the following table:

Table 1. Axial coding for developing a model of the psychological state of children of divorce in adulthood

Main axis	Life stage	State	Final codes
Psychological state	Childhood	Positive	Companionship and empathy with the guardian
			The warm support and support of parents
			Release and consent of the guardian parent
			Feeling satisfied with life without conflict and conflict
			Support from others (family and friends)
			loss of family
		Negative	Fear of telling the truth because of people's judgment
			Loneliness and social isolation or lack of intimate relationships
			Rejection
			Loss of sponsor
			Difficulty in regulating daily life
			Inability to choose or create textures that suit personal values and needs
	Adulthood	Positive	Self-evaluation according to personal standards
			Feeling satisfied with life compared to the past
			Accepting the good and bad aspects of your existence
			Be determined to prove yourself
			self confidence
			Dealing with problems
		Negative	Feeling unable to change or improve life
			Self-blame for the behavior of the guardian parent
			Frustration from the guardian parent because of the wrong decision
			Blame yourself
			Inappropriate judgment of the behavior of others
			Stress and mental pressure
Disillusionment with the past			
Anger towards absent parents			
depression			
Tendency to addiction			
Failed and disillusioned with the past			
Lack of feeling of control over the holy world			
Frustration and resentment of the guardian parent			

According to the extracted categories, the model of the psychological state of children of divorce in adulthood can be presented as follows: Considering that the skewness and kurtosis statistics of the research variables are between -2 and +2, the assumption of normality of the data is confirmed. In the following, the correlation coefficients of the research variables

are given in Table 2. Finally, in the section related to the characteristics stated by the sample people regarding the question "three of the most important characteristics of yourself, regardless of all issues", these characteristics were divided into two aspects, positive and negative, according to the table below.

Table 2. Axial coding to examine the most important characteristics of people, independent of all issues

	State	Code
The most important characteristics of a person, regardless of all issues	Positive	Patience
		compromiser
		Flexible with other people
		Very diligent and hardworking
		Brave
		Responsible
		Honesty
		planning
		family friendly
		good heart
		Sentient
		with will
		Supporter and companion
		Critic and clairvoyant
	Eager to discover and learn	
	I have a strong will	
	Introverted	
	appreciative	
	Positive thinking	
	Independent	
	Sociable	
	Hardworking	
	Negative	failed
		disappointed
		Angry
		a complex
		Depressed
		perfectionist
bad mouth		
Emotional		

Conclusion

Considering the large number of children who are exposed to divorce every year, a fundamental question arises as to whether and how children adapt to the divorce of their parents. This is especially important in cases of high conflict, where divorce is the worst case scenario (Fotheringham et al. 2013). With the understanding of this importance, the present study was conducted with the aim of investigating the psychological status of children of divorce in adulthood.

The results of the research showed that the psychological status of children of divorce has positive and negative indicators in two aspects of childhood and adulthood. The positive aspect of childhood is companionship and empathy with the guardian parent, the support and warmth of the guardian parent, liberation and satisfaction of the guardian parent, among other positive indicators, one can mention the feeling of satisfaction with life without conflict and conflict, support from others (family and friends). Negative indicators include: loss of family, fear of telling the truth because of people's judgment, children experience some kind of fear and apprehension after the divorce and following the events that happened during the separation process and after. Not having or lack of intimate relationships, rejection, loss of a supporter, difficulty in regulating daily life affairs, creating contexts that suit personal values and needs. The research results showed that children experience a kind of fear of being abandoned and losing the feeling of being loved after divorce. Studies show that teenagers will have some mental anxiety and worry about future events after the separation of their parents. In addition, the feeling of sadness and rejection and the fear of repeating the loss arise in these people (Hooper, 2010). In explaining this article, it can be said that teenagers who have already experienced loss and abandonment are more likely to be involved in mental and psychological challenges, and the reason for this can be the fear of repeating this event and its consequences; At the time of divorce, when one of the parents leaves the home, children come to believe that there is no guarantee for the permanent presence of the parents and there is also the risk of abandonment by the other parent.

The positive side of divorce in children's adulthood is self-evaluation according to personal standards, feeling satisfied with the past life, accepting the good and bad aspects of one's existence, becoming determined to prove oneself, self-confidence and coping with problems. Lack of understanding and perception of parents living apart, lower mental health and more use of emotional and avoidance coping methods, more aggressiveness of the child's fear of rejection, changes in living conditions, low self-confidence originates from anxiety, which is lurking in the near future. Anxiety at this age has many consequences, including depression and various physical diseases. Anxiety, aggression, psychosis, suspicion, depression, morbid fear, tension and finally addiction are among the many injuries that children of divorce and even children of emotional divorce are involved with for many years depending on age and other factors.

According to the results of the research, the negative dimensions of divorce in adulthood are the feeling of inability to change or improve the context of life, self-blame for the behavior of the guardian parent, annoyance with the guardian parent for a wrong decision, self-blame depends to a large extent on the primary relationships, especially the relationship between the child's parents. (King, 2002). Studies have shown that people who have had positive experiences in their initial relationships with those around them show a greater tendency to trust newcomers in their future interactions compared to people who have experienced negative initial relationships with those around them. (Hardin, 1993). Since the children of divorced families have not benefited from a satisfactory and safe relationship in their early relationships, the creation of mistrust and pessimism towards others in these people seems predictable. Psychological stress and pressure, frustration from the past, anger towards absent parents, depression, tendency to addiction, failure and frustration from the past, lack of feeling of control over the outside world, discouragement and resentment towards the guardian parent, feeling helpless as a result of existing problems and pressures. Regarding mistrust, the results showed that the participants in this research developed a kind of pessimism

and mistrust towards others after the events that happened to them.

Finally, one of the consequences of divorce for children is the unpredictability of the future and the lack of security for these people; In other words, these people express some kind of worry about their unknown future. In this regard, researchers believe that after divorce, children face new situations, financial difficulties, and sometimes ongoing conflicts between parents and the child's parent. These factors create a feeling of lack of control and uncertainty in them (Wallerstein and Kelly, 2008).

Fagan and Churchill (2012) concluded that divorce significantly weakens the family and transforms the relationship between parents and children. Divorce makes it difficult to manage children's behavior and has a bad effect on their sense of competence.

The review of past studies is also affirmative and in line with the findings of the present study because it was found in previous studies that the divorce of parents will have a positive effect on the future of children (Hammer Smith, 2020; Lee et al., 2018). Some studies also showed that parental divorce will have a negative impact on the children's future. (Mohammadian, 2013; Jalili Rad & Aliabadi, 2014; Yahiizadeh & Hamed, 2015; Const, 2022; Shan et al., 2019; Johanson et al., 2018; Dimir Dagdas et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2017; Thomas & Hogan, 2015; Mandymakers & Kalmysen, 2014).

Mastonen et al. (2011) reported that adults who experienced the divorce of their parents in childhood have more lack of well-being and resilience compared to other people. The results of Dike et al.'s (2020) research showed that adults with parental divorce experience more sensitivity to rejection compared to normal people. McCabe (1997) reported that the amount of emotional and social development of children who grow up in divorced families is usually lower compared to other children who grow up in normal families.

To understand the disparities in children's adjustment after divorce, it is important to note that children are active in different areas of life, including school, friendship, leisure and family. Although the different domains may overlap to some extent, they are also to some extent independent. In the context of divorce, children's specific experiences of divorce (eg, emotions, cognitions, behavior) are likely to

influence their overall adjustment to divorce (Flock & Foligny, 2008). Indeed, parental divorce can create long-lasting feelings of pain, worry, and regret that negatively affect children's daily functioning in multiple domains (Alice et al., 2008; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, it is also possible that children's experiences of divorce are somewhat independent of their experiences in other domains, especially in the long term as divorce increases (Kelly & Emery, 2003). In this regard, Loman Billings and Emery (2000) showed that children whose parents have been divorced for two years or more, in measuring psychological symptoms, such as depression or anxiety, are not less than children with married parents. These findings suggest that children may experience both divorce-specific trauma and post-divorce adjustment at the same time.

This line of reasoning fits well with the idea that children are active agents who adapt to environmental challenges, thereby shaping their own regulation (Frankenhuis et al., 2016; Seruk, 2019). It is consistent with the notion that while bad things happen and may be traumatic for adults and children (Bonanno, 2004), not everyone reacts in the same way. For example, research shows that in the face of adversity, children show increased variability in their behavior and outcomes as they adapt and act differently to stressful environments (Blacksawn, 2008; Ellis et al., 2012). Hence, the distinction between resilience and maladaptation to stressful events unfolds over time, leading to heterogeneous trajectories, from chronic dysfunction to recovery (Bonano & Diminich, 2013).

Extending these findings to the context of parental divorce, the child may (sometimes for years) deal with the social and emotional consequences of parental divorce. However, it may resist normal developmental tasks such as starting and maintaining friendships and milestones such as continuing education. Parental divorce has become a developmental challenge for many children. Due to the many consequences of parental divorce in children's lives, parental conflict before divorce, possible relocation and change of school, unavailability of one or both parents, or increased traumatic experiences, many children feel blamed and suffer. These cases can have huge social and health consequences for them.

Based on the obtained results, it can be said that if divorce is viewed as a process phenomenon. Parents who have officially separated from each other have been living in a stressful and traumatic environment for years, their children have not passed their developmental stages compared to children who grew up in a warm and uninvolved environment. The shadow of this tension and conflict shows itself in all future interactions and situations of the child, especially in the field of mental health, the life and relationships of the children are strongly affected; It makes them feel insecure, afraid, rejected and neglected. The experience of these emotions and emotions affects the self-esteem of these people and in some cases causes these people to have a pessimistic and distrustful view of marriage. It, in turn, can overshadow the decision of these people in the future regarding marriage.

Today, there is a lot of evidence that in many parts of the world, there has been a fundamental change in the value and normative systems of societies regarding the family. Marriage has become more and more a fragile institution that takes place in different forms, with different intensity and weaknesses and with different effects and consequences in different countries of the world. The changing trend of divorce rates in various societies shows the change of society's structures on this global phenomenon, and it is not only necessary to identify the causes and factors affecting it, but its long-term effects for the children of divorce are always a challenge. Apart from this, the Iranian society has witnessed extensive and rapid changes in various dimensions of its social life in recent decades. One of the important cases of these changes is the change of social habits and behaviors in the issue of marriage and family. Among the most important of these changes are the decrease in the marriage rate, the increase in the age of marriage, the rapid increase in the number of separations and divorces; That is, he pointed out the factors that will lead to the weakening of the foundations of this important social institution. In the long run, this issue can have adverse effects on the society because the children of divorce face a wide range of problems such as low self-confidence, increased risk of child abuse, increased divorce rates in adulthood, etc. In some cases, divorce is the best option for a broken marriage, and there is a

possibility that the children of divorce will be on the right path throughout their lives; However, the adverse effects of this phenomenon are more visible for their future.

Among the limitations of the current research were the difficulty in coordinating with some participants, the time-consuming process of gathering information due to the size of the community, the prevailing conditions due to the covid-19 disease, and the dispersion of the statistical sample. The lack of theoretical foundations and empirical background regarding the psychological status of children of divorce, especially in internal studies, was one of the limitations of the current research.

It is recommended to those in charge to pay more attention to the issue of divorce and its recognition in families and the effects it will have on the psychological state of children in order to avoid its negative consequences. It is suggested that in order to reduce the harmful effects of divorce on children's mental health, social support, training and giving awareness about unhealthy family psychological-educational practices should be expanded. It seems that in order to reduce the effects of divorce on children, it is necessary to establish free family counseling centers in family courts, and these centers are required to provide mandatory pre-divorce counseling, especially to families with children. Undoubtedly, the provision of these services can also influence the decision-making process of parents regarding separation. On the other hand, providing psychological training in some schools as educational bases for children of divorce can raise the level of awareness of children about what has happened or will happen to them due to the separation of their parents and increase their ability to cope.

It is also necessary to provide counseling services for the custodial parent and the non-custodial parent based on the separation of their roles and in order to reduce differences between parents and children.

Conflict of Interest

According to the authors, this article has no financial sponsor or conflict of interest.

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