

## Social Adaptability of Adolescent Students from Divorce Homes in various Religious Backgrounds in Ghana

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact parental divorce has on adolescent students in Senior High Schools in Ghana and whether gender differences exist in the impact as well as the internalizing and externalizing types of behaviours. The participants comprised of adolescent students from four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. A purposive sample of 396 students consisting of 198 males and 198 females participated in the study. The cross-sectional descriptive survey using a questionnaire, was adopted in collecting the data. The questionnaire had Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. The study did not show any difference in social adaptability for both adolescent males and females. However, it was found that adolescents from Christian divorced homes adapt better psychosocially than adolescents from Muslim divorced homes. It is recommended that for adolescent students from Moslem homes adapt socially after divorce, in-service training should be organised periodically for teachers on how to identify and assist children from divorced homes to enable them cope with their social adaptation challenges. It is also recommended that counselling be given to adolescent students in schools from divorced homes especially those from Muslim homes. Parents should also be sensitized on the impact of divorce on their children.

Key words: social adaptability, externalizing behaviour, internalizing behaviour.

### 1. Introduction

Adolescence has been noted as a crucial period of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformations (Kelly, 2004). It is also recognized that perhaps the most influential determinant of adolescent success with the negotiation to adulthood is family structure (Fallon & Bowles, 2001). Indeed, to a large extent, family structure determines adolescents' academic and psychosocial development (Brown, 2006). In particular, family structure bears important implications on adolescents' abilities to successfully navigate through school and into adulthood. However, a key barrier to this success is divorce.

Boney (2003) and Furstenberg and Kiernan (2001) have highlighted the negative effects of divorce on adolescent development. They found that divorce disrupts adolescents' academic development. School engagement research denoted that adolescents from divorced families struggle with becoming academically and socially engaged in school (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1996). Amato (2008) observed that after divorce adolescents experienced anger, fear, loneliness, depression and guilt. Some feel pushed into adulthood if they must take responsibility for many new chores or care of siblings.

Secombe and Warner (2003) proposed that divorce causes four major sources of stress for children: fear of change, loss of attachment, feelings of abandonment, and tension from exposure to hostile parents. They further noted that most children experienced extreme difficulties with adjusting to the first year of the divorce. Kelly (1990) studied 520 adolescents in the USA and indicated that 68% of them from divorced homes demonstrated internalizing (conditions whose central feature is disordered mood or emotion) problems such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, insecurity, nervousness and low self – esteem. These same children demonstrated externalizing (anti-social behaviour) problems including aggression, had more difficulties in their peer relationships, were less compliant with authority figures and showed problem behaviours at school.

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Amato and Keith (1991b) conducted a meta-analytic review of studies investigating the differences between children from separated and intact families. The review included 92 studies published between 1950 and 1989, the majority of which were conducted in the United States. The results indicated more favourable outcomes for children from intact families. Cockett and Tripp (1994) also reported that adolescents from separated families showed higher levels of sad and worried behaviours, report more often of psychosomatic and anxiety symptoms as well as unhappiness and lower self-esteem. Adolescents from separated families are also more likely to report depressed mood and to be diagnosed with mood and anxiety disorders (Elliott & Richards, 1991).

Lipsey and Derzon (1998) have reported that adolescents who experience parental divorce tend to act on their impulse, and their impulsiveness is the most crucial personality dimension that predicts externalizing behaviours. Adolescents from divorced families are reported to commit more delinquent acts including drunkenness in public places, fighting, stealing and misdemeanours (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Vars (1998) indicated that 88% of students from divorce homes experienced academic and social difficulties with the middle school transition.

From a review of 25 Australian studies, Rodgers (1996b) concluded that parental separation was associated with adolescent and adult outcomes. The strongest effects seen in adolescents were substance use and delinquency, attempted suicides, psychiatric symptoms and criminality in adulthood. Studies in Britain (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Rodgers, Power, & Hope, 1997), New Zealand (Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey 1994), Finland (Aro & Pollasaari, 1992), China (Liu, 2000) and the Netherlands (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997) have also found lower levels of adjustment in children from separated families.

Gender-based research has indicated that boys are more negatively affected by divorce than are adolescent girls (Amato & Keith, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Keith (1991) concluded that divorce has a more negative effect on boys than on girls. They reported that more boys than girls struggled with making mental and verbal sense of divorce. They also found that in comparison to girls, boys from divorced families developed lower self-esteem and were more likely to display aggression at home and in school. In a subsequent meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (2001) revealed that marital disruption lowered boys' academic performances in reading and mathematics. Further, more boys than girls from divorced families tended to quit school.

Hetherington (1993) and Hetherington and Kelly (2002) noted that more boys than girls become depressed about the divorce of their parents. Boys were more likely than girls to use blaming, withdrawal, and inattentiveness as responses to divorce. Hetherington's findings pointed to research on boys' tendencies to maintain few friendships and form smaller support systems (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

Contrary to earlier beliefs that parental separation leads to more adverse consequences for boys, some studies have found more adverse outcomes for adolescent girls (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Using longitudinal data from the second wave of the United States National Survey of Children (NSC) study (when children were aged between 11 and 16 years), Allison and Furstenberg (1989) found that adolescent girls from separated families had higher levels of teacher-rated problem behaviour and self-rated dissatisfaction and distress compared to adolescent boys from separated families.

## **2. Aims and objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study was to find social adaptability of adolescent students from divorce homes in various religious backgrounds in Ghana. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to:

- Find gender differences existing in social adaptability of adolescent students?
- Test differences exist in social adaptability among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?

## **3. Literature Review**

Several theories have been put forward to explain the impact of divorce on adolescents and types of behaviours they demonstrate after divorce. The social learning theory, Bandura (1977), is concerned with the relationship between social and environmental factors and their influence on behaviour. According to this view, children learn through observing the behaviour of others especially their parents and by imitating them, which is referred to as modelling. Bandura (1986) therefore believed that if any force (e.g. divorce) disorganized the unit in which the modelling is taking place then the younger ones who are doing the modelling are affected. It is in the light of this that divorce is seen as having a negative impact on adolescents.

Erikson (1968), in his psychosocial theory, labelled the adolescent stage as one involving a search for identity or a series of identities, which even become a "crises of identity" in some cases. He believed that the adolescent is involved in a struggle to discover who he/she is and his/her essence.

He believed that the chief task of the adolescent is to confront the crisis of identity versus identity confusion or role confusion, so as to become a balanced adult with a coherent sense of self and valued role in society. The adolescent needs his/her parents and important or significant others to offer alternative suggestions for proper formation of identity. According to Erikson (1968), any force (e.g. divorce) that exerts additional pressure on an adolescent put him/her in a state of disequilibrium and deepens the crises for identity formation. Erikson (1968) believed that the adolescent is at a critical stage and any destabilization which has effect on the adolescent such as divorce creates adjustment problems for the individual.

Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) stated that when family attachment is severed by divorce, children's attachment style is replaced by feelings of anger, resentment, and confusion. As children mature in age, their altered attachment style prevents them from forming meaningful relationships. In addition, children begin to show maladaptive behaviors toward new, but pivotal, life experiences.

Divorce rate has increased during 21st century and at current rates, it is predicted that between two-fifths and two-thirds of all recent first marriages will end in divorce or separation. DeBord (1997) further expressed the view that the high rate of marital dissolution means that about 40% of adolescent children will experience a parental divorce prior to the age of 20. He emphasized that although a substantial risk of family disruption has always been present, today it is much more likely to be caused by divorce.

Hewitt, Skrbis & Western (2008) have indicated that changes to family life in Australia over the last century have been numerous. One such change has been the increase in the number of couples divorcing. Accordingly about half of divorces involve children under the age of 18 years and it is estimated that around 25% of children are living in households with only one parent (De Vaus, 2004).

In Ghana, Mainoo (2008) reported that records available in Ghana show a progressive increase in divorce over the past years. The Ghana Demographic and Housing Statistics [GDHS], (2005) has found that due to the increasing numbers of single-parent, mother-headed homes in Ghana, more Ghanaian youths (4.5 million) continue to experience varying factors that affect their psychosocial adjustment following parental divorce. Ankomah (2002) and Mainoo (2008) have reported the serious lack of empirical literature on divorce studies in Ghana. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact parental divorce has on adolescent students in Senior High Schools in Ghana and whether gender differences exist in the impact as well as the internalizing and externalizing types of behaviours.

The study was guided by the following research questions.

5. What gender differences exist in social adaptability of adolescent students?
6. What differences exist in social adaptability among adolescent students of various religious backgrounds?

#### **4. Methodology**

##### **Participants**

The target population comprised of adolescent students from the four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The population of the Senior High School students in Obuasi Municipality was 8,520 students.

##### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The sample consisted of 396 respondents out of the 8,520 students in the schools. The sample size was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for sample selection. The 396 participants consisted of 198 males and 198 females.

Purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for the study since the list of students who came from divorced homes was not available. In each school, the lead researcher, together with some of the teachers moved from class to class to ask for students who were not staying with both biological parents to move into a secured classroom? The students were given follow-up questions such as why they were not living with both biological parents and whether their parents were divorced. The responses led to the identification of the appropriate students.

## Research Design

The research design for this study was cross sectional survey design which utilized a structured questionnaire for the collection of quantitative data involving multiple variables that were examined to detect impact and patterns of differences. Surveys enable an examination of “large and small populations (or universes) by selecting and studying samples chosen from the populations to discover the relative incidence, distribution, and interrelations of sociological and psychological variables” (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 377). The major variables used in the study were impact of divorce, internalizing types of behaviour and externalizing types of behaviour.

## Instrument

The main instrument for the study was a questionnaire. Questionnaire is a widely used and useful instrument for collecting survey information as it provides structured and often numerical data. It is also useful for the collection of data without the presence of the researcher and it is often comparatively straight forward to analyze (Cohen et al, 2005).

However, a questionnaire has some weaknesses. It is expensive and time consuming to produce. Respondents may also not provide honest answers to questions since the method normally involves the use of structured questions. To overcome the problems associated with the questionnaire the instrument for this study was structured such that respondents were given the opportunity to only tick the answers to the items.

Formulated research questions and hypotheses informed the development of the items in addition to references made to available literatures. In addition, a thorough examination of the theories that were relevant to the research questions in order to identify concepts that had bearing on externalizing and internalizing measures of adolescents of divorced families was made.

The instrument is a 33 item self-reporting instrument utilizing Likert type response scale which facilitated numerical coding of data. The entire instrument was arranged into content sub-sections A and B. Section A consisted of 13 demographic and background survey items. Section B consisted of 30 measures generated through prior research to tap appropriate conceptual domains for this study. There were 2 boxes, with the headings; ‘Before my Parents’ Divorce’ and, ‘After my Parents Divorce’. Respondents were instructed to circle the appropriate number that corresponded to their most suitable option from the rating scale provided. (i.e. 1 = Not at all true of me, 2 = Somewhat true of me, 3 = Often true of me, 4 = Very often true of me, and 5 = Always true of me). Ten items in the questionnaire addressed adolescent externalizing type of behaviours (items 14 - 23), followed by another ten items that addressed internalizing types of behaviours (item 24 – 33). The initial items were reviewed by educational researchers to ascertain content validity and then piloted. The piloted items were then refined for use. In terms of reliability, the externalizing behaviours scale had a Cronbach’s alpha value of .84 while the internalizing scale also had alpha value of .84.

## Data Collection Procedure

A letter of introduction to request for permission to conduct the main study in schools in the Obuasi Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana was obtained from the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Cape Coast. Copies of the letter were given to the headmasters of the four selected schools.

With permission granted by the headmasters, specific dates were fixed for the collection of the data in each school. The lead researcher introduced himself to the teachers in each school. The lead researcher explained the purpose of the study to the teachers. However, in order to avoid stigmatization and possible psychological effect on performance and participants’ self-esteem during and after the exercise, the lead researcher secured an empty classroom in the schools visited. The lead researcher supervised the entire exercise in the four schools and addressed issues that arose from the exercise. The data was collected in March 2011 and the response rate was 100%.

## 5. Results and Discussions

### Research Question One

#### What Gender Differences Exist in Social Adaptability of Adolescent Students?

In order to determine if the results of the analysis show differences in the social adaptability types of behaviours such as unconcern, social self-caring, social withdrawal, social irritability, social involvement in bad friendship, social caring by relatives, social misconduct and social support for adolescent males and females, an independent-sample t-test was conducted to evaluate the significant mean difference between social adaptability types of behaviours of adolescent girls and adolescent boys. The sample size was 396 students. Table 20 shows the results of the analysis.

**Table 1: Results of Independent Sample t – test Analysis of Group Difference for Social Adaptability Types of Behaviours**

Group	N	M	SD	Df	t	p
Male	198	28.2	7.5	394	1.22	0.225
Female	198	27.3	7.7			

Table 1 shows the social adaptability scores for males ( $M = 28.23$ ,  $SD = 7.47$ ) and females ( $M = 27.30$ ,  $SD = 7.65$ ). With alpha set at .05, the test was shown not to be statistically significant,  $t(394) = 1.22$ ,  $p > .05$ . The study did not show any difference in social adaptability for both adolescent males and females. This means that both male and female adolescents equally adapt socially.

### Research Question Two

#### What Differences Exist in Social Adaptability among Adolescent Students of Various Religious Backgrounds?

In order to determine if the results of the analysis show differences in the social adaptability types of behaviours such as unconcern, social self-caring, social withdrawal, social irritability, social involvement in bad friendship, social caring by relatives, social misconduct and social support for adolescent students of Christian and Muslim backgrounds, an independent- sample t- test was conducted. The researcher only used data collected from students from Christian and Muslim backgrounds for the analysis. This is because the data collected from Traditional African and those who did not belong to any religion were very few. The sample size was 382. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 21.

**Table 2: Comparison between Religious Group and Social Adaptability of Adolescents**

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Christianity	114	31.8	7.2	380	7.31	0.0001
Muslim	268	26.0	7.1			

Results from Table 2 shows that social adaptability of the 2 religious groups Christianity ( $M = 31.8$ ,  $SD = 7.2$ ) reported more significantly than Muslim ( $M = 26.0$ ,  $SD = 7.1$ ),  $t(380) = 7.3$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ . It was found that adolescents from Christian divorced homes adapt better psychosocially than adolescents from Muslim divorced homes. This is a new discovery since no such discovery was disclosed in the reviewed literature.

### Discussion

This finding is relevant to the general Ghanaian situation due to the existence of the extended family system and it is equally consistent with several research conducted on social support availability to adolescents who face distressing family conditions (Drapeau & Bouchard, 1993; Cauce et al., 1992; Isaac & Leon, 1986). Although, the family may be “broken”, the extended family serves as a source of emotional, psychological, economical and spiritual support to anchor the offsprings of the divorced family based on lineal descent and cultural ties (Sudarkasa, 2004). It basically exists to ensure continuity of the family by extending diverse supports to foster wellbeing and positive social adaptability to members who experience family crises. Sudarkasa (2004) believed that Ghanaian adolescents, regardless of gender, when experiencing parental divorce know by cultural intuition and traditional upbringing that there are several others in the community that value and care for their wellbeing by way of offering advice and counselling, monetary and emotional support as well as behavioural guide at the onset of family crises. He emphasized that Ghanaian adolescents when experiencing parental divorce are therefore able to construct a supportive peer network as well as utilize mentors and other people in the extended family such as uncles, aunts, grandparents, community and institutional programs that enable them to increase their adaptive social adjustment.

Two theoretical perspectives of social-ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) and resilience (Masten, 2001) are used to explain the relationship of gender and adolescent's social adaptability following the experience of parental divorce. Ghanaian adolescent boys and girls are able to tap and utilize socio-ecological resources such as support from schools, peer groups, family, relatives, community, religious organizations and policy arrangements of government to increase protective factors.

Protective factors promote both adolescent boys' and girls' social competence and social problem solving abilities that protect them from the risk of developing psychosocial behaviour problems. The development of social competence promotes positive adaptation. Adolescents' social competence entails developed social cognitive capabilities and emotional regulation skills that allow them to select and engage in appropriate psychosocial behaviours (Bronfenbrenner, 1997).

A family resilience approach emphasizes identification and enhancement of both adolescent boys and girls coping resources (including the social, economic, emotional, religious, psychological and physical assets) that increase adolescents' protective factors to enable them and families to overcome disruptive challenges (Walsh, 1998). Familial factors such as low interpersonal conflict, effective parenting, low parental distress, parental responsiveness, and disciplinary efficacy enhance adolescent protective factors for positive adaptation. In addition, the availability of community factors, such as membership of religious communities and receiving social support from them enhance family resilience which enable the adolescent boys and girls to adjust well psychosocially (Walsh, 1998).

Religion is significant criterion variable predicting adolescent social adaptability behaviours in the study. Religious response analyses in this study consistently confirm the notion that religion moderates psychosocial behaviours of Ghanaian adolescents of divorced families. Several researched have established the significance of religious belief and practice as a coping mechanism for negotiating the effects of parental divorce and other life stresses for adolescents (Furrow & Wagner, 2003; Mahoney, Pargament, Jewel, Swank, Scot, Emery & Rye, 2006; Donahue & Benson, 1995; Pearce et al., 2003; Ellison & Levin, 1998; Idler & George, 1998).

Research has also shown that people tend to utilize religious coping to deal with situations where they have little control, compared to situations over which they have high control (Pargament, 1997). Religion serves a particular function in that it can help people create meaning out of their experience while coping with uncontrollable situations such as parental loss (Mahoney et al., 2006; Pearce et al., 2003). Various studies have demonstrated the importance of paying attention to the diverse cultural and religious dimension of religious coping (Ai., 2003; Frable, 1997). Ghanaian adolescents in this study used their religion as a means to engage in reactive coping.

Reactive coping (Spencer, 2006; Ker & Bowen, 1981) entails an effort the adolescent expends to deal with the cumulative stress of parental divorce with a view to compensate for the harm and loss. This type of reactive coping is problem focused, emotion focused and social-relation focused (Spencer, 2006; Ker & Bowen, 1988).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In conclusion, it was found that adolescents from Christian backgrounds adapt better psychosocially than those from Muslim backgrounds. Furthermore, adolescents from Muslim backgrounds demonstrate less internalising types of behaviour than those from Christian backgrounds. However, adolescents from Christian backgrounds demonstrate more externalising behaviours than those from Muslim backgrounds

Based on the findings and conclusions from the study, the following recommendations are made. In helping adolescent students from Moslem homes to adapt socially after divorce, in- service training should be organised periodically for teachers on how to identify and assist children from divorced homes to enable them cope with their social adaptation challenges. It is also recommended that counselling be given to adolescent students in schools from divorced homes especially those from Muslim homes. Parents should also be sensitized on the impact of divorce on their children.

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