



Causes and Consequences of Divorced Parents in Child Personality Development

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Abstract

By nature of things, parents need to ensure the growth and development of their children, building an appropriate, non-confrontational environment to foster emotional preparation to face adverse life events so that they are manageable and not traumatic. In practice, post-divorce parental interactions are unsatisfactory and damaging because they are often impacted by the hostility that the child feels towards the ex-spouse, with consequences for the child's psycho-emotional balance. The psychological analysis of research on divorced families and the relationship between the resident parent and the child is reviewed. Most often than not, being caught up in the hostility against each other, parents are not aware of the emotional disorder and imbalance that may affect the child's personality by enhancing problematic personality patterns. In this context, the HiPIC - Hierarchical Personality Inventory for Children test was used to assess the parents' (the resident parent and the parents within organized families) perception of their child, i.e. to reflect on the child's concrete and observable behaviors. The sample selected included children aged 9-12 and their parents. Scoring and interpretation of the HiPIC test, and statistical processing revealed five dimensions of specific child personality functioning.

Key words: Benevolence; divorce; emotional stability; extraversion pattern; HiPIC test

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1. Introduction

Following the divorce of their parents, a significant number of children are affected by exposure to parental conflict related to establishing the child's residence and schedule of interactions with the non-resident parent, legal and financial considerations, or the emotional refusal of at least one parent to accept separation. By nature of things, parents need to ensure that children are raised and developed, that they are provided with an appropriate, non-confrontational environment, and that they are emotionally prepared to face adverse life events such as parental separation and make such events more manageable and less traumatic (Baumrind, 2013). From a regulatory perspective, both at global and national level, there are numerous regulations on the protection of children's physical, mental, intellectual, emotional and relational health, laws on protecting and guaranteeing children's rights. The consequences of divorce and its impact on children are a major issue which is widespread worldwide. Multiple studies on this topic, mainly cross-sectional, have found a number of determinants of the problem, reporting inadequate parental care (insufficient or overprotective), parental inconsistency generated by parental separation, and negative parental attitudes. Pre- and post-divorce family status patterns determined varied internalizing disorder outcomes in children who experienced divorce.

In practice, post-divorce parenting interactions are unsatisfactory and damaging, as it often happens that the parent to whom the child has been entrusted (the resident parent) deflects, conveying to the child the hostility he or she feels towards the ex-spouse, which, although perhaps justified from his or her point of view, is not such as to disqualify the other parent in his or her role (the non-resident parent). Therefore, the emotional and affective instability of the minor, due to psychological immaturity and lack of life experience, deprives him/her of the possibility to maintain and develop personal relationships with the parent from whom he/she has been separated by divorce, to express his/her feelings freely, without pressure and conflicts of loyalty towards the parent with whom the minor lives, in terms of the quantity and quality of the affections expressed within the family; for example, a family climate lacking emotional security will generate in the child a similar perception of the reality of the social environment: it will seem unstable, dangerous, difficult to control, which will cause the child to show reserve, have difficulty relating, feel unable to cope with an environment which s/he perceives as hostile.

Longitudinal studies show that children whose parents have divorced are more likely to experience more conflict in their own marriages and are more likely to end up separating, usually being involved in short-term partnerships that do not lead to marriage (Mustonen et al., 2011). Lyddon and Sherry attach great importance to attachment theory in personality formation and development, arguing that it provides a viable framework for understanding personality development (Lyddon & Sherry, 2001). Studies have found that family instability and lack of parental affection and supervision during preadolescence and adolescence predict the formation of dependent and passive-aggressive personalities with high levels of symptoms of antisocial, avoidant, borderline personality disorders. Keinänen et al. systematically reviewed 51 studies and identified family, respectively, parenting behavior/style, family climate, and parent-child relationship associated with exposure to a hostile interparental environment and the affective parenting dimension represented by low warmth, hostility, and harsh corrective behaviors (Keinänen et al., 2012).

Childhood trauma and its association with borderline traits in children has been investigated by a number of researchers through systematic reviews of longitudinal cohort studies, concluding that, in general, abuse is a risk factor for borderline personality traits in children and adults, with risk increased by the severity of abuse (Ibrahim, Cosgrave & Woolgar, 2018). Parental neglect and conflict, parental growth and developmental difficulties in their own childhood, every type of abusive parenting style, family climate and parent-child relationship may determine the etiology for the development of borderline personality disorder. Moreover, against the background of parental characteristics in the form of parental psychopathology and sociopathology, history of loss, separation or abuse, parental personality traits associated with negative life events, parental conflicts,

create the premises for the child's personality characteristics. The presence of the maternal diagnosis may result in poor parenting outcomes through less satisfying interactions, more cognitive-behavioral risk factors, mother-child relationship difficulties and poorer mental health, affecting the child's balanced development. Psychological problems of a clinical nature are often rooted in early expressions of stable personality traits that are still being built, beyond identification of clinically isolated symptoms, forming emergent personality patterns (Choi & Marks, 2008). The association between family stresses caused by transitions in parental separation and the effects of the child's adjustment to the changes of separation has been established in numerous studies showing higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems, at both externalizing (antisocial, noncompliant behavior, aggression) and internalizing levels (inhibited, withdrawn behavior, anxiety, depression), with lower levels of social responsibility, self-esteem, and social and cognitive competence, in children and adolescents living in contentious homes or in divorced families compared to those in harmonious, non-divorced families (Hetherington, 2006). Five systematic reviews have explored the role of maladaptive parenting practices as a psychosocial risk factor for the development of personality disorder conducted with the aim of identifying progress in this area needed to refine developmental theories, uncover etiological mechanisms, improve early detection, and achieve the ultimate goal of prevention (Stepp, Lazarus & Byrd, 2016).

The relationship between parental bonding and the formation of the child's behavioral prototypes has been proven in the study on the involvement of two factors of parental caregiving, namely, parental rejection and parental overprotection of each parent which revealed the development of inhibited/self-critical and dysphoric/dependent prototypes as personality dimensions. Depressive personality, characterized by a negative self-focus, high negative emotionality and increased reactivity to stress was identified in the early stages of adolescence, was maintained and tended to persistent and continue throughout different stages of development until adulthood (Wertz et al., 2021). The current problem of divorce in families with children, from the perspective of how parents manage separation, can cause disturbances that affect the child's psycho-emotional functionality and development with effects that can accompany the individual throughout his life, through the appearance of psychological disorders. For these reasons, the identification and treatment of psycho-emotional disorders in children as a result of their parents' poor management of the divorce phenomenon are imperative.

Psychological problems of a clinical nature are often rooted in early expressions of stable personality traits in formation, beyond the capture of isolated clinical symptoms, forming emergent personality patterns (Olărescu & Dumitriu, 2016). Identifying and diagnosing psychological problems in children is very important because they can lead to psychological disorders in adulthood (Warshak, 2017). In fact, half of all disorders begin by adolescence (Weinstock, 2011). Zuckerman considered that human personality could be reduced to two fundamental temperamental dimensions: the tendency of behavioral approach (including sociability, impulsivity, aggressiveness) and the tendency of behavioral avoidance/inhibition (neuroticism, anxiety), these characteristics being visible very early in children, the two fundamental tendencies constituting a pre-existing ground that can lead to the differentiated development of later adult personality (Frey & Carlock, 2013). These two tendencies are matched with the child's approach to major life hazards and challenges, which allows for the development of a way of encoding and activating response patterns that the child can build upon throughout his or her experience. As a result, some experiences, situations that activate and maintain a pattern of behavior, that are initially external, gradually become internalized and internal, sometimes unconsciously. Following an extensive study of personality characteristics and their correlation with the family developmental environment and appropriate family functioning, Fortunato et al. argued that personality traits have been identified based on a broad spectrum of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, a taxonomy that includes personality categories and diagnostic criteria to determine children's emerging personalities in an empirically based, psychologically robust, and clinically meaningful way (Friedberg, 2013).

Schizoid and schizotypal personalities have been correlated with withdrawal, as well as social, thinking and attention problems, probably due to children's severe detachment from interpersonal relationships, their very restricted range of expressions and emotions, along with the presence of unconventional beliefs and odd behaviors (Barber & Demo, 2013). Obsessive-compulsive personalities characterized by a generalized preoccupation with orderliness, perfectionism, and mental and interpersonal control - at the expense of flexibility, openness, and efficiency - have been associated with anxiety/depression and social and thinking problems (McHale, 2007). In contrast, dependent and avoidant personalities have shown a high correlation with anxiety/depression and withdrawal, as well as social, thinking and attention problems [Kearney et al., 2003; Althenhofen et al., 2008]. Borderline and histrionic personalities, which are distinguished by a deficient ability to regulate emotions and a tendency to act on impulses, showed a significant and positive correlation with externalizing problems that were also related to antisocial, narcissistic and passive-aggressive personalities, considering the attitude of these patients to be angry or hostile, egocentric and lacking empathy (Shonkoff, 2012; Marcelli et al., 2003).

Various considerations can be made regarding childhood personality and its continuity throughout development. It is noteworthy that, according to the literature, some personalities show homotypic continuity from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, usually those characterized by psychological health (Vîrlan & Frunze, 2012; Stolarski et al., 2011). The need for greater attention to early detection and identification of personality traits and patterns in childhood may prevent children from being exposed to marked long-term consequences with an increased risk of developing severe clinical conditions in adolescence or adulthood (Brown et al., 1998). Identifying the developmental trajectories of psychopathological configurations by considering the child's personality and its underlying developmental dynamics allows for more specific diagnostic predictions and promotes more timely interventions (Feinberg, 2003).

Regarding the parent-divorce-child issue, a series of research questions have constituted *the scientific research problem*: "How do parents see their child? Do they observe behavioral, attitudinal, emotional changes? What is the parent's overview of the specific functioning of the child's personality?". Few studies focus on factors that influence how children's personality traits are affected by how parents manage relationships after divorce. It is essential to identify the variables that predispose to the unbalanced formation of children's personalities to determine interventions aimed at ameliorating any disorders to which they are prone. For the first time at a national level, a comparative experimental study has been conducted, having as subjects children aged 9-12 from divorced families and resident parents on the one hand, and children and parents from organized families on the other hand; the experimental study was carried out in order to highlight personality and emotional disorders as a consequence of the dynamics of parental divorce that children aged 9-12 go through with their parents.

We initiated a comparative experiment with the *aim of assessing* the parents' (resident parent and parents with organized family) opinion of their child, i.e. to reflect on the child's concrete and observable behaviors.

The *hypothesis* of our experimental research consists in the assumption that, in the preadolescent with divorced parents, emotional, interpersonal, motivational and behavioral style disorders will be identified and, between preadolescents from divorced families and preadolescents from non-divorced (organized) families there are significant differences in the perspective of the options offered by the parents.

The *variables* are following:

- independent variable: family type (divorced/not divorced);
- dependent variables: each scale of the test, as follows: emotional stability, extraversion, imagination, benevolence, conscientiousness.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The research was conducted on a group of 228 children aged between 9 and 12 and 228 parents with whom the children lived, referred to as divorced, resident parents, from Bucharest, Romania, with an informed consent, stipulated in the family contract signed by the parents. The experimental group consisted of 125 children and their 125 resident parents, respectively, who were administered psychological assessment, while the remaining 103 children and 103 parents were from organized families. Regarding the criteria for inclusion in the research samples, common characteristics related to the chronological age of the 9–12-year-old child, and specific characteristics in the form of the presence or absence of divorce in the parents were taken into account according to the two reference groups.

Two groups were formed, as follows: 125 children presenting the characteristic "divorce", called the divorced group (DG); they were included in the psychological evaluation at the Counseling Center Sector 2, Bucharest, with the consent and informed consent for the research being granted by the contract with the family signed by the parents; 103 children from organized families, called the non-divorced group (NG), recruited randomly from the municipality of Bucharest, based on the criteria of the child's age of 9-12 years old and the fact that they came from non-divorced families; consent and informed consent were given in writing by filling in the consent form.

2.2. Instruments

To record the level of personality impairment in the development of preadolescents aged 9 to 12 with divorced parents, we used psychological assessment by administering the Hierarchical Personality Inventory for Children – HiPIC, developed by I. Mervielde and de Fruyt (1999). We used an adapted form and distributed it in Romania through Testcentral Bucharest. It is a comprehensive instrument designed for the diagnostic assessment of normal personality in children aged 6 to 13. The test is based on the established Big Five model.

HiPIC describes differences in children's behaviors and attitudes. Thus, used in a clinical or pedagogical context, it allows the assessment of the emotional, interpersonal, motivational and behavioral style of young children, based on the 5 major personality dimensions. The questionnaire is addressed to the parent (guardian/teacher), or any person who meets the criteria of frequency of interaction with the child being assessed. The administration is based on five-step responses to 144 simple, brief statements that depict concrete, observable behaviors of the child. The test can be used in two ways: as an overview of the child's specific personality functioning and as a comparative form of the convergence and divergence of the two parents' assessments. In practice, HiPIC can be used in the clinical context to know the starting point in therapy, identify resources and vulnerabilities and set therapeutic goals. The tool addresses the five dimensions of personality (Mervielde & De Fruyt, 1997):

- *Emotional Stability* - measures self-confidence, self-confidence and emotions about fear, discouragement and mild depressive feelings;
- *Extraversion* - measures the available energy and eagerness with which the child engages in activities, how spontaneously he or she expresses emotions, opinions and ideas, the type of social relationships;
- *Imagination* - scores measure the level of creativity in approaching tasks or in play activities, intellectual skills of cognitive functioning and engagement in exploratory activities;
- *Benevolence* - the scale measures concern and care for the well-being of others, or the manifestation of egocentrism, level of irritability or self-control and tolerance of frustration;
- *Conscientiousness* - scores measure the level of concentration and sustained attention over a longer period of time in activities in which children are involved, the perseverance with which they achieve their goal, the manner in which they achieve results.

2.3. Data analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data obtained in the research, data processing was carried out using the statistical program Jamovi. The descriptive details allowed the use of parametric statistical methods in data processing: t-test for independent samples (calculating the statistical differences between the means obtained by the sample of preadolescents from divorced families with the sample of preadolescents from non-divorced/organized families; Cohen's *d* indicator (effect size or magnitude of the standardized difference between the means of some distributions of the studied variables). The analysis of the normality condition was tested by means of the indicators skewness and kurtosis distribution shape. The homogeneity of the values on the basis of which the means were calculated at the level of the studied variables was verified by applying the Levene test and the Hartley FMax report.

3. Results

For the HiPIC test, the data reported by the parent who meets the criterion of frequency of interaction with the assessed child, i.e. the resident parent, were processed and analyzed. More specifically, the concrete data reported in the HiPIC personality test are presented in Fig.1 to support and highlight the existence of disorders in GCD children.

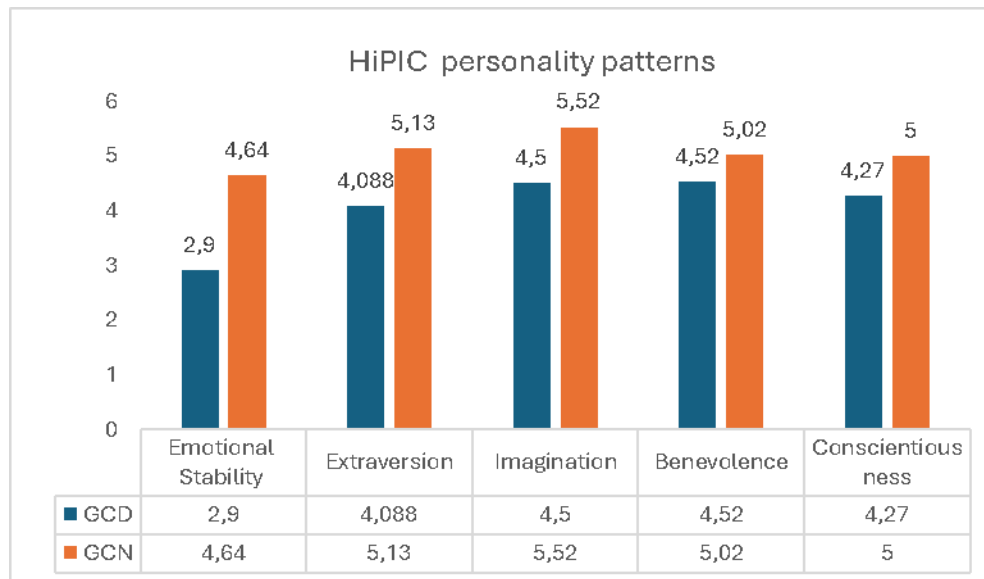


Figure 1. Mean HiPIC personality pattern scores for GCD and GCN

We note that the mean GCN scores on all test scales are higher than on the GCD. The mean of the GCD and GCN scores, when statistically processed, gave us the statistically significant difference between these groups, as revealed below. Comparison of personality traits for HiPIC, using the independent samples t-test, revealed that: children from families with divorced parents had significantly lower scores on the *Emotional Stability* scales ($t(226) = 8.29, p < .001, d = 1.10$), *Extraversion* ($t(226) = 5.06, p < .001, d = 0.67$), *Imagination* ($t(226) = 5.01, p < .001, d = 0.67$), *Benevolence* ($t(226) = 2.02, p = .045, d = 0.27$) and *Conscientiousness* ($t(226) = 3.77, p < .001, d = 0.50$), compared to children from non-divorced families, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of personality and emotional traits in HiPIC for GCD and GCN

Independent Samples T-Test		Statistic	df	p	Effect S
Stabilitate Emotionala	Student's t	8.29	226.00	<.001	Cohen's d 1.1
Extraversie	Student's t	5.06	226.00	<.001	Cohen's d 0.6
Imaginatie	Student's t	5.01	226.00	<.001	Cohen's d 0.6
Benevolenta	Student's t	2.02	226.00	0.045	Cohen's d 0.2
Constiinciozitate	Student's t	3.77 ^a	226.00	<.001	Cohen's d 0.5

Although not used as an instrument to describe the nature and severity of personality pathology at an early age, the results reported for the *Emotional Stability* scale highlight that the abilities of children whose parents are going through a divorce to cope with anxious and stressful situations are lower than those in complete families. They think they cannot cope, remain inert in the face of adversity and are unable to make decisions on their own. They complain quite easily and are often seen by others as dependent, insecure and angry children.

From the perspective of the *Extraversion* scale, which describes the frequency and intensity of emotionally positive and energetic social interaction of the child, in the case of children with divorced parents, significantly lower scores than those in organized families reflect their tendency to stay aloof, not to stand out and actively seek to interact with children, finding it difficult to integrate into a group of friends.

The results obtained on the *Imagination* scale also reveal characteristics that imply a lack of imagination and difficulties in thinking in abstract terms, limiting children from divorced families to approach the problems they face through a single strategy and not from several angles, a safe and reliable strategy that can lead to a lack of inner awareness.

As regards the *Conscientiousness* scale, the significantly low level obtained by children from divorced families highlights their difficulties in persevering and concentrating in order to achieve good results in the activity, needing continuous encouragement and supervision.

In conclusion, the personality characteristics of children from divorced families showed statistically significant differences, with lower scores on the personality patterns Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Imagination and Conscientiousness compared to the results reported for children from non-divorced families. The presence of personality disorders in preadolescents with divorced parents was revealed by comparison with preadolescents whose parents are together in the case of the HiPIC test, with scores on the Emotional Stability, Extraversion, Imagination and Conscientiousness scales showing statistically significantly smaller differences. The ability of children whose parents are going through a divorce to cope with anxious and stressful situations is lower, they tend to be dependent, insecure and angry. Therefore, the HiPIC test also confirms the hypothesis of the research phase.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The present study investigated the relationships between personality patterns in children in the family context of divorce on the one hand, and the relationships between personality patterns in children in non-divorced families, on the other hand. Consistent with the hypothesis, the results showed statistically significant differences in children's developmental personality characteristics according to family environment.

The significant scores obtained on the scales for children going through parental divorce may be explained by the environment often defined by tensions and conflicts, often presented as uncaring

and hostile, which leads to hypersensitive manifestations, limited ability to experience pleasure, hostile, aggressive actions, limited coping resources, vulnerability to anxiety, depression and emotional tension. The significantly higher values recorded in preadolescents from divorced families can be explained by the very characteristics of the scales (Emotional Stability, Extraversion), which are conceptualized as presenting a conflict of the self/other polarity, the orientation towards others to obtain the reinforcement and security they need being omnipresent in these preadolescents.

Children feel a strong internal conflict, which causes them to choose between being obedient, adapted to the needs of others and provocative by expressing autonomy. On the surface, they seem to solve this conflict through obedience, in the context of the divorce, shown to the parent with whom they live, but at a deep level, they feel anger and resentment. Behind the apparent compliance there are intense desires to rebel and assert one's self-oriented impulses and emotions (Janovsky et al., 2020). Consistent with other studies exploring the impact of divorce on children's development, the results of the present study emphasize the effect of separation in families with children, from the perspective of how parents manage the separation. This can cause disturbances that affect the functionality and psycho-emotional development of the child with effects that can accompany the individual throughout his life. Children may feel a loss of reference, realizing that life will not get better, witnessing the deterioration of family relationships and experiencing strong additional stress that makes them feel overwhelmed (Calvete et al., 2020). Divorce generates unhealthy behavioral responses. For example, fear of abandonment, loneliness and emotional deprivation are easily triggered by separation experiences and may increase the level of conflict between partners as a way of protecting themselves from negative emotional states (Mc Donnell et al., 2018).

Personality development characterized by severe distress and persistent psychological pain is usually associated with a history of abuse and neglect. Children experience consistent family conflict that has a profound negative effect on developing personality traits and contributes to emotional instability, unpredictable behaviors, dysfunctional thoughts, and identity confusion (Klein et al., 2022). From a practical point of view, these results highlight the factors on which psychological interventions should focus to alleviate post-divorce problems to lessen the impact on children.

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