

Self-concept and social anxiety as predictor variables of academic performance of Spanish adolescents with divorced parents

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Abstract

Introduction. According to previous studies, when parents divorce it may increase the vulnerability of children to develop personal problems, such as lowering academic performance. This research examines the academic performance of Spanish children with divorced parents and its relation to academic self-concept and social anxiety.

Method. The sample includes 342 boys and girls aged between 14 and 18 years, half ($n = 171$) with divorced parents, recruited from 15 schools in five counties of Spain. Participants provided information on the number of their courses evaluated as Excellent and Failure and completed the academic dimension of the Self-Description Questionnaire II and the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents.

Results. Compared to youth whose parents are living together, the results confirm that youth whose parents are divorced (a) failed more examinations, and (b) had a worse academic self-concept. A multiple regression analysis revealed that it is more likely to drop for adolescent children of divorced parents who are male, older, have worse school self-concept, and live with a stepparent.

Discussion. Parental divorce is related to a worse academic performance in the Spanish adolescents. The findings suggest the importance of detecting, from the educational field, school problems in those adolescents whose parents have divorced to prevent the school failure and other associated problems.

Keywords: Academic performance, academic self-concept, social anxiety, Spanish adolescents, divorced parents

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Autoconcepto y ansiedad social como variables predictoras del rendimiento académico de los adolescentes españoles con padres divorciados

Resumen

Introducción. Estudios previos indican que el divorcio de los padres puede aumentar la vulnerabilidad de los hijos a desarrollar determinados problemas personales, como bajo rendimiento académico. El presente estudio examina el rendimiento académico de los adolescentes españoles con padres divorciados y su relación con el autoconcepto y la ansiedad social.

Método. La muestra está formada por 342 adolescentes con edades comprendidas entre 14 y 18 años, la mitad de ellos con padres divorciados, reclutados de 15 colegios ubicados en cinco provincias españolas. Los participantes informaron del número de sobresalientes y suspensos obtenidos y completaron el Cuestionario de Autoconcepto y la Escala de Ansiedad Social para Adolescentes.

Resultados. Los resultados indican que, en comparación con los adolescentes con padres divorciados, los que tenían padres casados (a) obtenían más suspensos, y (b) tenían un peor autoconcepto académico. El análisis de regresión múltiple reveló que los adolescentes con padres divorciados que tenían más probabilidad de obtener calificaciones de suspenso eran los varones, más mayores, con peor autoconcepto, y que vivían con la nueva pareja de la madre o padre.

Discusión. Se confirma que el divorcio de los padres se relaciona en los adolescentes españoles con peor rendimiento académico. Los hallazgos sugieren la importancia de detectar, desde el ámbito educativo, problemas escolares en los adolescentes cuyos padres se han divorciado con el objetivo de prevenir el fracaso escolar y otros problemas asociados.

Palabras Clave: Rendimiento académico, autoconcepto, ansiedad social, adolescentes españoles, padres divorciados.

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Introduction

Since 1981, when Spanish law changed to permit divorce, the number of marital breakups has increased considerably. Spain became in one of the last European countries to codify such a law, after an extended period when marriages could not be dissolved. The reform of the law in 2005 contributed to a still larger number of divorces, because from that moment it was not necessary to have an official separation before the divorce, the causes underlying separation and divorce are no longer required, and the minimum period necessary in order to request a divorce was reduced to three months from the marriage. Along with Belgium and Hungary, Spain is one of the European countries with the highest numbers of divorces; with two breakups for every three marriages they celebrate (Institute for Families Policies, 2010). The increase of the relationship breakups and the new models of family functioning have generated the need to conduct research examining how divorce affects Spanish children in order to develop strategies and support programs. Divorce represents a change in the structure and functioning of the family that may significantly affect minor children (Sandler, Tein, Mehta, Wolchik & Ayers, 2000). Parental divorce has been linked in studies with Spanish samples to some problems, such as the separation anxiety disorder (Orgilés, Espada, & Méndez, 2007), school fears (Orgilés, Espada, Méndez, & García-Fernández, 2007), or behaviour problems (Cantón, Cortés, & Justicia, 2002). Several studies confirm minor academic impairments in children with divorced parents than those with intact families (Martinez & Forgatch, 2002; Potter, 2010; Tillman, 2007), but most evidence has come from research conducted in the United States. Previous studies suggested that the effect of divorce can be moderated by certain variables, such as the degree of conflict between parents (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010) or living with a stepmother or stepfather (Klomegah, 2007). Potter (2010) suggests that the association between parental divorce and a decrease in the psychosocial well-being in children helps explain the relation between divorce and lower academic yield.

Often associated with academic performance in studies with general population are the academic self-concept and social anxiety. Marsh and Shavelson (1985) defined the self-concept as the perception of each one has about him or herself. The self-concept is still under active development during adolescence and depends, among other factors as peers, on the family environment. Academic self-concept has been used as a predictor of academic performance in adolescents (Boulter, 2002; Guay, Larose, & Boivin, 2004), and may have the greatest weight in explaining the success or failure in school (Marsh & Yeung, 1997). Com-

pared to children from non-divorced parents, some studies have shown that children with divorced parents have significantly lower scores in self-concept (e.g., Sweeney & Bracken, 2000; Evans, Kelley, & Wanner, 2001). Another factor that may influence academic outcomes, but not yet studied in children with divorced parents, is social anxiety. Social anxiety is one of the most common problem in adolescents and can be defined as an intense fear of social situations and a frequent attempt to avoid them. As the teenagers gain greater autonomy from their parents, relationships with peers and with the opposite sex attain importance, especially the social competence and the fear of negative evaluation (Inglés, 2003). Previous studies with adolescents in the general population have shown that social anxiety leads to lower participation in the classroom, resulting in the dropout or low academic performance (Francis & Radka, 1995). The need to obtain good education test results is also a source of stress for the teenagers, who often express anxiety before evaluative situations (Onyeizugbo, 2010). Adolescents who report more positive relationships use to exhibit higher levels of psychological well-being (Chow, 2010). Success in interpersonal relationships is positively related to school adaptation and academic performance, while difficulties in interpersonal relationships and social anxiety are associated with deteriorating academic yield (Inglés, 2003). The relationship between academic performance and social anxiety is not as conclusive in children with divorced parents, since there have been found no studies about this topic with adolescent population.

Objectives

The high rate of divorce and the important repercussions of dropout on adolescents, coupled with a paucity of Spanish studies directly examining these variables, make an investigation of these issues quite timely. The purpose of this research is to analyze how academic success may relate to academic self-concept and social anxiety in adolescents with divorced parents. Firstly, it is examined differences in academic performance, self-concept and social anxiety in function of having divorced or married parents. Secondly, the association of academic performance with social anxiety, self-concept and some individual and family variables is examined in adolescents with divorced parents. In addition, it is analyzed the best predictors for the number of courses evaluated by teachers as Failure.

Method

Participants

To recruit the sample, 15 schools from five counties of Spain were contacted. Three schools were selected in northern Spain, three in central area of the country, two in the east, four in the southeast, and three in the southern Spain. Of the 15 schools, nine were in coastal area and the rest in the interior. We included schools located in rural and urban areas. The principals of schools and parents of the students offered their consent for the study. Those adolescents whose parents gave written informed consent (approximately 99% of the total) were given the questionnaires. The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the institution.

Of the 1,216 adolescents, aged between 14 and 18 years, who completed the tests, 20% had divorced parents. We excluded children living in single-parent families due to different causes of parents' divorce, such as being orphans or children who have never known her/his father. The sample finally included 171 participants with divorced parents (14% from the total). For the comparison group a matched sample by age, gender, socioeconomic level and geographic location of 171 adolescents were randomly selected from the total of the participants with married parents who completed the surveys. All children were Spanish.

The group of teenagers with divorced parents had a mean age of 15.80 years ($SD = 0.76$), 42% boys ($n = 72$) and 58% girls ($n = 99$). The average age at the parents' divorce was 7.81 years ($SD = 4.22$), with a range of 0 to 17 years. In the large majority of cases, the mother had custody (87% vs. 6% for fathers); custody is shared in 5% of cases and for the last 2% of cases, other family members, usually grandparents, has the custody of the adolescents. Of the children with divorced parents, 15% lived with their mother or father and with a step-parent. In addition, 44% indicated that siblings lived at home. The relationship between the divorced parents was perceived as good, that is, without conflict, for the 72% of adolescents; 19% of the participants considered it nonexistent (i.e., they claim that there is no contact between their parents), whereas 9% defined the relationship as conflictive. The group of participants who came from intact families consisted of 171 adolescents with an average age of 15.91 years ($SD = 0.77$), of whom 37% were boys ($n = 64$) and 63% ($n = 107$) were girls.

Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires collectively in classrooms, in groups of 20 to 30 students, counterbalancing the order of the questionnaires. The written instructions were also

read aloud and any questions were answered. An envelope was provided to each participant to put their questionnaire after completing it, a measure taken to reassure participants of the privacy and anonymity of their replies.

Instruments

Information concerning demographic variables and variables related to the family situation of each adolescent was collected with questionnaires. To examine *academic performance* information on the number of courses evaluated as Excellent and as Failure was requested. A *failure* obtained in an exam means that the student has not achieved the objectives of his/her level, with a score lower than 5 on the scale. The highest rate, *excellent*, is 9 or more points on the scale and means brilliant mastery of the subject. The current study used both the number of Excellent and the number of Failures as dependent variables, due to consider that these are the academic results more informative (e.g., Inglés, 2009).

Academic self-concept was evaluated via the Self-Description Questionnaire II, brief (SDQ; Marsh, 1989; Marsh, Relich & Smith, 1983). We used only the mathematical, verbal and school self-concept subscales, which are the only academic dimensions in this scale. The Spanish version of the SDQ was developed using the back-translation method. The items were translated from English into Spanish and then translated back into English, in both cases by an English native speaker. Both versions were compared in order to prove that there were not significant differences between them. Validated with the Spanish sample, the questionnaire maintained its good psychometric properties, the scale had a satisfactory reliability, $\alpha = .82$, adequate factorial validity, and appropriate convergent and discriminant validity (e.g., mean $r = .35$ for academic dimensions related to academic achievement, and mean $r = .05$ with scales measuring anxiety and sensation seeking).

The Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised (SAS-A) (La Greca & Stone, 1993) in its adaptation for Spanish adolescents (La Greca & López, 1998) was applied to assess social anxiety. This instrument has 22 items, of which 18 are self-statements (for example, “I feel that others make fun of me”) and the rest are filler items (for example, “I like to play sports”). Response options follow a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 5 (true all the time). The scale includes three subscales: Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE), Social Avoidance and Distress specific to New situations or unfamiliar peers (SAD-New) and Social Avoidance and Distress experienced in the company of peers (SAD-General). The scores

range from 1 to 90 for the total score, from 1 to 40 for the FNE subscale, $\alpha = .84$, from 1 to 30 for the SAD-N subscale, $\alpha = .79$, and from 1 to 20 for the SAD-G subscale, $\alpha = .72$. Reliabilities were very good, with $\alpha = .84$ in the total sample and $\alpha = .86$ in the subsample of children with divorced parents.

Data analysis

Differences between adolescents with divorced parents versus those with married parents were examined using a t-test for a comparison between two independent samples. The relation between social anxiety, self-concept and the academic performance of adolescents with divorced parents was assessed by two separate univariate regression analyses. One analysis used as dependent variable the number of courses evaluated with Excellent and another considering as dependent variable the number of courses evaluated as Failure. Finally, a model including simultaneous variable was conducted in order to be able to control for all the significant moderators and their interactions to assess the best model which explains the academic performance in terms of number of courses graded as Failure.

Results

Differences between adolescents with divorced and married parents

The teenagers whose parents were divorced have significantly more courses evaluated as Failure than those whose parents were not divorced ($p < .05$, $t = -2.44$, $d = 0.27$). They also have significantly worse self-concept than those from intact families, a difference that appears for school sub-scale ($p < .05$, $t = -2.06$, $d = -0.22$) (Table 1). No significant differences between the two groups appear either on the total score of Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents or any subscale. Participant's region or schools did not affect results, so there were not differences between rural and urban schools or relating to the area (northern, central, eastern, southeast and southern Spain).

Table 1. Differences on Academic Success, Academic Self-Concept, and Social Anxiety for Adolescents whose Parents Are Divorced Versus Not Divorced (N = 342)

		Parental status				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
		Divorced (n = 171)		Not divorced (n = 171)				
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Academic success	Number of courses evaluated as Failure	1.67	(2.10)	1.13	(1.92)	-2.44	.015	0.27
	Number of courses evaluated as Excellent	1.26	(1.73)	1.59	(2.30)	1.51	.13	-0.16
Academic self-concept	School	11.67	(4.07)	12.57	(4.02)	-2.059	.040	-0.22
	Math	12.43	(6.52)	13.04	(5.57)	-0.93	.35	-0.100
	Verbal	17.49	(6.54)	17.97	(6.65)	-0.67	.50	-0.072
Social anxiety	FNE	19.20	(5.97)	18.88	(6.11)	-0.49	.62	-0.053
	SAD-New	14.27	(4.25)	14.77	(4.74)	1.021	.31	0.11
	SAD-G	7.19	(2.62)	7.60	(3.03)	1.35	.18	0.14
	Total score	40.66	(11.03)	41.25	(12.27)	0.47	.64	0.051

FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; SAD-New = Social Avoidance and Distress in New Situations; SAD-G = Social Avoidance and Distress experienced Generally; *d* = Hedges's standardized mean difference (corrected for sample size) using the pooled standard deviation.

Divorce and Academic Performance

The academic performance of teenagers with divorced parents was regressed on age, gender, academic self-concept, social anxiety, time elapsed since the marital breakup of their parents, living with stepparents, and perceived quality of the relationship between their parents (see Table 2). The analysis in terms of age shows that as older the teenager is higher is the number of courses with Failures. Significant differences were found in the number of courses evaluated as Failure in terms of gender, so boys fail more courses ($M = 2.31$; $SD = 2.49$) than girls ($M = 1.28$; $SD = 1.73$). We found no significant differences in the number of outstanding either by gender or age. The results reveal that self-concept was related to the academic performance. As worse self-concept the adolescent has higher is the number of Failures, and as better self-concept he/she has higher is the number of Excellents. Social anxiety does not influence either the number of Failures or the number of Excellents obtained ($p > .05$).

The time elapsed since the separation of parents was not related to academic performance, either in the number of failed courses or the number of excellent courses ($p > .05$). Nei-

ther the quality of the relationship between parents perceived by their children, nor having siblings or living with a stepparent influence either on the number of failed courses or the excellent scores obtained.

Table 2. Academic performance as a function of the sample characteristics for adolescents whose parents were divorced ($N = 171$)

Moderator variables		Academic performance			
		Number of courses evaluated as Failure		Number of courses evaluated as Excellent	
		β^a	p	β^a	p
Age		.23	.002	-.11	.16
Female ^b		-.23	.002	.14	.075
Academic self-concept	School	-.42	.000	.44	.000
	Math	-.25	.001	.28	.000
	Verbal	-.25	.001	.35	.000
Social Anxiety	FNE	-.11	.17	.028	.71
	SAD-New	-.10	.203	.043	.58
	SAD-G	.049	.527	-.069	.37
	Total score	-.084	.277	.015	.84
Variables related to the parents' divorce	Time since parents' divorce	.092	.23	-.013	.86
	Quality of the actual relationships between parents	.025	.75	.022	.77
	Living with a stepparent	-.15	.06	.010	.93
	Having siblings ^b	-.041	.60	.087	.26

FNE = Fear of Negative Evaluation; SAD-New = Social Avoidance and Distress in New Situations; SAD-G = Social Avoidance and Distress experienced Generally; ^aWith positive values implying higher performance. ^bMale coded as 0, female coded as 1; Having siblings coded as 0, not having coded as 1.

Prediction of number of courses evaluated as Failure

A multiple regression analysis was carried out to explain what variables affect the number of failed exams in adolescents whose parents are divorced. The best predictors are gender, age, living with a stepparent, and school self-concept explaining 28% of the variance (adjusted R^2). According to the model obtained, the number of Failures is higher in male adolescents, older, with worse school self-concept, and living with a stepparent.

Table 3. Predictors of the number of Failures in adolescents whose parents are divorced (N = 171)

Predictors	Number of courses evaluated as Failure	
	β	<i>p</i>
Male ^a	-.22	.003
Age	.19	.009
Self-concept	-.40	.001
Living with a stepparent ^b	-.77	.007

^aMale coded as 0, female coded as 1; ^bLiving with a stepparent coded as 0, not living coded as 1.

Discussion and conclusions

The current study examines the variables related to academic performance in Spanish adolescents with divorced parents. Firstly, differences were evaluated in function of family structure. Significant differences were not found in the number of courses evaluated as Excellent, but as expected, adolescents with divorced parents obtained more courses graded as Failure than those who live with both parents. This finding is in accord with previous studies indicating that children with divorced parents have a worse academic performance than those with parents living together (e.g. Tillman, 2007). Adolescents with divorced parents have also poorer academic self-concept, so they perceive themselves less competent in situations related to this area. These results are consistent with international prior research that has shown that the self-concept in children with divorced parents is lower than the self-concept of those who come from intact families (e.g., Sweeney & Bracken, 2000). However, despite the expectation of a differential effect between children with divorced and non-divorced parents in social anxiety, no statistically significant differences were found. Unfortunately no studies have been carried out relating social anxiety in children and parental divorce, so our results cannot be compared to previous evidence. After the divorce of parents, children face new social situations arising from the various changes that take place after the breakup of the couple. They often change their home, school, and neighborhood and sometimes even city, and facing new social situations with friends, classmates, neighbors, friends of their parents, and so on. Although it is not clear, the exposure of adolescents with divorced parents to a greater variety of social environments might well lessen anxiety to interact socially, so unexpectedly their scores in social anxiety did not differ significantly from the group with non-divorced parents.

One of the main aims of this study was to explain the academic achievement in children with divorced parents. The results of the multiple regression analysis show that the best predictors to the number of courses evaluated as Failure are gender, age, living with a step-parent, and school self-concept. Boys obtained more Failures than girls, according to earlier international research showing that academic achievement is higher among girls than boys with divorced parents, and that boys experience more academic problems than girls after the divorce of their parents (Elder & Russell, 1996; Kaye, 1989). It is possible, as Nielsen (1999) suggests, that boys have more exposure to the effects of divorce than do girls because divorced mothers tend to make more derogatory comments about the former spouse than do divorced fathers; Nielsen (1999) maintains that divorced mothers use their sons as confidants and take them into a protective role, which interferes with paternal relationships. When the father and children do not maintain an often contact after divorce, Nielsen predicts more academic, social, sexual, emotional or psychological problems for boys than girls. The current research's age-related finding was that older teenagers with divorced parents obtain more Failures than younger adolescents. Although the reason is not clear, it is suggested that the level of demand in advanced grades is greater, so it seems logical that the older get more failing marks. In addition, school failure increases with age, and in the final years of the compulsory education, the number of teenagers who do not wish to continue studies and that expect to complete in order to begin to work is higher. Consistent with previous findings with general population (Boulter, 2002; Guay et al., 2004) the number of courses evaluated as Failure is also related to academic self-concept. As expected, the relation between academic self-concept and academic achievement found in numerous studies with general population occurs in adolescents with divorced parents. Our findings also show that teenagers obtained more Failures when they lived with one parent and his/her new partner, consistent with results from earlier research. Amato and Keith's meta-analysis (1991) revealed that children living in step-families show a lower level of academic achievement, compared to children living with both parents. Amato and Keith maintained that the relationship of parents with new partners is stressful for children because it often involves a change of home to a new neighborhood or city, and the need to adapt to new routines and rules. Relationships with stepparents is a source of stress for many children (Amato & Sobolewski, 2001) and as a response, children, especially adolescents, react with hostility and rejection. Finally, while social anxiety has been linked to poor academic performance in general population (e.g., Van Amerigen, Mancini & Farvolden, 2003), this relation has not been found in our sample of adolescents

with divorced parents, contrary to expected. The lack of previous studies focus on adolescents with divorced parents difficult to contrast these results.

There are some limitations to our research. The main limitation is that the results are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. Besides, due to the sample size of the children with parents divorced, we could not develop a complete explanatory model of the academic performance and the family structure. Further studies with larger samples are needed to achieve that objective. The study has also some strengths and important conclusions. First, it is confirmed for the first time with a Spanish sample that adolescents with divorced parents have more Failures than those whose parents were living together, and that their academic self-concept is also worse, probably the result of their worst academic results. Regardless the novelty of the divorce law in Spain, approved in 1981, and its social acceptance, such findings suggest that children with divorced parents have similar experience than those found in families from other countries where divorce is less recent. Our attempt to examine the relation between parental divorce and academic performance, self-concept and social anxiety only reveals few significant differences with low effect size indexes, suggesting that adolescents with divorced and non-divorced parents are more similar than different in these variables. Secondly, for the first time it is examined the self-concept and social anxiety as predictor variables of Failures in adolescents with divorced parents. Educational implications of these findings are clear. Despite few differences were found in some variables, adolescents with divorced parents have more Failures than those living with both parents, so they seem to be more likely to have a worse academic performance. It is suggested the importance of detecting as soon as possible, from the educational field, school problems in adolescents with divorced parents to prevent the school failure and other associated problems, such as a low academic self-concept.

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