

College students from families of divorce: keys to their resilience

Anne McIntyre^{a,*}, Reva L. Heron^{a,1}, Michael D. McIntyre^b,
Shacunda J. Burton^a, Jennifer N. Engler^a

^a*Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee, 307 Austin Pey Building, Knoxville, TN 37996-0900, USA*

^b*Department of Management, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, USA*

Abstract

College students from divorce families are noted for resilience to adjustment problems yet vulnerability to distress. We studied the impact of parental divorce and two personality characteristics (social responsibility and other-direction) on college students' adjustment problems and distress. Participants ($N=197$) were 105 college students with divorced parents and 92 whose parental marriages were intact. The personality characteristics were measured with the Social Responsibility Scale and the Other-Direction subscale of the Personal Behavior Inventory. Adjustment problems and distress were measured with the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R). Analyses indicated that all three predictor variables (parental divorce, social responsibility, and other-direction) were significantly associated with adjustment problems and distress. Parental divorce, however, was also related to higher social responsibility and lower other-direction, and this combination of personality characteristics was shown to reduce the relationship of divorce to adjustment problems but not to experienced distress. Results are discussed in the context of response to the social demands of college life.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-865-974-6843.

E-mail address: amcintyr@utk.edu (A. McIntyre).

¹ Now at Corazon Behavioral Health Services, Los Alamos, NM.

1. Introduction

College students who were children of divorce are notably resilient because, unlike younger children with divorced parents and adults who experienced parental divorce during their childhoods, they do not manifest more symptoms of adjustment problems than their peers from intact marriages do. Adjustment problems associated with parental divorce have been well documented for childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (see reviews by Amato, 2000; Kelly, 1998).

Yet numerous studies that have expected adjustment problems among late-adolescent college students from families of divorce have failed to find them (e.g., Grant, Smith, Sinclair, & Salts, 1993; Nelson, Hughes, Handal, Katz, & Searight, 1993; Weiner, Harlow, Adams, & Grebstein, 1995). Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000), who specifically noted the resilience of college students from families of divorce, also failed to find more symptoms of adjustment problems among students from divorce families than other college students. They did find, however, that these students reported more distress than their peers from intact parental marriages. Amato and Booth (1991) reported similar findings for distress from a national sample of adults but found that the differences were weak and attributable to those from higher stress parental divorces. The issues over which Laumann-Billings and Emery found distress differences among college students were family issues from both the past and present. They interpreted the greater distress of students from divorce families as evidence that even these resilient youth do manifest subtle negative sequelae of parental divorce. College students from families of divorce may be vulnerable to distress although they are remarkably resilient to adjustment problems.

What accounts for the resilience to adjustment problems manifested by college students from divorce families? We wondered if these students have personality characteristics that equip them particularly well for adjustment to the challenges of college life. We also wondered if adjustment problems associated with parental divorce are not observed in comparisons of global adjustment because such (college-pertinent) personality characteristics mask such problems. In other words, college students from divorce families may have adjustment problems associated with their parents' divorces that are not apparent in global adjustment comparisons with their peers because of the advantages such personality characteristics convey to them for adjustment to stresses in college life. Here we explored these questions with a cross-sectional design by searching for personality characteristics both associated with better adjustment among all college students and more frequent among those who had been children of divorce.

The literature, in fact, offered little to guide our search. Studies of personality characteristics associated with children's adjustment to parental divorce largely seem to have compared poorly adjusted children to adequately adjusted children in divorce families. That is, they focused on within-divorce group comparisons. Personality characteristics of children of divorce and intact marriages have not been compared. This is the critical comparison if parental divorce leads to increases in particular areas that create resilience. That is, a between-groups comparison is necessary if one suspects that some children of divorce may have personality assets that were actually generated by their experiences associated with parental divorce.

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