



Suicidal ideation among individuals whose parents have divorced: Findings from a representative Canadian community survey

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 March 2010

Received in revised form 26 November 2010

Accepted 2 December 2010

Keywords:

Childhood stressors

Parental divorce

Gender

Suicidal ideation

Offspring

Adverse childhood experiences

Suicidal behaviors

ABSTRACT

This study used a large, nationally representative sample to examine the gender-specific association between parental divorce and the cumulative lifetime incidence of suicidal ideation. Known risk factors for suicidal ideation, such as childhood stressors, socioeconomic factors, adult health behaviors and stressors, marital status, and any history of mood and/or anxiety disorders were controlled. Gender-specific analyses revealed that for men, the parental divorce–suicidal ideation relationship remained statistically significant even when the above-listed cluster of risk factors were included in the analyses (odds ratio (OR) = 2.36, 95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.56, 3.58). For women, the association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation was reduced to non-significance when other adverse childhood experiences were included in the analyses (full adjustment OR = 1.04, 95% CI = 0.72, 1.50). These findings indicate a need for screening of suicidal ideation among individuals, particularly men and those with mood and/or anxiety disorders, who have experienced parental divorce. Future research should focus on the mechanisms linking parental divorce and suicidal ideation.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Parental divorce

A number of studies have examined the effects of childhood parental divorce on adult well-being. The purpose of this study is to examine the gender-specific association between parental divorce and the cumulative lifetime incidence of suicidal ideation in a population-based sample.

Parental divorce in childhood is associated with a number of adverse mental health issues in adulthood. Adult children of divorced parents experience higher psychological distress than their peers with non-separated parents (Rodgers et al., 1997; Storksen et al., 2007), regardless of the child's age at the time of the parent's divorce (Rodgers et al., 1997). Of particular concern, adults who experienced parental divorce are at risk for suicidal attempts and ideation (de Goede and Spruijt, 1996; D'Onofrio et al., 2006; Donald et al., 2006; Park et al., 2006; Hardt et al., 2008; Lizardi et al., 2009).

1.2. Suicidality: attempts and ideation

Suicidality encompasses suicide completion, suicide attempts, and suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation is a risk factor for, and often

precedes, suicidal attempts (Brezo et al., 2006; Nock et al., 2008). Previous links have been found between parental divorce and *suicide attempts*. For example, using a clinical sample, Hardt et al. (2008) reported that those who had experienced parental separation or divorce were more likely to attempt suicide than those who had not experienced this childhood stressor. Gender-specific analyses were not conducted. Lizardi et al.'s (2009) large, population-based study reported that individuals with a history of parental divorce had almost twice the odds of attempting suicide during their lifetime (unadjusted odds = 1.95, confidence interval (CI) = 1.58–2.40) than those with no history of parental divorce. This association decreased but remained significant even when sociodemographic factors and parental depression were controlled (adjusted odds = 1.33, CI = 1.06–1.67). Gender-specific analyses conducted in Lizardi et al.'s (2009) study revealed that both males and females who had experienced parental divorce had elevated unadjusted odds of lifetime suicide attempts in comparison to their same-sex peers. However, only females but not males had statistically significant odds of suicide attempts once parental depression and sociodemographic variables were controlled (O.R. = 1.50 and 1.01 respectively). In sharp contrast to these findings, Donald et al.'s (2006) case–control study found that males who had experienced parental divorce had ten times the odds of attempting suicide compared to their male peers who had not experienced parental divorce. For females, the association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation was not statistically significant (Donald et al., 2006). The different outcomes between Lizardi and colleagues' and Donald and colleagues' studies may stem from differing control

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variables. Both Lizardi et al. (2009) and Donald et al. (2006) controlled for parental divorce, sex, ethnicity, and marital status. However, Lizardi and colleagues controlled for age, family income, parental depression, and sex of the parent the respondent lived with following the divorce, while Donald and colleagues did not. Control of any of these factors could contribute to the conflicting findings.

Other childhood adversities may play a role in the link between parental divorce and *suicide attempts*. Afifi et al.'s (2009) population-based data indicate that parental divorce in the absence of childhood abuse is not significantly associated with lifetime suicide attempts nor suicidal ideation. However, for individuals who experienced both parental divorce and abuse during childhood, the odds of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were more than twice that of their peers who experienced neither of these childhood stressors. Thus, other factors may contribute to a link between parental divorce and suicide attempts. Afifi et al.'s analyses were also adjusted for sociodemographic characteristics.

When *suicidal ideation*, as opposed to suicidal attempts, was examined, most studies also report a strong link with parental divorce. D'Onofrio et al. (2006) found that parental divorce in childhood increases the risk of ever having experienced suicidal ideation. Additionally, the increase in suicidal ideation was accompanied by an increased risk for depressed mood (D'Onofrio et al., 2006). This increased risk of suicidal ideation following parental divorce has been shown elsewhere (de Goede and Spruijt, 1996; Park et al., 2006), however, gender-specific analyses reveal conflicting results. Park et al. (2006) found an increased risk of suicidal ideation in male but not female South Korean adolescents following parental divorce. However, de Goede and Spruijt's (1996) analysis of 18–24 year olds found increases in suicidal ideation among females but not males of divorced families. Thus, the gender-specific effects of parental divorce on offspring's suicidal ideation are not clear nor do we understand the mechanisms underlying these associations.

Levant's (1996) research examining the male gender role may provide insight into gender differences in suicidal ideation in adult children of divorce. Levant proposes that during childhood, boys experience male gender role socialization processes that can influence later life through gender role conflict (Levant, 1996). Fatherhood plays a key role in male gender role development (Levant, 1996). Furthermore, Jakupcak et al. (2003) suggests that emotional regulation in men is related to masculine ideology and masculine gender role stress, which are developed, in part, during childhood (Levant, 1996) and are therefore vulnerable to modeling from parents, specifically fathers.

Gender role conflict has been associated with mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Levant, 1996). The vast majority of divorced children are raised by their mothers and many children have limited or no contact with their fathers (Cooney, 1994). Thus, we anticipate that males may be more vulnerable to suicidal ideation and other problems related to parental divorce than females.

In order to effectively determine the independent association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation, it is important to consider other factors which may play a role in the relationship. We hypothesize that the parental divorce–suicidal ideation link may be explained by the following cluster of risk factors 1) other childhood adversities; 2) adult socioeconomic status; 3) adult stressors and marital status; 4) health behaviors; 5) mental health.

- 1) *Other childhood adversities*: Parental divorce is associated with other childhood adversities such as parental addiction, parental unemployment, and childhood physical abuse (Turner et al., 2007). In turn, childhood adversities are associated with elevated rates of suicidal ideation (e.g. Park et al., 2006).
- 2) *Adult socioeconomic status*: Students who experience parental divorce in childhood are more likely to experience academic problems in school (Storksen et al., 2006), are less likely to

complete high school (Zill et al., 1993; Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994) or attend college (Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994), and have lower rates of college or university graduation (Huurre et al., 2006) resulting in lower education levels in adulthood (Keith and Finlay, 1988; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999; Martin et al., 2005; Huurre et al., 2006). Concomitantly, children of divorced parents are at increased risk of unemployment (Furstenberg and Teitler, 1994; Huurre et al., 2006) and earn less in adulthood (Ross and Mirowsky, 1999) than their peers who were did not have divorced parents. In the general population, risk of suicidal ideation is associated with lower education levels (Nock et al., 2008) and financial hardship (Vilhjalmsson et al., 1998).

- 3) *Adult stressors and marital status*: Parental divorce is associated with a variety of negative physical health outcomes (Amato and Keith, 1991). Those who experience stress (Vilhjalmsson et al., 1998) and multiple chronic conditions (Vilhjalmsson et al., 1998) have increased risk of suicidal ideation.

Adult children of divorced parents are less likely to be married or be in common law relationships (Huurre et al., 2006; Storksen et al., 2007). Divorce rates are higher among those who have divorced parents (Keith and Finlay, 1988; Amato, 1996; Ross and Mirowsky, 1999; Huurre et al., 2006). In turn, being unmarried (Pirkis et al., 2000; Nock et al., 2008) is associated with higher rates of suicidal ideation in the general population.

- 4) *Health behaviors*: Rates of cigarette smoking and heavy alcohol consumption are higher among those who have experienced parental divorce (Huurre et al., 2006; Kestilä et al., 2006). The parental divorce–obesity link is less clear, where some studies suggest that parental divorce is a risk factor for obesity (Yannakouli et al., 2008) while others find no association between the two factors (Kestilä et al., 2009). Increased odds of suicidal ideation are related to substance use disorders (Pirkis et al., 2000; Sareen et al., 2005; Nock et al., 2008) in both genders. Higher body mass indexes (BMI) in women and lower body mass indexes in men (Carpenter et al., 2000) are associated with suicidal ideation. Park et al.'s (2006) survey found that smoking and drinking were associated with suicidal ideation in men but not in women.
- 5) *Mental health*: Individuals whose parents have divorced are more likely to have elevated anxiety levels (Jekielek, 1998; Strohschein, 2005; Storksen et al., 2006) and are at increased risk for experiencing psychological distress (Rodgers et al., 1997; Storksen et al., 2007) and developing mood disorders (Zill et al., 1993; Gilman et al., 2003; Huurre et al., 2006; Storksen et al., 2006; Afifi et al., 2009). The prevalence of suicidal ideation is higher among those with anxiety disorders (Vilhjalmsson et al., 1998; Pirkis et al., 2000; Nock et al., 2008) and mood disorders, including depression (Vilhjalmsson et al., 1998; Pirkis et al., 2000; Sareen et al., 2005; D'Onofrio et al., 2006; Nock et al., 2008).

Control variables: Research is unclear with regard to age, with some studies indicating that younger age is a risk factor for suicidal ideation (Pirkis et al., 2000; Nock et al., 2008) while others have found older age to be a risk factor (Ladwig et al., 2008).

To our knowledge, this is the first study to provide a gender-specific multivariate analysis of the association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation in a North American population-based sample of adults. Although Park and colleagues (Park et al., 2006) have examined the bivariate association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation in their South Korean sample of high school students, they did not include parental divorce in multivariate analyses of suicidal ideation or include adult respondents. Furthermore, the context and ramifications of parental divorce may be substantially different between South Korea and North America.

Based on the above-mentioned literature, it was hypothesized that parental divorce would be associated with the cumulative lifetime

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