

## Effects of family disintegration on children later depression



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### ABSTRACT

Studies examining the effects of marital dissolution on children's welfare have repeatedly found that children of separated parents perform worse on several well-being parameters than those from intact households. Depression is highly represented in the health care system among children and older offspring of divorced parents. This study utilizes the double ABCX model to examine the relationship between divorce and depression. The goal of the study was to see if divorce is a sound predictor of depression. Divorce was shown to only explain a modest portion of the variation in depression ( $r^2 = .04$ ). This level of variation suggests that other than divorce, various additional variables have a role in depression. The study closes with the indication that if additional moderating variables such as the child's maturity and availability of household resources before and after dissolution were encompassed in the analysis, divorce would become a stronger risk factor for depression. Family disharmony may be linked to a higher incidence of severe depressive illness in children of divorced parents.

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### 1. Introduction

The influence of parental divorcing on children's development and adjustment has sparked new studies because of high marital separation rates. The current divorce rate in the United States is reported to be 50% (Drill, 1987). This information is not entirely accurate, but it is somewhat equal to the truth. Increased divorce rate raises concerns in the development of healthy households and influences the well-being of children involved in these families. Divorce decisions usually take place without regard to the adverse consequences such choices may have on the psychological well-being of children. Kim (2011) examined the effects of divorce on children in three different stages (e.g., pre-divorce, in-divorce, and post-divorce). As such, Kim (2011) found (a) delays among children of divorce in math test scores during and after the experience of parental divorce, (b) a negative in-divorce effect on interpersonal skills and negative combined effects during the in- and post-divorce periods, and (c) a pronounced in-divorce effect on the internalizing behavior dimension. Internalizing behaviors, including

depression, are major types of mental illness because of their typography (Davies and Cummings, 2015; Walter et al., 2019). Those behaviors can persist for years without being detected, while their consequences can be fatal.

In addition, Amato (2000) concluded that children whose parents are divorced are more likely to score lower than offspring of stable households on many well-being indicators. These indicators include academic achievement and psychological measures (Brüggmann, 2020; Wauterickx et al., 2006; Voursour et al., 2012). Bernardi and Radl (2014) found that parental divorce is associated with a lower probability of attaining a university degree. Parental divorce is related to adolescent sadness in two ways. According to the findings: (1) It causes a slew of secondary issues and pressures that are intrinsically linked to depression, and (2) It changes how teenagers react to these stresses, often amplifying, but sometimes lessening, their depression symptoms (Bernardi and Radl, 2014; Thambirajah, 2018).

Kitson and Morgan (1990) stated that divorce decision produces a period of disruption and problematic functioning for many people. This disruption and malfunction can be experienced by either the couple themselves or their children (Demir-Dagdas et al., 2018). Depression can be one of the significant consequences of divorce, and the relationship between divorce and depression has been established and studied by many researchers (Amato, 2000; Wauterickx et al., 2006; Gierer et al.,

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2017). Questions have arisen whether divorce directly predicts depression (Heddawi and Al-Ghalib, 2020). Knowing that depression can manifest from divorce, what procedures should be taken to minimize the risk for those children developing any emotional and behavioral challenges, in general, and depression, specifically? Those were the preliminary questions inquired by the investigator. However, more specific questions are essential to guide current research. The present study will examine the relationship between parents' divorce and depression experienced by children following family dissolution.

Divorce might be considered a crisis due to the impending devastations (Hoyt et al., 1990; Karababa, 2021; Kay-Flowers, 2019). Therefore, the study will examine the problem in a theoretical framework involving the Double ABCX model. Reuben Hill first introduced the model in 1949 and then further developed it to the ABCX formula in 1958 (Hill, 1958). The ABCX formula was designed to examine precrisis events that interact with each other to produce the crisis. Those components are described as:

- A. The Crisis-Precipitating Event/Stressor: Is a problematic event that the family has little or no preparation to encounter. Those events can be economic, health-related, or maybe husband-wife conflicts.
- B. The Family's Crisis-Meeting Resources: Factors within the family that can either prevent the crisis from occurring. According to Hill (1958), Crisis-Meeting resources can be defined as family integration and family adaptability.
- C. The Family Definition of the Event: The family's definition of stressors that the family adopts, which can shape the family's interpretation and consequences of the event.
- D. The Crisis: An event that can cause distress and might require the family to change or reorganize to survive the crisis.

The basic ABCX formula developed by Hill (1958) was criticized for its lack of precision in defining the model's components, which might be misleading in some terms such as Crisis-Meeting Resources or Definition the Family Makes of the Event. In addition, the formula failed to account for events after the crisis. Those events can explain the family's coping mechanisms and whether they promoted survival or dismemberment (Boyer-Pennington et al., 2001). As a result, McCubbin and Patterson (1983) decided to expand the ABCX formula to include examining postcrisis variables in one model called the Double ABCX model. McCubbin and Patterson (1983) addressed the limitations of Hill's formula by renaming two of its components. The *b* factor (i.e., Crisis-Meeting Resources) was replaced with existing resources, while the *c* factor (i.e., the Family Definition of the Event) was replaced with perceptions. In addition to the four components in

Hill's formula, the new model goes on to include an additional four components:

- *aA*. Pileup: Involves the accumulation of (a) the initial stressor; (b) the magnitude of the initial stressor that increased over time; (c) transitions; (d) the consequences of family efforts to cope with the crisis; and (e) the uncertainty within the family and society.
- *bB*. Existing and New Resources: The *b* refers to the existing resources before the crisis, included in the first formula. However, the *B* refers to the new resources developed to help the family cope with the crisis. The *B* can account for any resources introduced after the crisis, such as family counseling, educational intervention, or additional responsibilities.
- *cC*. Perception of  $x+aA+bB$ : The letter *c* refers to the family's perceptions of the initial stressor, while the letter *C* refers to the family's perceptions of the crisis, pileup, and the existing and new resources. The direction of the *cC* factor can determine the adaptability of the family.

The last component of the Double ABCX model is an adaptation, which refers to the outcome as a result of the change in the family system. If the family adapted, it is called bone adaptation and refers to the balance between the individual, the family, and the community. However, the failure to adapt is referred to as maladaptation and produces  $xX$ , which is the imbalance at the expense of the family's integrity, development, or independence (Weber, 2010).

This study aims to examine the relationship between parental divorce and subsequent experiences of depression. This research investigated whether family disintegration is a decent indicator of advanced mental health problems and adverse life outcomes (Ivanova and Kalmijn, 2020).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample in this investigation consisted of 1725 youths who Delbert Elliott personally interviewed during his original investigation in early 1984. The sample consisted of a national American youth population selected by area probability sampling with ages between 18 and 24. The data was retrieved as permitted for research purposes from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR).

### 2.2. Design

Over 1500 variables were included in the initial dataset, including demographics, parental history, deviant behaviors, depression, and confrontation with law enforcement. The data was reorganized to

collect responses from the sample on variables relevant to the current study. The following variables were used in this analysis: Parents' marital status and respondents' reports of a lack of interest in setting and achieving personal or professional objectives in the previous year. The association between parental divorce and the occurrence of depressive symptoms is investigated using basic regression analysis to see if parental divorce is a reliable predictor of later depression in children aged 18 to 24.

### 3. Results

Following data collection, descriptive and inferential statistics were analyzed in SPSS to look

for trends and statistical significance between divorce and child depression.

#### 3.1. Demographic features

Within the sample, the most common age of respondents was 23, with the bulk of children falling between 21 and 27 (Fig. 1). The gender distribution of survey respondents is depicted in the bar chart below (Fig. 2). Males make up most of the study population (53.22 percent), while females cover the rest. In the survey, 78.90% of the respondents were Anglo, while 15.07% were African American children (Fig. 3).

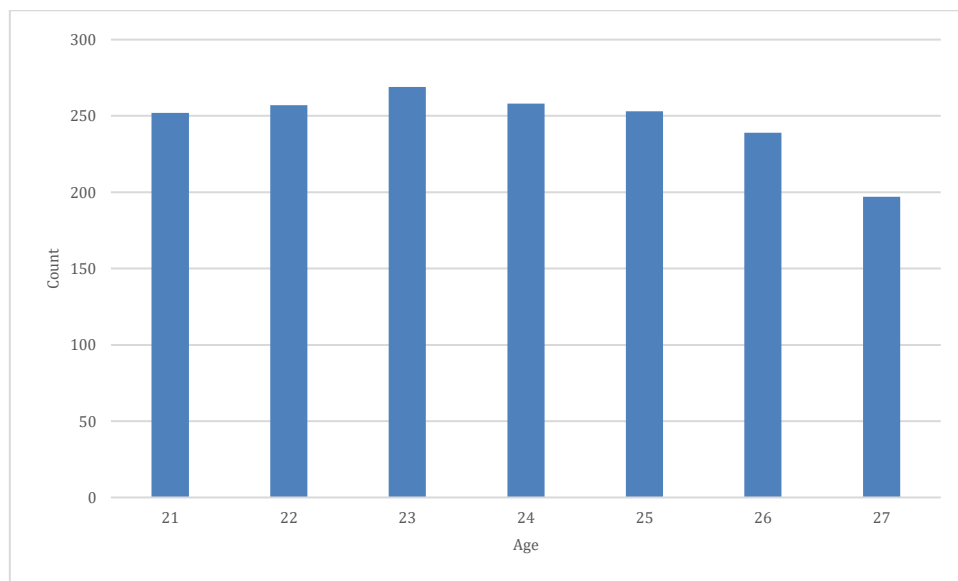


Fig. 1: Sample count by age

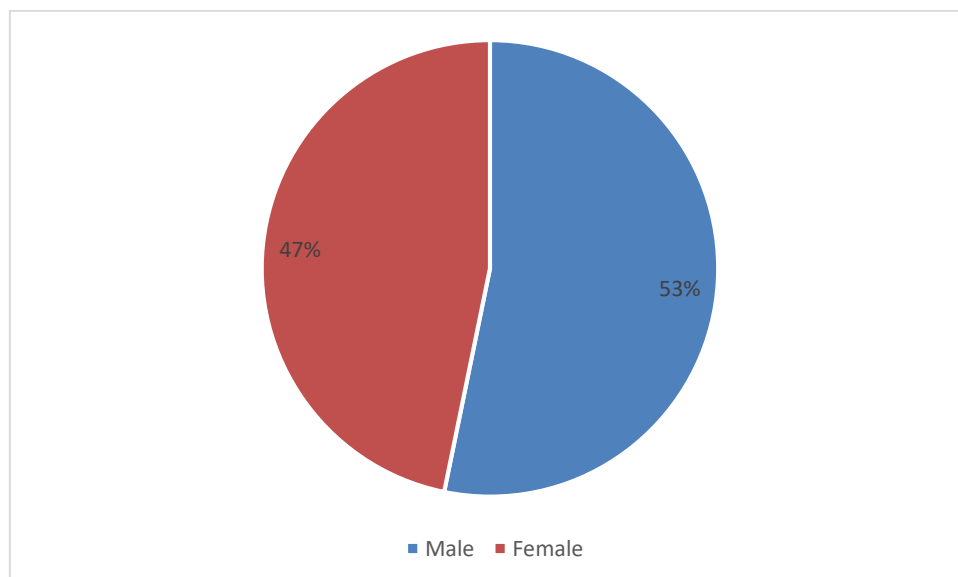
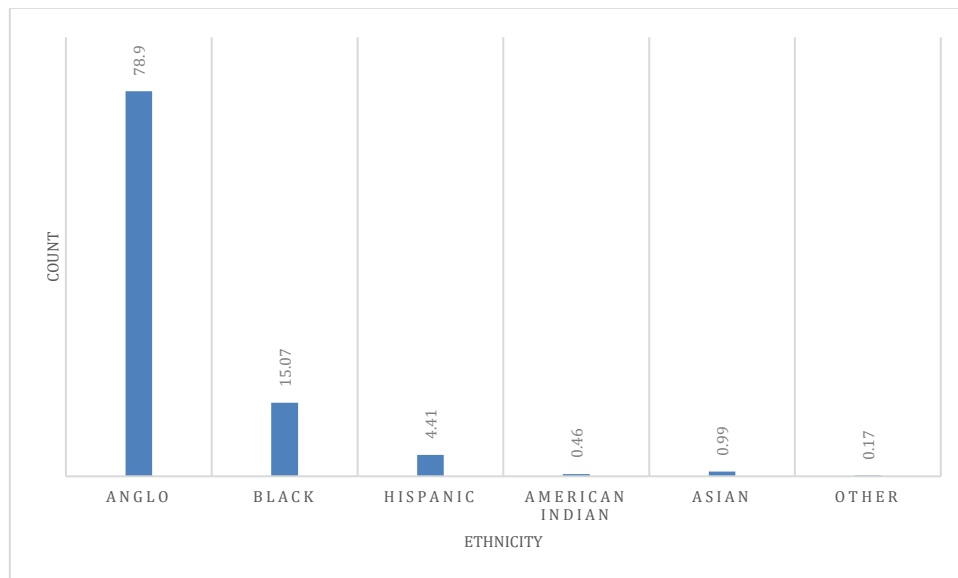


Fig. 2: Sample count by gender

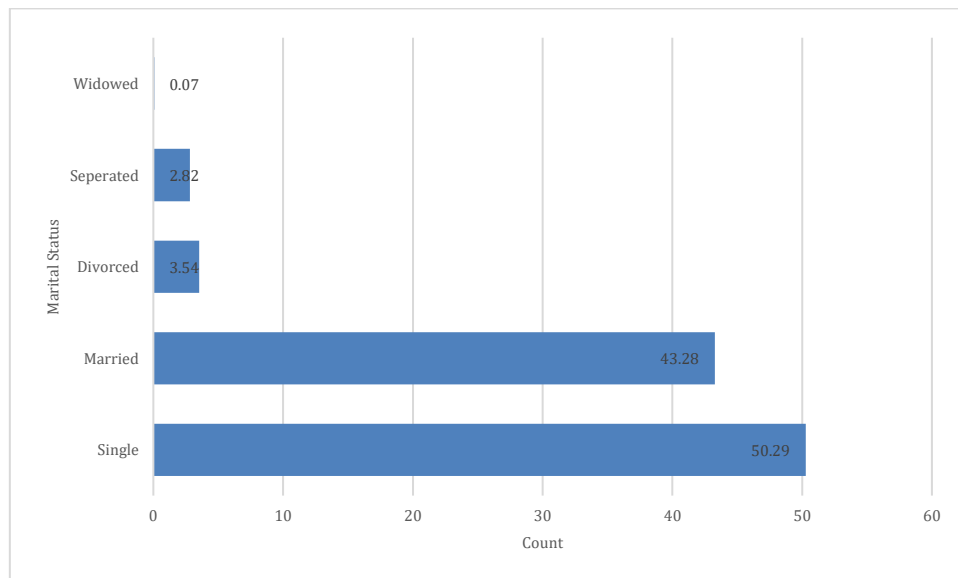
#### 3.2. Marital status

One of the main goals of this study was to examine if divorce impacts children's depression or mental health. Children with mental health

difficulties from single-parent families account for 50.29 percent of the collected data, as shown in the graph below (Fig. 4). Children coming from married couples come in second, while those from divorced parents come in third.



**Fig. 3:** Sample count by ethnicity



**Fig. 4:** Sample count by marital status

### 3.3. Inferential statistics

A simple regression analysis was run between the family divorce and depression variables using SPSS, though the results are statistically significant ( $F_{(1,1724)} = 74.47, p < .001$ ) the effect size  $r^2$  of .04 was found (Table 1). This value indicates that the variance in parents' divorce can only explain 4% of the variance in the symptom of depression in children, while the rest of the variation is explained by other factors.

**Table 1:** Simple Regression Estimates between Divorce and Depression

	$\beta$	$df$	F	$r^2$	Sig.
Divorce	.204	1	74.47	.041	.000*
Total		1724			

Note: \* Significant at the .001 level

### 4. Discussion

Even though the analysis yielded statistically significant results, the fraction of the dependent

variable explained by the independent variable is relatively low. Additional independent variables, such as the resources available for children following the divorce, the manner in which the divorce occurred, the age of the children when parental divorce did happen, and the types of conflicts and stressors that led to the divorce, may be needed to explain the variables contributing to depression which is consistent with other research (Knauer, 2019; Lizardi et al., 2009; Madruga et al., 2017; Kreyenfeld and Trappe, 2020).

Furthermore, assessing depression based on a single comment made by the participants may not accurately reflect true depression. Lack of motivation or interest in accomplishing personal and professional goals, on the other hand, could be due to a transient state of mind brought on by schoolwork or even stress in a romantic relationship (Mahl, 2001; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983; Mortelmans, 2020). This debate brings us to the original theoretical framework that was applied in this research. The resources available after the crisis or,

in this example, after divorce, can moderate the extent of adaption (O'Connor et al., 1999). Because the degree of adaptability varies from case to case and crisis to crisis, accurate predictions cannot be made based solely on the crisis (Palosaari and Aro, 1995; Palosaari et al., 1996).

According to the findings of this study, early divorce children were frequently considered to be more scared and depressed than offspring from intact homes. Information on the typical reaction of a certain age and socioeconomic groups to familial divorce is needed to build effective preventative treatments (Rootalu and Kasearu, 2016; Roper et al., 2020; Rudd et al., 2016). As a result, more research into the adaptation of divorced children and the factors that influence this adjustment is required. The presence of depression in young children who have experienced divorce emphasizes the need for these young individuals to build preventative interventions that provide abilities and experiences to mitigate such negative consequences (Sakya et al., 2012; Taylor and Andrews, 2009; Thambirajah, 2018; Weber, 2010).

## 5. Limitations and recommendations

Given the literature's mention of divorce's major impact on children, the effect size obtained is relatively minimal. The current study used an old dataset, which may have unfavorably biased the outcomes. Both divorce and depression measures failed to accurately reflect the variables of interest (Rudd et al., 2016; Roper et al., 2020). In terms of variables, just one item has been utilized for each measure. As a result, improved measurements may lead to more dependable outcomes. To better predict depression, the researcher developed a suggested model based on divorce and other moderators such as the child's age when the divorce occurred and the age of the child when the divorce transpired (e.g., grandparents, economical status, counseling, etc.).

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/referencenumberICPSR6542>.

## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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