

Effects of parental separation in offspring individual adjustment

Efectos de la separación parental en el ajuste individual de los hijos

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Abstract

Background/Objective: In the European Union it is estimated that there are about 800,000 separations per year that involves approximately 500,000 children. The literature has found that parental divorce causes problems for children in academic performance, behavior, social competence, psychological adjustment, self-esteem, but the effects on family adjustment are unknown. Hence, a field study in order to know the effects of parental separation on the family adjustment of the children was designed. **Method:** 393 children and adolescents, 125 from parents separated in non-contentious proceedings, 122 from parents separated in contentious proceedings and 146 from cohabiting families, responded to a measure of family adjustment. **Results:** The results exhibited that the children of families in contentious separation reported a greater personal maladjustment than those of cohabiting families, an increase of 15.8%. In addition, the children of couples in contentious and non-contentious separation warned of greater family maladjustment than those of cohabiting families, a quantified increase of 55.9% and 45.1%, respectively. Furthermore, the children of families in the process of contentious separation exhibited greater family maladjustment than those of families in non-contentious separation, an estimated increase of 16.3%. **Conclusions:** The implications of the results for good professional practices, prevention and intervention are discussed.

Keywords: couple breakdown; effects of parental separation in offspring; maladjustment; couple conflict; family intervention programs.

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Resumen

Antecedentes/Objetivo: En la Unión Europea se estima que se producen al año unas 800,000 separaciones que implican aproximadamente 500,000 menores. La literatura ha encontrado que la separación de los progenitores acarrea problemas para los hijos en el rendimiento académico, conducta, competencia social, ajuste psicológico, autoestima, pero se desconocen los efectos en el ajuste familiar. Por ello, diseñamos un estudio de campo para conocer los efectos de la separación parental en el ajuste familiar de los hijos. **Método:** 393 children and adolescents, 125 de padres separados en proceso no-contencioso, 122 de padres separados en procesos contencioso y 146 de familias convivientes, respondieron a una medida del ajuste familiar. **Resultados:** Los resultados mostraron que los hijos de familias en separación contenciosa informaban de una mayor inadaptación personal que los de familias convivientes, un incremento cifrado en el 15.8%. Además, los hijos de parejas en separación contenciosa y no contenciosa advirtieron de una mayor inadaptación familiar que los de familias convivientes, un aumento cuantificado en el 55.9% y el 45.1%, respectivamente. A su vez, los hijos de familias en proceso de separación contenciosa manifestaron una mayor inadaptación familiar que los de familias en separación no contenciosa, ascenso estimado en el 16.3%. **Conclusiones:** Se discuten las implicaciones de los resultados para las buenas prácticas profesionales, prevención e intervención.

Palabras clave: ruptura de pareja; efectos de la separación parental en los hijos; inadaptación; conflicto de pareja; programas de intervención familiar.

INTRODUCTION

The couple breakdown is one of the most stressful life events that it can face throughout life and with adverse consequences (Field et al., 2009; Langeslag & Sanchez, 2018; Love et al., 2018). The statistics of the European Union (Eurostat, 2021) point to around 1.9 million marriages and an estimate of around 0.8 million divorces in 2019, that is, for each new marriage, the ratio of the breakdown of old marriages is of approximately 40%. These separations are estimated to affect about 500,000 children each year (Corras et al., 2017). Likewise, these children suffer what is known as an *Adverse Childhood Experience* [ACE] (Sacks et al., 2014). A large body of research found that divorce is related with physical, behavior and psychological problems in children, as well as with the decrease in the quality of life and well-being, personal, social and family (Amato 2001; Baert & van der Straeten, 2021; Corrás et al., 2017; Hornor, 2015; Larson & Halfon, 2013; Lund et al., 2006; Martínón et al., 2017; Rivas-Rivero & Bonilla-Algovia, 2020; Seijo et al., 2016) being more evident in the short term, that is, in the moments before and after the divorce (Baert & van der Straeten, 2021; Lansford, 2009), but it can also become chronic (Wallerstein &

Resnikoff, 1997). As moderators of this relationship, the vulnerability of children and the family functioning (e.g. pre- and post-divorce relationship between parents, pre- and post-divorce conflict, pre- and post-divorce parenting) has been studied (Amato, 2001, 2010).

The interest in analyzing the factors that can mediate the effect of divorce on children's adjustment has led to the study of variables such as the gender of the children or the level of conflict between the parents (Fariña et al., 2020; Moral-Jiménez & González-Sáez 2020). The empirical findings regarding the gender of offspring has generated controversy due to the great diversity existing among the samples used in the studies, which causes a high dispersion of the results. Thus, Amato (2001) reported that boys had more social relations problems than girls in such a way that boys develop more behavior problems than girls, but with inter-study heterogeneity. In any case, parental divorce significantly negatively affects offspring regardless of gender. Recently taking mothers as informants, Mitchell et al. (2021) found that they observed higher levels of hyperactivity in boys than in girls. On the contrary, other literature has found that what really impacts children is the breakdown of the couple and that both boys and girls who live a divorce encounter additional problems to those of their evolutionary moment, being an event highly stressful for most (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009; Pérez-Testor & Alegret, 2009; Wallerstein & Resnikoff, 1997).

The agreement regarding the family conflict, although greater, is not free of nuances either. Thus, when after divorce, parents raise the conflict and involve their children in it, the impact is very significant (Amato, 2001; Amato & Afifi, 2006; Afifi et al., 2007; Corrás et al., 2017; Fosco & Grych, 2010; Kerig & Swanson, 2010; Seijo et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it has also been found that the children's post-divorce adjustment varies depending on whether or not the children anticipated the breakdown of their parents' partner. In this sense, when the divorce occurred in an unexpected way, they exhibited a higher level of affectation than when the divorce was the result of a high family conflict, in which case, it became a relief for the children who improved after the breakdown (Amato 2001; Hanson, 1999, Strohschein, 2005), possibly by being freed from continuous exposure to family conflict.

In sum, the level of conflict mediates differences in the problems associated with parental separation in children, the effect in boys and girls may be differential, and both variables interact. Hence, a field study with the aim of knowing the effects of the level of conflict in the couple (cohabiting families, non-contentious separation families, contentious separation families), the children's gender and the interaction of both on the children's maladjustment was designed.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 393 children and adolescents from Galicia (Spain) aged from 7 to 17 years ($M = 11.72$ years, $SD = 3.58$), 125 were from non-contentious separation families; 122 from contentious separation families; and 146 from cohabiting families. The sample was matched in gender, $\chi^2(2, N = 393) = 2.83$, *ns*, with 191 girls (64 non-contentious separation family girls, 65 contentious separation family girls; and 62 cohabiting family girls), and 202 adolescent boys (61 non-contentious separation family boys, 60 contentious separation family boys; and 81 cohabiting family boys).

Measurement instruments

Participants completed an *ad hoc* socio-demographic questionnaire designed for this study to gather data on participants' gender and by family type.

As for measuring the individual adjustment, participants were administered the (Test Autoevaluativo Multifactorial de Ajuste Infantil, TAMAI) [Multifactorial Child Adjustment Self-evaluation Test] (Hernández, 2002), consisting of 115 items with a *Yes* or *No* response format evaluating personal ($\alpha = .85$), social ($\alpha = .75$) school ($\alpha = .86$), and family ($\alpha = .75$) maladjustment.

Design and procedure

A field study was carried out with a quasi-experimental design in order to compare the means between three subsamples of participants (non-contentious separation families; contentious separation families; cohabiting families). Design sensitivity analysis with the comparison of means between 3 groups, with 4 dependent variables (MANOVA) and a sample size of 393 subjects, found the probability of detecting $(1-\beta)$ significant differences ($\alpha < .05$) for a medium effect size ($f = 0.25/f^2 = 0.065$) was 100%.

The measures were obtained within a block of other measures (e.g., psychological adjustment, cognitive measures, social measures) by trained and experienced researchers who ensured the correct administration and completion of all tests and questionnaires in the centres or schools corresponding to each adolescent. The data were collected in one session at each centre, with the exceptional of cases requiring two sessions owing fatigue. As the order of test administration could influence the measures analysed in this study, leading to a systematic measurement error i.e., adding an alternative explanation to the effect analysed (Arce et al., 2000), the order of test administration was counterbalanced via standard rotation (A-B-C.....; B-C.....-A.....; C.....B-A;). Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians for the evaluation. All children and adolescents

freely volunteered to participate in the study. The time for completing all the questionnaires and tests ranged from 20-30 minutes.

Data were processed according to Spanish Data Protection Law (Ley Orgánica 3/2018, de 5 de diciembre, de Protección de Datos Personales y Garantía de los Derechos Digitales, 2018). The research project was examined by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Santiago de Compostela, reported that the protocol meets the ethical requirements.

Data analysis

For the mean comparisons, a 2 (gender: female vs. male) X 3 (family context: contentious, non-contentious and cohabiting family) MANOVA with a full factorial model was run as the dependent variables formed a correlated theoretical construct ($\lambda = .361, p < .001$). As an omnibus test in MANOVA heterogeneity of variance was observed (Mauchly's Test of Sphericity was significant), the Pillai-Bartlett's trace was used for its superior robustness to the violation of the homogeneous variance-covariance assumption (Olson, 1976). Heterogeneous of variance was observed too in some univariate comparisons (Levene's test was significant) what may cause deviations in the significance of the results (Stevens, 1986). As for coping this contingency, the theoretical F value (Box's conservative test, 2.996) was contrasted with the empirical F in order to validate the correct acceptance or rejection of the null hypothesis: if the empirical F is higher than the theoretical, the alternative hypothesis is correctly accepted, and vice versa (Mayorga et al., 2020). With this method, it was found that the empirical F s gave the same results of acceptance or rejection of the null hypothesis as the theoretical F s. Post hoc tests were performed with the Howell and Dunnett C test when heterogeneous variances were verified and with bonferroni correction (α/m) with homogeneity of variance. In the multivariate tests, the effect size was computed as η_p^2 and as Cohen's d (Hedges's formula) by the standardized mean difference. The magnitude of the effect sizes was interpreted using the Probability of Superiority of the Effect Size (PS_{ES} ; Fandiño et al., 2021; Vilarriño et al., 2022) for d i.e., the percentage of effect sizes over the total that would exceed the observed, and the explained variance for η_p^2 . A derivation of the BESD was used to quantify deficits in sample population (Gancedo et al., 2021; Redondo et al., 2019).

RESULTS

A MANOVA 2 (gender: female vs. male) X 3 (family context: contentious, non-contentious and cohabiting family) was executed with a full factorial design. The results of a MANOVA exhibited a significant multivariate effect, $F(8, 770) = 15.54, p < .001, 1-\beta = 1$, in the maladjustment of the sons and daughters for the family context factor (contentious

separation, non-separation, contentious, cohabiting), accounting for 13.9% of the variance of the maladjustment, $\eta^2_p = .139$, an effect magnitude greater than 78.8% of all possible effect sizes, but not for the gender factor $F(4, 384) = 15.54$, *ns*, $1-\beta = .317$, nor for the interaction of both, $F(8, 770) = 15.54$, *ns*, $1-\beta = .432$. That is, sons and daughters exhibited an equal individual maladjustment in the three family conditions, while the family context carries differences in the reported individual adjustment.

The univariate effects (see Table 1) exhibited that the family context factor leads to differences in personal and family maladjustment. The a posteriori contrasts specified that the children of families immersed in a contentious separation process present a personal maladjustment significantly greater than those of cohabiting families with an effect size between small and moderate, greater than 17.4% of all possible ones. The increase in staff maladjustment of the children from contentious families over the children from cohabiting families is, as an average, of 15.8 ($r = .158$). Likewise, post hoc analysis revealed that the children of families in the process of contentious and non-contentious separation report greater family maladjustment than those of cohabiting families, with a large and greater effect size, respectively, than 65.8% and 52.2% all possible, and with an increase in family maladjustment of 55.9% ($r = .559$) and 45.1% ($r = .451$), respectively; and that those of families in contentious separation warn of a higher family maladjustment than those of families in non-contentious separation, with an effect size between small and moderate and greater than 18.2% of all possible, and with an increase in the familiar maladjustment of 16.3% ($r = .163$).

Nevertheless, the error of these models (probability in the group of individuals with the greatest maladjustment of a score lower than the mean of the largest group) based on the data (statistical model) would reach 37.4% of the individuals in the group of contentious separation who they would obtain a score lower than the mean of the group of cohabiting families in personal maladjustment, and 15.6% in family maladjustment; while in family maladjustment 8.9% of offspring from contentious families would report a score lower than the average of the group of cohabiting families, and the 37.1% from non-contentious separation families than those from contentious separation families.

Table 1

Univariate effects in the individual maladjustment for the family situation factor.

Variable	<i>F</i>	1-β	<i>M</i> _{CF}	<i>M</i> _{N-CSF}	<i>M</i> _{CSF}	<i>d</i> ₁ (<i>PS</i> _{ES})	<i>d</i> ₂ (<i>PS</i> _{ES})	<i>d</i> ₃ (<i>PS</i> _{ES})
Personal	3.43*	.643	6.62	7.38	8.50	0.13(.072)	0.32(.174)	0.19(.103)
School	1.93	.400	9.75	8.70	10.57	-0.14(.080)	0.11(.064)	0.25(.143)
Family	64.95***	1.00	0.48	1.83	2.27	1.01(.522)	1.35(.658)	0.33(.182)
Social	2.61	.519	8.60	7.98	9.54	-0.11(.064)	0.17(.096)	0.29(.166)

Note. *df*(2, 384); *M*_{CF}: mean of the children from cohabiting families (control group); *M*_{N-CSF}: mean of the children from non-contentious separation families; *M*_{CSF}: mean of the children from contentious separation families; *d*₁(*PS*_{ES}): Cohen's *d* for children from non-contentious families vs. from cohabiting families (Probability of Superiority of the Effect Size); *d*₂(*PS*_{ES}): Cohen's *d* for children from contentious families vs. from cohabiting families (Probability of Superiority of the Effect Size); *d*₃(*PS*_{ES}): Cohen's *d* for children from contentious families vs. from non-contentious families (Probability of Superiority of the Effect Size); **p* < .05; ****p* < .001.

DISCUSSION

This study is subject to limitations in its generation that must be borne in mind. First, a cross-sectional design (versus longitudinal) was carried out that does not allow to know the evolution of the adjustment from the perspective of the development of the children (i.e., chronicity, spontaneous disappearance, mitigation of the effects over time). Second, the effects of mediators in said relationship, such as the level of pre-separation conflict, the exercise of co-parenting or the time elapsed since the break, have been considered counterbalanced. Mediators that could modify the results obtained (Moral-Jiménez & González-Sáez 2020).

The results of this research on the gender variable as a moderator of in-the-offspring maladjustment reveal that both boys and girls share the individual mismatch equally in the three family conditions analyzed. In this regard, the level of maladjustment in the personal, school, family and social spheres is the same for boys and girls, being generalizable to cohabiting families, non-contentious separation families and contentious separation families. On the contrary, the level of conflict in the couple leads to differences in reported individual maladjustment, such that children from contentious families suffer an approximate 16% increase in personal maladjustment (i.e., personal dissatisfaction, affective maladjustment, somatization, depression). Likewise, the level of conflict also leads to differences in family maladjustment. Succinctly, children from separated couples, both contentious and non-contentious families, reported higher rates of family maladjustment (i.e., negative family atmosphere, educational discrepancy, neglect, rejection affective, permissiveness, aversive parenting style) than those from cohabiting couples. That is, couple separation produces sequelae in individual adjustment of children, increasing family distress by about 55% in children from families in contentious separation and by 45% in those with non-contentious

separation. Furthermore, a significant higher maladjustment was observed children from contentious separation families (litigants) in comparison with children from non-contentious separation families, increasing the family maladjustment in around 16%. Thus, the sequelae for children after parent separation is aggravated in contentious separation (Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009; Pérez-Testor & Alegret, 2009; Wallerstein & Resnikoff, 1997), being generalizable to other domains as negative wellbeing (Afifi et al., 2010); school failure (Corrás et al., 2017); adolescent-parent-relations (Fosco & Grych, 2010); children development (Kerig & Swanson, 2010); Perez-Gramaje et al., 2020); externalizing behaviors (Cacho et al., 2020); psychological (Seijo et al., 2016) and conduct problems (Arias et al., 2020). If to all this is added that contentious separations lengthen the conflict over time (these legal disputes usually last for years), the probability that these damages will become chronic is extremely high (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Moreover, litigation between parents disables the primary social network, the family, necessary for an effective coping with this life stress event (Baert & van der Straeten, 2021).

Implications for good professional practices, prevention and intervention are derived from these results. In relation to good professional practices, the forensic psychological evaluation must have as an indirect objective to contribute to the reduction of the conflict (that is, to have an orientation of therapeutic jurisprudence) and, on the contrary, not to contribute to the scale of it. Consequently, recommendations that facilitate co-parenting, co-responsibility and sharing obligations in meeting the needs of children contribute to the best interest of the child by reducing conflict. However, this is not possible when there is some cause of incapacitation for the exercise of custody in one of the parents (Arce et al., 2005) and when the level of conflict is high. In the latter case, it is necessary to guide families in court decisions to psychoeducational intervention programs that have been effective in managing the conflict, promoting co-parenting, co-responsibility and meeting the needs of children, as well as in the control of damages in children and parents (Fariña et al., 2020; Moral-Jiménez & González-Sáez 2020; Novo et al., 2019; van Dijk et al., 2020). Known that the adverse effects of a badly managed breakdown and that a large part of the target population does not have the skills to properly manage it, raising awareness at the beginning of the judicial process (Fariña et al., 2017), the orientation of the case to alternative means to the judicial process, less effective in managing the adverse consequences of the rupture (Arce et al., 2005) and primary prevention (Fariña et al., 2002; Stallman & Sanders, 2014) form means of action that will result in fewer adverse effects for children and parents.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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