

# THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ADAPTATION OF THE ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED FAMILIES

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## ABSTRACT

How do adolescents nowadays react to family instability caused by parental divorce? How does this situation influence the adolescent socially and psychologically?

These questions relate to the growing increase of the divorce rate and the fact that this phenomenon can be considered one of the most adverse events in the life of the children involved, especially in adolescents, since in this phase a stable family structure with consistent references is essential.

According to a report published by the European Union, such as the following modern trends, the number of Portuguese couples divorcing has steadily increased. Statistics recently released show one in three marriages now end in divorce. In many cases divorce is not only the end of a marriage, but also the breakdown and the separation of a family unity. So, it is important to ascertain how divorce affects the adjustment of the family member.



The present study will examine the relationship between parental divorce and the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. It is therefore intended that a representative sample (N=300) of Portuguese adolescents (range in age from 11 to 18 years) complete a questionnaire regarding their psychosocial adaptation. We will focus on the following aspects: background, the family's relationships (the level of inter-parental conflicts and the degree of intimacy between parents), health, school and school work, religion, types of school and community activities, risks behaviours (smoking; alcohol; drugs; dating, sex and contraceptive and eating habits), life satisfaction, depression, anxiety and stress.

We will combine two different methods of collecting data: the questionnaire and some exploratory interviews. Both of them will be used to discuss the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescents from divorced families, and to provide theoretical support and intervention.

## OBJECTIVES

Given that the impact of divorce is not invariably negative, and that its consequences are the result of interaction between extrinsic factors (external influences) and intrinsic factors (internal vulnerability), that is the same situation is not experienced in a similar way by the people involved and, even if they feel the incidents as disturbing, they develop reactions (defensive or offensives) individual or collective strategies, which allow them to adapt, solve their problems and deal with them.

In this way, we set out to evaluate this purpose through a theoretical model of the functioning of a person in a particular situation, that is in this case, evaluate, on a psycho-social level, the way in which adolescents react to parental divorce, taking not only Health Psychology as a reference, but also Development Psychology.

So, the processes of adaptation regarding diversity will be analysed, challenging conception according to which the children of divorced parents invariably have a weak psychosocial adaptation.

According to this conceptual framework, it is important to know about these individuals stress levels, self-esteem, values, coping strategies, school and school work, health, religion, school and community activities and risk behaviours (smoking; drugs; eating habits; dating, sex and contraceptive). This group of indicators will be articulated with other aspects of greater objectiveness: the level of inter-parental conflicts and the degree of intimacy between parents.

## METHODS

Two different methods will be used for collecting data.

The main method is the **questionnaire** individually presented to the adolescents. The questionnaire approached here constitutes a study which will compare a **two representative samples of Portuguese adolescents (2 groups of 125 adolescents)** - one of them being from families in which the parents are divorced / separated; and the other from "intact" families. The results will be interpreted through the crosschecking of all the variables to be explained, for which the SPSS operating system (Statistic Pack for Social Sciences) will be used. This will consist of all quantitative analysis.

Nevertheless, it is important to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, so a qualitative analysis of **individual interviews** will also be made.

The questionnaire and the interviews will be administered in order to answer to research question. In short, they will be used to explore the adolescent's points of view and the relations between feelings, emotions, the risks behaviour, when they experience the parental divorce. Both results will be used to discuss the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescents from divorced families, and to provide theoretical support and intervention.

Participants will be recruited through advertisements made at the school where the purpose of the survey is to be explained. The collaboration of the Psychology and Social Services team of the selected schools is required.

## DETAILED DISCRPTION

Regarding the situation of parental divorce, our objective is to evaluate the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescents.

To face this complex task, it is necessary to employ a multi-causal and problematic theoretical framework: a model that recognises the active role of the adolescent, as a whole person (Jackson, Born & Jacob, 1997), in shaping his/her development, selecting goals and making choices (Silbereisen, Eyferth & Rudinger, 1986) and within the opportunities and the constraints of his/her environment (Jackson & Rodriguez-Tomé, 1993; Silbereisen, 1994).

Investigations of divorce and other family variables, indicate that the impact of divorce is not inevitably negative, which reinforces the view that a range of variables must be examined when studying the effects of divorce.

So, a questionnaire was created, that take into consideration the following domains of psychosocial adjustment:

➤ **Family relationships** - The study will assess inter-parental conflicts and current levels of parent-adolescent intimacy in relation to adolescent's psychosocial adjustment: In a family systems perspective, the analysis of these 2 variables reveals to be particularly important, since both can be constituted as risk factors – potentialising the negative effects of divorce, or on the other hand, diminishing the negative consequences of divorce. The evaluation of this variable will be estimated through the use of the scale adapted and modifying by Sandy Jackson\* (1999), Silvia Bonino and Silvia Clairano\*\*.

➤ **Self-esteem** – Is constituted as a subjective experience, in which its fundament and its variations are found in the individuals' relation with himself and in his relation with his peers. Self-esteem will therefore have influence in social adaptation, in the human function and in the consolidation of the personality. This variable will be estimated through the use of the scale, adapted (by Vasconcelos, M. L. and Tap, P. (2004)) from Toulouse's self esteem scale (Oubrayrie at al., 1994) having being reduced to 10 items: five that a direct positive evaluation and five other with negative meaning which imply an inversion of the response.

➤ **Stress** - It emerges when, in a situation, commitments or personal challenges are threatened or lost, or there is an inadequacy between the resources used and the ones available (Sordes – Ader, 1996). The evaluation was made on the stress felt, by using a reduction of a scale inspired on the work of Lemyre and Tessier, 1998. The scale is made of thirty items divided into four dimensions: depressive humour, physical expressions, weariness/strain and feverishness/tension. In this case, a scale reduced to twelve items is suggested (three per dimension).

➤ **Values** - The question here is to analyse the importance of values in the elaboration of the representation of social reality and in the guidance of people's actions in specific situations such as parental divorce. We will therefore ask the inquired to attribute a grade to the twenty values included in the list. These values are grouped into social values, psychological values, religious values, moral values, functional values and functional values.

➤ **Coping strategies** - Are expressed through the ability to tolerate, accept, avoid or reduce stress. Coping works as a stabilizing factor, which allow the individual to maintain a psychosocial adaptation during the periods that include emotions (Moos and Billings, 1982; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Holohan and Moos, 1987). A scale, which was adapted (by Vasconcelos, M. L. and Tap, P., 2004), from Toulouse's coping scale was used to determine the coping strategies. This scale evaluates six initial strategies: focusing, social support, removal, conversion, control and refusal.

➤ **Background** – The background analysis give us an fundamental overview about the adolescents (age, sex, with how they live, socio-economic level, work,...).

➤ **Health** – It is important to understand the adolescent's health seeing that it could be related with their psychosocial adjustment.

➤ **School and School work**. The analysis of academic performance represents an important factor since school life holds an essential role in the successful passage of adolescence life to adulthood. The analysis of this variable is made through a question that evaluates the regularity of school life.

➤ **Religion** – It seems important to know if divorce differs weighty with the kind of religion and the way they live them.

➤ **Risks behaviour (Smoking, Eating habits, Drugs, Dating, sex and contraceptive)**, Since adolescents are a risk group in regard to initialisation of smoking habits, alcohol, drugs, bad eating habits and sexual risk behaviour; we will verify if, because of being children of divorced parents, this will or not contribute to the promotion of this type of behaviour.

➤ **Types of school and community activities** – the evaluation of the extra-home activities will be a good variable to understand the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents from divorced families.

The evaluation of these last six variables will be estimated through the use of the scale adapted from Turino's scale (Clairano, 2004).

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## HYPOTHESIS

It is expected that the parents' marital status, but more specifically inter-parental conflicts and the intimacy with the parents, contributes to defining the psychosocial adaptation of adolescents.

It will also be expected that adolescents who present high levels of inter-parental conflicts will reveal a weak psychosocial adaptation in comparison to adolescents who experience low levels of inter-parental conflicts.

Adolescents who present high levels of inter-parental conflicts are also expected to reveal low levels of intimacy with their parents, compared to adolescents who present low levels of inter-parental conflicts.

Thus, there will also be a tendency for so that adolescents who refer high levels of intimacy with one of the parents experience a better adaptation than those who show low levels of intimacy with both parents.

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