Research report

Parental divorce, self-esteem and depression: an intimate relationship as a protective factor in young adulthood

U.K. Palosaari *, H.M. Aro

National Public Health Institute, Department of Mental Health, Tampere, Finland
University of Tampere, School of Public Health, Tampere, Finland

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Abstract

This study investigated whether an intimate relationship in young adulthood protects young people from depression in the presence of risk factors (parental divorce, low self-esteem in adolescence). The data were drawn from a follow-up survey of adolescents from the age of 16–22 (n = 1656). The prevalence of depression was highest among persons from divorced families who had reported low self-esteem at the age of 16 and who in young adulthood lacked an intimate relationship. An intimate relationship was found to protect young adults with the risk factor of earlier low self-esteem from depression irrespective of family background. The pattern was similar in both sexes.

1. Introduction

Divorce requires major adjustments from all family members. After the initial stress of parental divorce children may have emotional distress, behavioral problems or persistent decrease in their school performance for several years (Guidupaldi and Perry, 1985; Hetherington et al., 1985; Featherstone et al., 1992; Goodyer, 1993). It has been suggested that divorce-related difficulties among girls become visible especially in adolescence (Kalter et al., 1985; Hetherington et al., 1985; Featherstone et al., 1992; Goodyer, 1993). Certain problems stemming from parental divorce may be mediated via a lowered self-esteem (Parish and Wigle, 1985; Palosaari et al., in press). Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) reported that girls with a background of parental divorce had difficulties in intimate relationships and that some feared being abandoned like their mothers. The experience of earlier parental divorce has been reported to be associated with vulnerability to depression in young adulthood in both genders (Wallerstein and Blakeslee, 1989; Aro and Palosaari, 1992).

There is wide individual diversity in responses to a stressful environment in childhood. In spite of a risk of a maladaptive life course, many individuals cope successfully with developmental challenges. The impact of stressful childhood experiences on further development is modified by factors or processes in the child, family and community, and their interactions which then affect further development and life course either protecting from or predisposing to stress or disorder at another developmental stage. Subsequent adverse or beneficial circumstances may

* Corresponding author. Address: University of Tampere, School of Public Health, Box 607, 333101 Tampere 10, Finland.
intensify or mitigate the influence of early stressful experiences (Rutter, 1988; Brown et al., 1990). A protective factor has been defined as a factor which mitigates or buffers the effects of psychiatric risk (Rutter, 1985).

The processes of negotiation of life transitions, both in adolescence and in young adulthood, are of special interest, because at this point in particular a person's life course may be redirected into a more adaptive path (Rutter, 1987; Maugham and Champion, 1988). Rutter (1987), e.g., has shown that marriage with a supportive spouse may break the negative chains of pathological development. Difficulties in commitment and lack of trust in an intimate relationship may be one link mediating negative long-term impact of parental divorce. On the other hand, a good relationship may operate as a protecting factor in the life course of the offspring from divorced families. The presence of a confiding relationship, particularly with husband or boyfriend, reduced appreciably the risk of depressive disorder among adult women who had experienced parental loss in childhood (Brown et al., 1986b). One mechanism by which the buffering effect of social support has been suggested to function is by increasing the individual's self-esteem and coping skills under stress (O'Connor and Brown, 1984; Rutter, 1987; Brown et al., 1990).

This paper is one of a series of papers based on the 6-year follow-up of adolescents. In the present study (Aro and Palosaari, 1992), young adults with a history of parental divorce were significantly more often depressive compared with young people from nondivorced families. The girls' excess risk of depression due to parental divorce was partly mediated via lack of good self-esteem at the age of 16. Further, low self-esteem indicated increased vulnerability to subsequent depression among boys and girls, in general, irrespective of family background (Palosaari et al., in press).

In the present paper, we asked whether an intimate relationship in young adulthood protects the individual from depression in the presence of earlier risk factors (parental divorce and low self-esteem in adolescence).

### 2. Methods

#### 2.1. Study population

The study population included all 9th-grade pupils attending secondary schools in the spring of 1983 in Tampere, a Finnish city of 166,000 inhabitants (Aro, 1988). There were altogether 2269 pupils, 97.6% of whom participated in the study and completed questionnaires in their classrooms. The mean age of the pupils was 15.9 years (SD = 0.3 years). The same young people were re-examined by means of postal questionnaires in spring 1989 at the age of 22. The participation rate in the follow-up was 77.4%. No significant difference was found in parental divorce between participants and nonparticipants. Before the first phase of the study, 24% of pupils had experienced parental divorce (girls, \( n = 210 \); boys, \( n = 146 \)). These children were included in the study.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nondivorced</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>( P )</td>
<td>Nondivorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-esteem at age of 16</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>(453)</td>
<td>54.3 (88)</td>
<td>40.4</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>(297)</td>
<td>45.7 (130)</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intimate relationship at age of 22</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>(459)</td>
<td>69.2 (155)</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>(204)</td>
<td>30.8 (61)</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum score of quality of relationship (t test)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>mean (SD)</td>
<td>10.1 (4.0)</td>
<td>10.6 (4.1)</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** \( P < 0.001 \).
group and the children living in two-parent families (girls, \( n = 675 \); boys, \( n = 611 \)) were in the control group.

2.2. Variables

Depression was screened by a Finnish modification of the short 13-item Beck’s Depression Inventory. S-BDI score 5 was used as a cut-off point (Beck et al., 1974; Mattlar et al., 1987). Self-esteem at the age of 16 was measured on a Finnish scale developed for students. This included 7 assertions with a 5-point scale resembling those in Rosenberg’s measure (Rosenberg, 1965; Aro, 1988). The assertions were: ‘I believe in myself and my prospects; I wish I were different from what I am; I suffer from feelings of inferiority; I think I have many good qualities; I feel I lack self-confidence; I am capable of doing the same as others; I am often dissatisfied with myself’. The theoretical range of the scale was 7–35. The internal reliability of the score was 0.79 among girls and 0.77 among boys measured by Cronbach’s alpha. In the analyses, the scale was dichotomized at about the mean (girls, mean = 17; boys, mean = 15). In ‘intimate relationship’ we included marriage, cohabitation and steady dating. The quality of intimate relationship was assessed with 6 questions concerning closeness and conflicts of the relationship scored on a 5-point scale: ‘Our relationship is warm’, ‘We are close to each other’, ‘Our relationship includes mutual trust’, ‘We have many problems’, ‘Our relationship is cooling off’, ‘We often quarrel’. The sum of the scores was dichotomized in the mean (\( x = 9, SD = 3.4 \)).

The preliminary statistical description was based on cross-tabulation and on logistic regression modelling. Furthermore, we were especially interested in the multiplicative effects of predictors, i.e., in the interaction structure of risk and protective factors. Accordingly, the data were analysed using loglinear modelling.

3. Results

Low self-esteem at the age of 16 was more common among girls from divorced families. Boys from divorced and nondivorced families did not differ from each other. At the age of 22, no difference in the existence of an intimate relationship was found between young people from divorced and nondivorced homes. Further, family background did not predict any difference in reported quality of present relationships (Table 1).
Males

Depression %

Self-esteem

High Low

Intimate relationship

Non-divorced family

Divorced family

3.1. Model building

At the age of 16, one of the predictors for subsequent depression was low self-esteem (females, RR = 2.3, CI 95% 1.6–3.3; males, RR = 2.15, CI 95% 1.2–3.4). In further analyses, parental divorce and low self-esteem were considered as risk factors for depression. We studied whether an intimate relationship protected young adults from depression in the presence of these risk factors (Fig. 1, Fig. 2).

The prevalence of depression was highest among persons from divorced families who had reported low self-esteem at the age of 16 and who in young adulthood lacked an intimate relationship. An intimate relationship was found to protect young adults with the risk factor of earlier low self-esteem from depression irrespective of family background. The association between parental divorce and depression remained in the model. The pattern was similar among both sexes. Among girls, there was also an indirect association between parental divorce and depression, with girls from divorced families reporting more frequently low self-esteem in adolescence.

The results also suggested that good self-esteem in adolescence reflects resilience against depression in both genders. The prevalence of depression remained low in all subgroups with good self-esteem.

When the quality of relationship was taken into account, the association between parental divorce and depression in the offspring remained significant. If the relationship was good the prevalence of depression further decreased irrespective of family background (females, poor relationship 16.7% vs. good relationship 4.5%, \( \chi^2 = 25.7, df = 1, P < 0.001 \); males, poor relationship 9.2% vs. good relationship 2.6%, \( \chi^2 = 8.83, df = 1, P < 0.01 \)). However, the proportion of depressive young people among those who had no intimate relationship (females, 20%; males, 13%) was bigger than that in either of the former groups.

4. Discussion

Research showing that social support, including an intimate relationship, functions as a buffer and protective factor against depression has been a focus of methodological consideration, largely due to the intertwinedness of risk, protective and outcome-related factors in the life course (Brown et al., 1986a; Alloway and Bebbington, 1987; Aro et al., 1989). Within the methodological complexity, our results also lend support to this hypothesis.

Commitment to a partnership is among the developmental tasks in young adulthood and managing to form an intimate relationship probably increases trusting and hopeful attitudes towards the future. A close relationship may compensate for the effects of...
earlier low self-esteem on choices in young adulthood. Further, steady dating or an enduring relationship are regarded as a normative part of the transition to adulthood. The lack of partnership at this age may be stressful as such. On the other hand, the results suggested that good self-esteem in adolescence reflects resilience against depression. Those with good self-esteem in adolescence had low levels of depression in spite of the lack of an intimate relationship. An alternative interpretation of our data is that a low self-esteem in adolescence and lack of an intimate relationship in young adulthood may both be indicators of a risk trajectory in development. Those who were depressive at the age of 22 may have been depressive already at the age of 16. Kandel and Davies (1986) suggest that long-term effects of adolescent depression manifest themselves in reduced ability in forming an intimate relationship. In the follow-up study, they showed the continuity of depressive symptoms over time and the presence of associated long-term difficulties in relationships, viz., a lack of closeness in relationship with parents in adolescence and lack of closeness with their spouses in young adulthood. However, the protective effect of an intimate relationship on the proneness to depression among those with low self-esteem shows that the developmental phase of young adulthood may be a turning point in such a trajectory.

The protective effect of an intimate relationship on young adults from divorced families was similar to the effect on those from nondivorced families. However, the extra risk due to parental divorce existed in the presence of an intimate relationship. Males and females probably have different reasons for this. Females with a history of parental divorce were more likely to get divorced themselves and to report problems and conflicts with spouse than females from nondivorced families (Aro and Palosaari, 1992) and the discord may bring to their mind threatening memories of parental divorce (Wallenstein and Corbin, 1989). Among males from divorced families, failures in job activities may indicate vulnerability to depression. In addition, parental divorce among both genders may indicate additional stressful life courses, which are not compensated for by intimate relationships.

References

Brown, G., Harris, T. and Bifulco, A. (1986b) Long-term effects of early loss of parent. In: M. Rutter et al. (Eds.), Depression