

# The Impact of Divorce on Romantic Relationship\*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of parental divorce on romantic relationships using educational survey data from Taiwan. In contrast to previous literature, I did not find that parental divorce has any impact on the willingness to marry or on getting married by the age of 25. However, I did find that individuals from divorced families tend to have more boyfriends or girlfriends in their lives (increasing by 25%). The mechanism is discussed in the paper.

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\*Replication code and data are available at [GitHub](#).

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# 1 Introduction

Parental divorce is a significant life event that can have a profound impact on an individual's life. Children of divorced parents may experience emotional insecurity and other disadvantages that could affect their own romantic relationships. However, whether and to what extent to these adverse experiences play a role is an empirical question. In this paper, I use longitude survey data from Taiwan to address this issue.

Previous studies in sociology and psychology have extensively documented the adverse effects of divorce on children. These studies reveal that children from divorced families have more disadvantages in academic performance, mental health, and social relationships compared to children from intact families ([Amato and Keith, 1991](#); [Amato, 2001, 2010](#)). In particular, experiencing parental divorce in childhood has been shown to decrease marital satisfaction and increase the likelihood of future relationship dissolution ([Bartell, 2013](#); [Cui et al., 2011](#); [Jacquet and Surra, 2001](#)).

However, existing studies fail to recognize the cause and effect of parental divorce on romantic relationships due to data limitations. The majority of studies have used cross-sectional data, which can only provide correlational evidence (e.g., [Riggio, 2004](#); [Riggio and Valenzuela, 2011](#)). Recent studies have used longitudinal data, but either in a short period (e.g., six years in [Cui and Fincham, 2010](#)) or with a lack of sample size (e.g., 500 samples in [Lee, 2018](#)). To overcome these limitations, I used the Taiwan Education Panel Survey (TEPS), which tracked 2,500 high school students in Taiwan over two decades. Moreover, with hundreds of variables in this dataset, my multivariate regression provides a more satisfying causal inference.

In fact, I found enriching results that are not mentioned in the literature. For instance, I found that people from divorced families are indifferent to those from intact families in terms of willingness to marry and marital status in their 25s. However, the number of romantic relationships between the two groups is significantly different, with people from divorced

families having 25% more lovers than those from intact families. Additionally, I found that this phenomenon is more likely due to differences in opinions about romantic relationships rather than emotional demands.

The paper proceeds as follows: I introduce the dataset in section 2, specify the empirical strategy in section 3, present the results in section 4, and conclude in section 5.

## **2 Data and Sample**

### **2.1 Data**

The data for this paper was obtained from the Taiwan Education Panel Survey (TEPS) and its extended version (TEPS-B), which surveyed high school students in Taiwan across multiple cohorts and waves. The dataset includes information on whether they experienced parental divorce, their marriage status, their attitude towards marriage, and other various variables related to their family, education, and personal information.

### **2.2 Sample**

My sample consists of representative students born in 1988-1989 who were surveyed during their first year of junior high school in 2001 (12 years old), their third year of senior high school in 2007 (18 years old), and again at around 25 years old in 2014. We define people from divorced families, our treatment group, as those who experienced parental divorce or separation before 2007 (18 years old). People from intact families, our control group, are defined as those who did not experience parental divorce, separation, or death. It is worth noting that my sample includes single-parent families resulting from divorce and excludes those resulting from death, which some previous studies have failed to consider.

### 3 Empirical Specifications

My empirical strategy involves estimating the following regression:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \cdot \textit{ParentDivSep}_i + X_i\beta + \varepsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

$Y_i$  is the outcome of interest for individual  $i$  in 2014 (25 years old): **Married**, which equals 1 if married, and 0 otherwise; **Couple**, which equals 1 if having a current partner, and 0 otherwise; **Want Marriage**, which were on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating a complete lack of interest in getting married and 5 indicating a strong desire to get married; **Meet Partner**, which were on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating a low chance of meeting their soulmate and 4 indicating a high chance of meeting their soulmate; **Num of Lovers**, which indicates the number of lovers since high school (min = 0, max = 15); **Opinions toward marriage**, which were on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating a “strongly agree”; **Frequency of negative feelings**, which were on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “seldom” and 4 indicating “always.”

$\textit{ParentDivSep}_i$  is the treatment dummy surveyed in 2007 (18 years old). It indicates whether individual  $i$  have experienced parental divorce or separation.  $\beta_1$  is the coefficient of interest, which measures the change in outcomes among people from divorced families, relative to the change of those from intact families.

$X_i$  refers to the control variables surveyed in 2001 (12 years old). These variables include gender, family income, parental education, parenting style, living city, timing of sexual characteristics, number of siblings, and test scores in junior high school. These variables are distant from the outcome variables in 2014 and the treatment variable in 2007, which prevents them from being considered bad controls (mediators). Moreover, family-related responses are obtained from the participants’ parents, which mitigates measurement error.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Main Results

Table 1 shows the summary statistics of outcome variables by groups, and Table 2 shows the formal regressions results. I found no significant difference between people from divorced families and those from intact families in terms of whether they were married at 25 years old and how much they wanted to get married in the future.<sup>1</sup> However, I did find that people from divorced families, compared to those from intact families, were more likely to have a partner at 25 years old, more likely to meet a feasible future soulmate, and had more boyfriends or girlfriends since high school. Specifically, I noted an approximately 25% increase in the number of boyfriends or girlfriends.

Given that the willingness to marry is indifferent, having plentiful lovers seems arcane. One potential explanation is that people from divorced families may be more flexible in romantic relationships, leading them to end unsuitable ones and start new ones. Another explanation is that individuals from divorced families may seek partners who resemble their divorced parents in order to fulfill emotional needs. Since both of these possibilities are plausible, I plan to use data to test them in the next two sessions.

### 4.2 Possible Mechanism 1: Marriage Attitude

In the 2014 survey, participants were asked about several statements expressing unconventional opinions about marriage. Table 3 presents the regression results for regressing these opinions on the treatment variable. Four out of six coefficients of the treatment variable are significantly positive, indicating that people from divorced families are more likely to hold non-conservative marital views. This openness to marriage may result in their having more relationship experience than people from intact families.

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<sup>1</sup>One might suspect that the null result is due to only 3% of people getting married at 25 years old. However, I reran the regressions for **Married (30 years old)** using 2019 survey data when 70% of people get married, and the null results remained.

### 4.3 Possible Mechanism 2: Emotional Demand

In the 2014 survey, participants were asked about how frequently they experienced negative feelings. Table 4 presents the regression results for regressing these negative feelings on the treatment variable. Contrary to the literature that suggests parental divorce has a strong negative impact on emotions, only two out of eleven coefficients of the treatment variable are significantly positive. This suggests that people from divorced families do not necessarily struggle in life or have a greater need to seek romantic relationships than those from intact families.<sup>2</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Using survey data from Taiwan, I examined the causes and effects of parental divorce on romantic relationships. I found that parental divorce has no impact on willingness to marry or on whether individuals get married, but it does increase the number of romantic relationships by 25%. The reason behind is more likely to be a difference in attitudes toward marriage rather than emotional needs. However, I note that these findings do not directly support or refute the mechanisms, but rather provide additional materials for this complicated social issue.

Our main contribution is utilizing a longitudinal data structure with informative variables, which provides a more satisfying causal inference than related literature. Future studies could take advantage of the abundant variables in the data to use machine learning methods to identify causal effects, or consider a design-based regression method to establish a stronger causal relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the dataset allows me to identify the timing of divorce and the quality of parental marriage, which are important factors that can lead to a more comprehensive investigation.

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<sup>2</sup>In fact, according to the 2019 survey, women from divorced families were found to be slightly happier than those from intact families.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, several waves of legal adjustments have made divorce more favorable (fair) for women in Taiwan. This change could serve as an exogenous shock for the difference-in-differences method.

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# Tables

Table 1: Summary Statistics

Variable	All	Intact	Divorced
Married (in 2014)	0.030 (0.169)	0.029 (0.166)	0.038 (0.191)
Couple (in 2014)	0.435 (0.496)	0.428 (0.495)	0.492 (0.501)
Want Marriage (1-5)	2.896 (0.991)	2.895 (0.986)	2.905 (1.029)
Meet Partner (1-4)	1.937 (0.840)	1.925 (0.834)	2.038 (0.889)
Num of Lovers (0-15)	1.667 (1.466)	1.622 (1.443)	2.057 (1.600)
Observation	2,512	2,248	264

*Notes:* Outcome variable means are presented in each cell, with the standard deviation in parentheses. The first column presents all observations. The second column presents individuals from intact families (control group), and the third column presents individuals from divorced families (treatment group).

Table 2: Main Results: Romantic Relationship

Variable	(1) Married (in 2014)	(2) Couple (in 2014)	(3) Want Marriage	(4) Meet Partner	(5) Num of Lovers
ParentDivSep	0.003 (0.013)	0.075* (0.037)	0.022 (0.077)	0.139* (0.068)	0.418*** (0.119)
Constant	0.041 (0.038)	0.263* (0.106)	2.794*** (0.222)	1.737*** (0.176)	2.305*** (0.302)
Control Variables	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,381	2,381	2,377	2,377	2,372

*Notes:* This table displays the estimated coefficients of  $\beta_1$  from equation 1. The coefficient stands for the average treatment effect of parental divorce. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Each column regresses different outcome variables on the treatment variable. Column (1) regresses whether the individual has a spouse, while column (2) regresses whether the individual has a partner. Column (3) regresses the willingness to marry, which ranges from 1 to 5, while column (4) regresses how often the individual has a chance to meet a soulmate, which ranges from 1 to 4. Finally, column (5) regresses on the number of boyfriends or girlfriends since high school. All of the regressions are controlled for gender, family income, parental education, parenting style, living city, timing of sexual characteristics, number of siblings, and test scores in junior high school.

\*\*\* significant at the 0.1 percent level, \*\* significant at the 1 percent level, \* significant at the 5 percent level, and † significant at the 10 percent level.



Table 3: Possible Mechanism: Marriage Attitude

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Variables	Marriage w/o Child	Cohabiting w/o Marriage	Child w/o Marriage
ParentDivSep	0.142 (0.092)	0.188* (0.083)	0.251** (0.084)
Constant	3.270*** (0.233)	2.899*** (0.226)	2.302*** (0.234)
Control Variables	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,381	2,380	2,380

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	(4)	(5)	(6)
Variables	Pessimistic	Same-sex Marriage	Same-sex w/ Child
ParentDivSep	0.257*** (0.075)	0.156† (0.081)	0.092 (0.078)
Constant	2.993*** (0.216)	1.820*** (0.226)	2.512*** (0.220)
Control Variables	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,380	2,380	2,378

*Notes:* This table displays the estimated coefficients of  $\beta_1$  from equation 1. The coefficient stands for the average treatment effect of parental divorce. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Each column represents a regression of a different attitude statement related to marriage on the treatment variable. Responses range from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning "strongly disagree" and 5 meaning "strongly agree". The following statements are involved: (1) Marriage without having a child, (2) Couples cohabiting without marriage, (3) Having children without marriage, (4) Only a few couples could have happy lives, (5) Same-sex couples could get married, (6) Same-sex couples could take care of children. All of the regressions are controlled for gender, family income, parental education, parenting style, city of residence, timing of sexual maturity, number of siblings, and test scores in junior high school.

\*\*\* significant at the 0.1 percent level, \*\* significant at the 1 percent level, \* significant at the 5 percent level, and † significant at the 10 percent level.

Table 4: Possible Mechanism: Emotional Demand

Variables	(1) Inappetence	(2) Heavy	(3) Insomnia	(4) Bad Mood	(5) Irritated	(6) Loneliness
ParentDivSep	0.063 (0.062)	0.078 (0.061)	0.107 (0.068)	0.112† (0.062)	0.062 (0.044)	0.057 (0.055)
Constant	1.704*** (0.165)	1.782*** (0.159)	1.545*** (0.186)	1.936*** (0.155)	1.261*** (0.114)	1.507*** (0.145)
Control Variables	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,381	2,381	2,381	2,381	2,381	2,381

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Variables	(7) Unfriendly	(8) Sadness	(9) Unmotivated	(10) Untrustworthy	(11) Despair
ParentDivSep	0.065 (0.046)	0.111* (0.051)	0.071 (0.063)	0.044 (0.054)	0.015 (0.022)
Constant	1.187*** (0.118)	1.298*** (0.126)	1.625*** (0.160)	1.702*** (0.147)	1.026*** (0.049)
Control Variables	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Observations	2,381	2,381	2,381	2,381	2,381

*Notes:* This table displays the estimated coefficients of  $\beta_1$  from equation 1. The coefficient stands for the average treatment effect of parental divorce. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses.

Each column represents a regression of different frequencies of negative feelings on the treatment variable. Responses range from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning “seldom” and 4 meaning “always.” The negative feelings being regressed are: (1) Not having an appetite, (2) Feeling that everything is a struggle, (3) Having poor sleep, (4) Being in a bad mood, (5) Wanting to shout, throw something, or hit someone, (6) Feeling lonely, (7) Feeling that other people are unfriendly, (8) Feeling sad, (9) Feeling unmotivated, (10) Feeling that others are untrustworthy, and (11) Not wanting to live. All of the regressions are controlled for gender, family income, parental education, parenting style, living city, timing of sexual characteristics, number of siblings, and test scores in junior high school.

\*\*\* significant at the 0.1 percent level, \*\* significant at the 1 percent level, \* significant at the 5 percent level, and † significant at the 10 percent level.