PERSONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF SEPARATED COUPLES' ADOLESCENT CHILDREN: A BASIS FOR A PROPOSED PROACTIVE VALUES PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the personal and psychological profile of adolescent children of separated couples. In particular, the research determined the differences in the said variables when respondents were grouped according to age, gender, grade-point average, custodial parent, length of parental separation and status of custodial parent. Sixty-eight (68) high school students, who were purposively chosen after an initial survey of the marital status of their parents, were the respondents of the study. Significant differences in the following: (1) the areas of warmth, intelligence, conformity apprehension and extraversion and adolescents' age, (2) anxiety and gender; (3) conformity and grade-point average; (4);withdrawal and custodial parents (5) withdrawal, self-sufficiency, anxiety and length of parental separation (6) investing in close friends and age ; (7) developing social support, seeking spiritual support seeking professional support, relaxing and gender; (8) seeking diversion, being humorous and grade-point average; (9) being humorous and length of parental separation. Findings of this study became the basis for the development of a proposed proactive values program.

Key words: personality traits, psychological profile, adolescent children, separated couples.

INTRODUCTION

In the past three or four decades, marital separation in the Philippines was generally perceived as an experience for only limited number of couples. In those times, husbands and wives were expected to keep the marriage no matter how difficult the marital situation. They had to stay together to protect the names of the families involved, to uphold the sanctity of marriage and for the sake of the children.

The issue of divorce in the 1970's did not die down with the codification of legal separation, now commonly known as marital annulment. Filipino couples have not stopped exploring and hoping for a way out of their marriage-turned prison. Much talk on separation is focused on the benefits it will have on the spouses. Taking the backseat in the discussion is the effect it will have on the children.

The presumption seems to be that the good effects it will have for the spouses will naturally and necessarily trickle down to the children. Indeed, this has been the observation of Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) who said that traditional belief was for unhappily married couples to stick it out "for the good of the children". But it has changed. Today's dictum, they say, proclaims that unhappy couples might as well separate for the good of the children.

Parental separation has been found to have negative effects on children and adolescents, as demonstrated by numerous studies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Kurdek & Siesky 1980; Hetherington, M. Cox & R. Cox, 1979). Adolescence is a very crucial stage in the developmental stages of an individual, characterized by a complex set of developmental tasks or demands which move the young person from childhood to young adulthood. Dealing with the changes of their developmental stage as well as the potentially traumatic nature of marital dissolution can be overburdening. Compared to adolescents living in intact families, adolescents whose parents are separated experience problems that are intense in nature. Hence, a lot of his energy is expended in dealing with the various changes he experiences.

Catholic schools are not exempted from having these adolescents who are children of separated parents. As per record in one of the catholic schools, ninety-five percent (95%) of reported behavior-related problems in the Prefect's office were children of separated parents. This prompted the researcher to look into the personality characteristics and coping strategies of adolescents. Recognizing the fact that students with separated parents are prone to develop more serious problems in the future, the researcher intends to develop a proactive values program to enhance adolescents' positive perception of self and strengthen developmental strategies.

The main objective of the study is to determine the personality characteristics and coping strategies of separated couple's adolescent children which will be the basis for the development of a proposed proactive values program for this group of students.

REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

The Trend of Parental Separation

Parental Separation has become a common experience to many children (Hetherington, M. Cox, & R. Cox, 1982). Between the 1970 and 1989 the proportion of children living in single-parent families doubled whereas the proportion of those living with two parents declined by 12 percentage points. Even in Israel, a relatively small country, the rate of divorce has increased by more than 50% since the mid-'70s (Guttman, 1993).

In Canada, as in the United States, growing proportions of children are experiencing their parents' separation at an increasingly early age (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). In Norway, based on recent statistics, almost every second marriage (47.8%) will end in divorce (Statistics Norway, 2002) The Norwegian Government has provided special laws and regulations as an effort to counteract the negative effects of divorce on children. Newly separated couples are offered family counseling. The non-resident parent is obliged by law to contribute financially to the daily costs of raising his or her children.

Researchers (Barrameda, 1989; Agravante-Go, 1998, Albert, 2001) lament the dearth of local scientific studies on parental separations, particularly on their effects on children. Agravante-Go (1998) surmised it could be the sensitive nature of the topic that is keeping researchers off. Go (1993) explained that studies seem to depend in the prominent issues of a particular decade.

Parental separation is definitely on the rise in the Philippines. Although divorce per se is not a legal option – Congress is still debating on the issue – the Philippines has its own version called "divorce – Filipino style" via the declaration of nullity of marriage, or simply informal separations. The National Statistics Office (1997, as cited in Go, 1997) reports that regardless of the fluctuating number of annulment cases filed in civil courts, the number of actual marriages annulled has steadily increased.

One of the earlier studies that dealt with marital split ups among Filipinos was an informal survey by Wiley (1982, as cited in Barrameda, 1989; Sevilla, 1982; Go, 1993; Agravante-Go, 1998; Albert, 2001) of sixth and seventh grade students from both public and private schools in various urban and rural areas. The author identified the following features: (a) the larger percentage of marital dissolution occurs at the extreme ends of the income spectrum among the very poor and the very rich; (b) the pressures on marital structures are more strongly felt in the urban and industrialized centers; (c) in most cases, the pattern is the father to leave the wife and children.

Parental Separation and Its Effects on Children

Two of the most classic studies that examined the implication of divorce on children were those made by Hetherington, M. Cox, and R. Cox and Wallerstein and Kelly in the early 1970s (Levitin,1979 as cited by Agravante-Go, 1998). The results of these studies indicated that the first year following divorce is the most difficult for the children emotionally and behaviorally. They were found to be distressed and in pain. Moreover, they were observed to be more aggressive, less compliant, lacking in self-control, distractible, in demand for attention, helpless, often experience difficulties in social relationship and exhibit more problems in school than children from intact families.

A recent study of I. Storsken (2005) about adolescents with a childhood experience of parental divorce found that children of divorce had a negative relative change in symptoms of anxiety and depression, subjective well-being, self-esteem and school problems during the four-year period of mid-adolescence. This implied that the development of psychological distress and adjustment problems during adolescence differs between those with a childhood experience of divorce and those with no such experience.

Coping behaviors and strategies of adolescent children when faced with difficult situations like parental separation is another factor supported by studies of Patterson & McCubbin (1987), Armistead et.al., (1988) Hartley, (1990) Santiago(2003), Agravante-Go (1998), Albert (2001). Their findings indicated that adolescents employed different coping strategies when faced with difficult situations like family disruption. However, most of their findings indicated that in order to adjust, accept and move on with a new life, adolescents often made use of negative externalizing coping strategies. They have indicated also in their findings the gender differences in the use of coping strategies.

Factors Influencing Children's Reactions to Parental Separation
The reactions of children to parental separation are influenced by several factors. Age is one fixed variable that seems to play an important role in children's response to parental separation. Kalter and Rembar (1981 as cited by Agravante-Go, 1998) mark the importance of timing of parental separation in the life of the child. Studies have clearly stated that the child's development has a relationship to the child's experience and emotional development at the time of marital break up. In general, children whose parents separate have moderately poorer outcomes (i.e. emotional well-being, a variety of conduct related difficulties, academic achievement, physical health, teenage childbearing and labor force participation) than children living in continuously intact two-parent families (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Two meta studies (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001 as cited by I. Storsken et.,al., 2005) show that there is modest support for

larger effects of divorce among boys than among girls, at least in some areas of adjustment. Still the main conclusion is that divorce is associated with adjustment problems irrespective of gender.

Batacan (2000) made a survey entitled "Profile of Adolescents with Separated Parents: Their Self-Esteem, Academic Performance, Misbehavior, Interpersonal Skills, Stress and Coping Styles". Female adolescents with separated parents have lower academic performance compared to those from intact families.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Respondents of this descriptive comparative study were sixty eight (68) high school students of a private catholic institution, sampled purposively. Majority of the respondents were males (54%) between 12-14 years old (51%), with a grade-point average of 79 and below (59%). More than half (65%) are staying with their biological parents who were separated from their marital partners for less than 5 years (51%). Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents' parents did not remarry after the separation.

INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

Personal data sheets were distributed among the high school students in order to determine who among them have separated parents. Seventy-two (72) adolescent children qualified for the study but sixty-eight (68) participated during the administration of the standardized tests. They were made to answer High School Personality questionnaire (HSPQ), youth version of 16PF developed by Raymond B. Cattell and Adolescent Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (A-COPE) developed by Hamilton I.Mc Cubbin.

HSPQ consist of 142 questions which measures 14 primary personality characteristics. Each scale- Warmth, Intelligence, Emotional Stability, Excitability, Dominance, Enthusiasm, Conformity, Boldness, Sensitivity, Withdrawal, Apprehension, Self-Sufficiency, Self-

Discipline and Tension- measures a unique personality dimension that has shown to be important in predicting and understanding a variety of social, clinical, occupational and school behaviors.

A-COPE is self-report coping inventory designed to measure the behaviors adolescent find helpful in managing problems or difficult situations. The 54-item questionnaire were rated by the respondents using a five-point Likert scale (1-Never; 2-Seldom; 3- Sometimes; 4-Often; 5 Most of the time) to indicate how they behaved in each of the described ways when faced with difficulties or when feeling tense.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. Differences in the personality characteristics of the respondents when grouped according to age.

Table 1 Comparing Personality Characteristics when grouped according to Age

Personality Characteristics	12-14 years old N=35		15-17 years old N=33		t-test results	p-value	VI
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD			
Warmth	4.56	1.87	5.78	1.81	2.74	0.008	S
Intelligence	3.31	1.77	4.84	1.05	3.62	0.001	S
Conformity	4.5	1.75	5.5	1.78	2.34	0.02	S
Apprehension	4.58	1.95	5.68	1.75	2.45	0.02	S
Extraversion	4.4	1.31	5.17	1.57	2.2	0.03	S

To determine the different personality characteristics and coping strategies often employed by the respondents, t-test for independent group was employed. Results on table 1 show significant differences in the areas of warmth, intelligence, conformity, apprehension and extraversion. Findings show that the older adolescents are more socially outgoing, intelligent, persevering. However, having the

experience of parental separation, they cannot avoid worrying about the future family situations and their future relationships as well.

2. Difference in the personality characteristics of separated couples adolescent children when grouped according to length of parental separation.

Table 2 Comparing Personality Characteristics when grouped according to length of Parental Separation

Personality Characteristics	Less than 5 years N= 35		5 years and above N= 33		t-test results	p-value	VI
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD			
Withdrawal	6.57	1.67	5.49	1.52	2.8	0.01	S
Self-Sufficiency	5.54	1.42	6.36	1.71	2.16	0.04	S
Anxiety	5.45	1.37	6.3	1.47	2.45	0.02	S

Results in table 2 indicated that the respondents whose parents were separated for five years or more are more self-sufficient but anxious than those whose parents were separated for less than 5 years. A close inspection of the respondents' scores in the items of the HSPQ revealed that those with an experience of marital break up for 5 years or more were accustomed in making their own decisions and became resourceful about life demands. However, they cannot avoid worrying about their future relationships if it can last.

3. Differences in the coping strategies of the respondents in the event of family disruption.

Table 3 Comparing Coping Strategies when grouped according to Gender

Coping Strategies	Male N=37		Female N=31		t-test value	p-value	VI
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD			
Developing Social Support	3.17	0.53	3.54	0.51	2.95	0.004	S
Seeking Spiritual Support	3.1	0.56	3.61	0.84	3.01	0.004	S
Seeking Professional Support	2.32	0.82	2.81	0.91	2.3	0.03	S
Relaxing	3.05	0.49	3.33	0.62	2.04	0.05	S

Results indicated significant differences among female respondents who made use more of the social support, spiritual support, professional support and relaxation as their coping strategies when faced with difficult situations like the experience of parental separation.

The findings regarding the use of seeking spiritual support is similar with the findings of Santiago (2004) that females often engage themselves to prayer and going to church when faced with difficult situation.

Discussion

The prevalent personality characteristics of the adolescent respondents when grouped according to the variables used in the study were dominance, sensitivity, withdrawal, self-sufficiency and anxiety.

Majority of the adolescent respondents are well provided financially by their custodial parents that is why they feel dominant from others. A close inspection of the respondents' responses during

the interview revealed that they feel insecure when they see parents of their classmates during school activities. Furthermore, adolescents who experienced marital separation cannot keep themselves from feeling angry with their parents or from holding one parent to blame for the separation (Bumpass, 2000). Females often became anxious about their future marital relationship for fear of similar experience with that of their parents.

Guidance records of grade-point average and school organizations revealed that the older adolescents show greater interest in school-related activities, popularity and election to leadership. However, the answers of the respondents from the interview conducted by the researcher revealed that the older adolescents get emotionally upset by pressure from authority although they were concerned about group standards and conformity.

It is also important to note that the respondents whose parents were separated for less than 5 years are more withdrawn than those whose parents were separated for more than five years. This is indicative that they are guarded and wrapped up in self because of the experience of parental separation. This is consistent with the findings of Wallerstein & Kelly (1980) and Hetherington et al., (1982) that the first year of separation is the most difficult time for the children in terms of emotional, social and personal acceptance. Most often, children during the first year of separation experienced intense shock, fear and sadness. Two to five years after the separation, the negative reactions diminished although most of these reactions did not actually disappear. But compared to the behavior of those coming from intact families, studies have shown that children of separated parents still exhibit problems in areas of adjustment and scholastic performance.

In terms of coping strategies the respondents often employed *avoiding problems, being humorous, seeking spiritual support and investing in close friends*. Adolescents may choose to run away from difficulties, use drugs as a way to relax, and/or become involved in relationships which may involve their meeting such "requirements" as drinking, smoking, or using illegal drugs.

CONCLUSION

Given the rapidly increasing number of marital dissolution in the Philippines today, a staggering number of children are experiencing family disruption. Schools nowadays are faced with the rising number of students who witness marital conflicts and separation. As a group, these adolescent children often feel a sense of shame and stigma when being compared to peers from intact families. Thus, it is highly recommended from the results of the study to develop a proactive values program to create a venue for adolescents to express their feelings and discuss their coping strategies when faced with difficult situations. Adolescent children are in the process of transition from childhood to adulthood and most of them are experiencing the burden and confusion of their developmental stage.

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