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*Full Length Research Paper*

## Impact of divorce on adolescent students in Ghana

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact parental divorce has on adolescent students in Senior High Schools in Ghana and whether gender differences exist in the impact as well as the internalizing and externalizing types of behaviours. The participants comprised of adolescent students from four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. A purposive sample of 396 students consisting of 198 males and 198 females participated in the study. The cross-sectional descriptive survey, using a questionnaire, was adopted in collecting the data. The questionnaire had Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. The results of the study indicated that parental divorce greatly impacted both male and female adolescents. Male adolescents showed more internalizing and externalizing behaviours than female adolescents. It is recommended that counselling be given to adolescent students in schools from divorced homes and that teachers should make efforts to identify such adolescent students. Parents should also be sensitized on the impact of divorce on their children.

**Key words:** Impact of divorce, externalizing behaviour, internalizing behaviour.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Adolescence has been noted as a crucial period of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional transformations (Kelly, 2004). It is also recognized that perhaps the most influential determinant of adolescent success with the negotiation to adulthood is family structure (Fallon & Bowles, 2001). Indeed, to a large extent, family structure determines adolescents' academic and psychosocial development (Brown, 2006). In particular, family structure bears important implications on adolescents' abilities to successfully navigate through school and into adulthood. However, a key barrier to this success is divorce.

Boney (2003) highlighted the negative effects of divorce on adolescent development. They found that divorce

disrupts adolescents' academic development. School engagement research denoted that adolescents from divorced families struggle with becoming academically and socially engaged in school (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1996). Amato (2008) observed that after divorce adolescents experienced anger, fear, loneliness, depression and guilt. Some feel pushed into adulthood if they must take responsibility for many new chores or care of siblings.

Secombe and Warner (2003) proposed that divorce causes four major sources of stress for children: fear of change, loss of attachment, feelings of abandonment, and tension from exposure to hostile parents. They further noted that most children experienced extreme difficulties with adjusting to the first year of the divorce. Kelly (1990) studied 520 adolescents in the USA and indicated that 68% of them from divorced homes demonstrated

internalizing (conditions whose central feature is disordered mood or emotion) problems such as anxiety, depression, withdrawal, insecurity, nervousness and low self – esteem. These same children demonstrated externalizing (anti-social behaviour) problems including aggression, had more difficulties in their peer relationships, were less compliant with authority figures and showed problem behaviours at school.

Amato and Keith (1991b) conducted a meta-analytic review of studies investigating the differences between children from separated and intact families. The review included 92 studies published between 1950 and 1989, the majority of which were conducted in the United States. The results indicated more favourable outcomes for children from intact families. Cockett and Tripp (1994) also reported that adolescents from separated families showed higher levels of sad and worried behaviours, reported more often of psychosomatic and anxiety symptoms as well as unhappiness and lower self-esteem. Adolescents from separated families are also more likely to report depressed mood and to be diagnosed with mood and anxiety disorders (Elliott & Richards, 1991).

Lipsey and Derzon (1998) have reported that adolescents who experience parental divorce tend to act on their impulse, and their impulsiveness is the most crucial personality dimension that predicts externalizing behaviours. Adolescents from divorced families are reported to commit more delinquent acts including drunkenness in public places, fighting, stealing and misdemeanours (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992). Vars (1998) indicated that 88% of students from divorce homes experienced academic and social difficulties with the middle school transition. From a review of 25 Australian studies, Rodgers (1996b) concluded that parental separation was associated with adolescent and adult outcomes. The strongest effects seen in adolescents were substance use and delinquency, attempted suicides, psychiatric symptoms and criminality in adulthood. Studies in Britain (Rodgers, Power, & Hope, 1997), New Zealand (Fergusson, Horwood & Lynskey 1994), Finland (Aro & Pollasaari, 1992), China (Liu, 2000) and the Netherlands (Garnefski & Diekstra, 1997) have also found lower levels of adjustment in children from separated families. Gender-based research has indicated that boys are more negatively affected by divorce than are adolescent girls (Amato & Keith, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). They reported that more boys than girls struggled with making mental and verbal sense of divorce. They also found that in comparison to girls, boys from divorced families developed lower self-esteem and were more likely to display aggression at home and in school. In a subsequent meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (2001) revealed that marital disruption lowered boys' academic performances in reading and mathematics. Further, more boys than girls from divorced families tended to quit school.

Hetherington (1993) and Hetherington and Kelly (2002) noted that more boys than girls become depressed about the divorce of their parents. Boys were more likely than girls to use blaming, withdrawal, and inattentiveness as responses to divorce. Hetherington's findings pointed to research on boys' tendencies to maintain few friendships and form smaller support systems (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 2003).

Contrary to earlier beliefs that parental separation leads to more adverse consequences for boys, some studies have found more adverse outcomes for adolescent girls (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). Using longitudinal data from the second wave of the United States National Survey of Children (NSC) study (when children were aged between 11 and 16 years), Allison and Furstenberg (1989) found that adolescent girls from separated families had higher levels of teacher-rated problem behaviour and self-rated dissatisfaction and distress compared to adolescent boys from separated families.

Several theories have been put forward to explain the impact of divorce on adolescents and types of behaviours they demonstrate after divorce. The social learning theory, Bandura (1977), is concerned with the relationship between social and environmental factors and their influence on behaviour. According to this view, children learn through observing the behaviour of others especially their parents and by imitating them, which is referred to as modelling. Bandura (1986) therefore believed that if any force (e.g. divorce) disorganized the unit in which the modelling is taking place then the younger ones who are doing the modelling are affected. It is in the light of this that divorce is seen as having a negative impact on adolescents. Erikson (1968), in his psychosocial theory, labelled the adolescent stage as one involving a search for identity or a series of identities, which even become a "crises of identity" in some cases. He believed that the adolescent is involved in a struggle to discover who he/she is and his/her essence. He believed that the chief task of the adolescent is to confront the crisis of identity versus identity confusion or role confusion, so as to become a balanced adult with a coherent sense of self and valued role in society. The adolescent needs his/her parents and important or significant others to offer alternative suggestions for proper formation of identity. According to Erikson (1968), any force (e.g. divorce) that exerts additional pressure on an adolescent put him/her in a state of disequilibrium and deepens the crises for identity formation. Erikson (1968) believed that the adolescent is at a critical stage and any destabilization which has effect on the adolescent such as divorce creates adjustment problems for the individual. Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) stated that when family attachment is severed by divorce, children's attachment style is replaced by feelings of anger, resentment, and confusion. As children mature in age, their altered attachment style prevents them from forming

meaningful relationships. In addition, children begin to show maladaptive behaviors toward new, but pivotal life experiences. Divorce rate has increased during 21st century and at current rates, it is predicted that between two-fifths and two-thirds of all recent first marriages will end in divorce or separation. DeBord (1997) further expressed the view that the high rate of marital dissolution means that about 40% of adolescent children will experience a parental divorce prior to the age of 20. He emphasized that although a substantial risk of family disruption has always been present, today it is much more likely to be caused by divorce. Hewitt, Skrbis & Western (2008) have indicated that changes to family life in Australia over the last century have been numerous. One such change has been the increase in the number of couples divorcing. Accordingly about half of divorces involve children under the age of 18 years and it is estimated that around 25% of children are living in households with only one parent (De Vaus, 2004).

In Ghana, Mainoo (2008) reported that records available in Ghana show a progressive increase in divorce over the past years. The Ghana Demographic and Housing Statistics [GDHS], (2005) has found that due to the increasing numbers of single-parent, mother-headed homes in Ghana, more Ghanaian youths (4.5 million) continue to experience varying factors that affect their psychosocial adjustment following parental divorce. Ankomah (2002) and Mainoo (2008) have reported the serious lack of empirical literature on divorce studies in Ghana. The purpose of this study is to determine the impact parental divorce has on adolescent students in Senior High Schools in Ghana and whether gender differences exist in the impact as well as the internalizing and externalizing types of behaviours.

The study was guided by the following research questions;

- 1). What impact does parental divorce have on adolescent students?
- 2). What gender differences exist in the impact of parental divorce on adolescent students?
- 3). What gender differences exist in the internalizing types of behaviours for adolescent students?
- 4). What gender differences exist in the externalizing types of behaviours for adolescent students?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The target population comprised of adolescent students from the four Senior High Schools in Obuasi Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. The population of the Senior High School students in Obuasi Municipality was 8,520 students.

### **Sample and Sampling Procedure**

The sample consisted of 396 respondents out of the 8,520 students in the schools. The sample size was guided by Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula for sample selection. The 396 participants consisted of 198 males and 198 females.

Purposive sampling method was used to select the participants for the study since the list of students who came from divorced homes was not available. In each school, the lead researcher, together with some of the teachers moved from class to class to ask for students who were not staying with both biological parents to move into a secured classroom. The students were given follow-up questions such as why they were not living with both biological parents and whether their parents were divorced. The responses led to the identification of the appropriate students.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was cross sectional survey design which utilized a structured questionnaire for the collection of quantitative data involving multiple variables that were examined to detect impact and patterns of differences. Surveys enable an examination of "large and small populations (or universes) by selecting and studying samples chosen from the populations to discover the relative incidence, distribution, and interrelations of sociological and psychological variables" (Kerlinger, 1986, p. 377). The major variables used in the study were impact of divorce, internalizing types of behaviour and externalizing types of behaviour.

### **Instrument**

The main instrument for the study was a questionnaire. Questionnaire is a widely used and is a useful instrument for collecting survey information as it provides structured and often numerical data. It is also useful for the collection of data without the presence of the researcher and it is comparatively straight forward to analyze (Cohen et al, 2005). However, a questionnaire has some weaknesses. It is expensive and time consuming to produce. Respondents may also not provide honest answers to questions since the method normally involves the use of structured questions. To overcome the problems associated with the questionnaire the instrument for this study was structured such that respondents were given the opportunity to only tick the answers to the items. Formulated research questions and hypotheses informed the development of the items in addition to references made to available literatures. In addition, a thorough examination of the theories that were relevant to the research questions in order to identify

**Table 1.** Frequency of the Effects of Divorce on Adolescents

Impact	N	Percentage
Negative effect	328	82.8
Positive effect	16	4.0
No effect	24	6.1
Uncertain	28	7.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2.** Independent Sample t – test analysis of Gender Difference for Impact of Divorce on Adolescent Students

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Male	198	1.39	0.92			
Female	198	1.36	0.85	394	0.341	0.734

concepts that had bearing on externalizing and internalizing measures of adolescents of divorced families was made.

The instrument is a 33-item self-reporting instrument utilizing Likert type response scale which facilitated numerical coding of data. The entire instrument was arranged into content sub-sections A and B. Section A consisted of 13 demographic and background survey items. Section B consisted of 30 measures generated through prior research to tap appropriate conceptual domains for this study. There were 2 boxes, with the headings; ‘Before my Parents Divorce’ and, ‘After my Parents Divorce’. Respondents were instructed to circle the appropriate number that corresponded to their most suitable option from the rating scale provided. (i.e. 1 = Not at all true of me, 2 = Somewhat true of me, 3 = Often true of me, 4 = Very often true of me, and 5 = Always true of me). Ten items in the questionnaire addressed adolescent externalizing type of behaviours (items 14 - 23), followed by another ten items that addressed internalizing types of behaviours (item 24 – 33). The initial items were reviewed by educational researchers to ascertain content validity and then piloted. The piloted items were then refined for use. In terms of reliability, the externalizing behaviours scale had a Cronbach’s alpha value of .84 while the internalizing scale also had alpha value of .84.

**Data Collection Procedure**

A letter of introduction to request for permission to conduct the main study in schools in the Obuasi Municipality of the Ashanti Region of Ghana was obtained from the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Cape Coast. Copies of the

letter were given to the headmasters of the four selected schools. With permission granted by the headmasters, specific dates were fixed for the collection of the data in each school. The lead researcher introduced himself to the teachers in each school. The lead researcher explained the purpose of the study to the teachers. However, in order to avoid stigmatization and possible psychological effect on performance and participants’ self-esteem during and after the exercise, the lead researcher secured an empty classroom in the schools visited. The lead researcher supervised the entire exercise in the four schools and addressed issues that arose from the exercise. The data was collected in March 2011 and the response rate was 100%.

**RESULTS**

**Research Question One**

What impact does parental divorce have on adolescent students?

In order to determine the impact of divorce on adolescent students, respondents provided information on the item, “My parents’ divorce has had this effect on my life”

Negative effect	<input type="checkbox"/>
Positive effect	<input type="checkbox"/>
No effect	<input type="checkbox"/>
Uncertain	<input type="checkbox"/>

Frequencies were used to tabulate the results. The total numbers of respondents to the item were 396. Table 1 shows the results.

Results from Table 1 indicated that 328 participants, constituting 82.8% reported that the parents’ divorce had a negative effect on them. Sixteen participants, constituting 4.0% indicated that the parents’ divorce had a positive effect on them. In general the results indicated that divorce had a negative impact on adolescent students.

**Research Question Two**

What gender differences exist in the impact of parental divorce on adolescent students?

In order to determine if differences exist in the impact of divorce on male and female adolescents, an independent-sample t-test was conducted. The sample size was 396. The result of the analysis is shown in Table 2.

For the gender differences in the impact of parental divorce, males (M = 1.39, SD = 0.92) did not report significantly higher impact than females (M = 1.36, SD = 0.85), t(394) = 0.341, p > .05). An alpha level of .05 was

used for the statistical test. The magnitude of the difference in the means was very small ( $\eta^2 = .003$ ). Based on the results of the analysis, the effect size of .003 shows that only 0.3 percent of the variance in impact is explained by gender. There is no statistically significant difference between male and female adolescent students of the impact of parental divorce.

**Table 3.** Independent Sample t-test for Gender Difference in Internalizing Types of Behaviour

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Male	198	33.2	9.2			
Female	198	30.5	8.2	394	3.12	.002

**Table 4.** Independent Sample t – test for Gender Difference in Externalizing Types of Behaviour

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Male	198	26.3	9.3			
Female	198	22.1	8.0	394	4.8	0.0005

### Research Question Three

What gender difference exists in the internalizing types of behaviours for adolescent students?

Ten internalizing types of behaviour were identified. These were fear, shamefulness, depression, low self-esteem, unhappiness, loss of home interest, anxiety, confusion, hurt, and lack of confidence. Students responded to these behaviours on a five-point likert scale of “Not at all true of me (1), Somewhat true of me (2), Often true of me (3), Very often true of me (4) and Always true of me (5)”. The responses were aggregated to obtain a score for internalizing types of behaviour. To determine gender difference, an independent-sample t-test was conducted, with a sample size of 396. The result of the analysis is in Table 3. The result in Table 3 shows the internalizing types of behaviours for males ( $M = 33.2$ ,  $SD = 9.2$ ) and females ( $M = 30.5$ ,  $SD = 8.2$ ). With alpha set at .05, the t-test was found to be statistically significant,  $t(394) = 3.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . The magnitude of the difference in means implies that males demonstrated more internalizing behaviours after parental divorce than females.

### Research Question Four

What gender difference exists in the externalizing types of behaviours for adolescent students?

Ten externalizing types of behaviour were identified. These were drinking, sexual involvement, delinquency, aggressiveness, anger, truancy, disobedience to parents, smoking, stealing and drug involvement. Students responded to these behaviours on a five-point Likert scale of “Not at all true of me (1), Somewhat true of me (2), Often true of me (3), Very often true of me (4) and Always true of me (5)”. The responses were aggregated to obtain a score for externalizing types of behaviour. To determine gender difference, an independent-sample t-test was conducted, with a sample size of 396. The result of the analysis is in Table 4.

Table 4 shows the externalizing scores for males ( $M = 26.3$ ,  $SD = 9.3$ ) and females ( $M = 22.1$ ,  $SD = 8.0$ ). With alpha set at .05, the test was shown to be statistically significant,  $t(394) = 4.8$ ,  $p < .05$ . From this analysis males were found to have higher scores of externalizing behaviours than females. This implies that they show more externalizing types of behaviour than female students.

## DISCUSSION

### Impact of divorce

The finding in the study is in line with what Brown (2006) reported in his research work. He established that divorce has a negative impact on both male and female adolescents. It must be noted that the impact may be social, economic or psychological. Some of the comments made by students about the impact of divorce on their lives are as follows;

1. Inability to pay school fees.
2. Getting involved in sex.
3. Parents' inability to provide for their needs.
4. Loss of interest in school and at home.
5. Low self – esteem and fear in life.

### Gender Difference of Impact

The finding from the study contradicts the earlier findings reported by Hetherington and Kelly (2002). They reported that divorce had more severe impact on males than females. However, the finding in the current study is consistent with other researchers who found no difference in the impact of divorce on males and females (Brown, 2006 & Xu et al, 2007). Brown (2006); Xu et al (2007) had indicated that the social, economic and psychological effect of divorce is the same for males and females.

### Gender differences in the internalizing types of behaviours

The differences in the internalizing behaviours found in this study is consistent with recent studies suggesting that parental divorce has greater internalizing effects on boys than on girls (Vandervalk, Spruijt, Goede & Mass, 2004). However, this contradicts with other adolescent gender studies which indicate that girls experience more internalizing behaviour than boys (Kirby, 2002; Amato, 2001).

### Gender differences in the externalizing types of behaviours

The study's finding that adolescent boys have higher externalizing behaviours than girls is consistent with studies suggesting that parental divorce has greater externalizing effect on boys than girls (Kirby, 2002). Externalizing behaviour may be explained by the Freudian (1946) notion of displacement of aggression. Adolescents develop strong reactions when their parents' divorce (Sun & Li, 2002) and feel abandoned and frustrated. As a result they become anxious and angry (Kirby, 2002; Sun & Li, 2002) with themselves because of the constraints their parents' divorce have had on them. They choose to be preoccupied with their own interests but do not come up with a clear path to a mature identity (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). They become more aggressive in the society (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). Like most adolescents Ghanaian adolescent boys and girls express frustration and anger due to the socio-economic effects of parental divorce (Sudarkasa, 2004; Kirby, 2002). With the associated peer rejection in the new communities and school they may relocate and enroll into bad companies (Anarfi & Antwi, 1995). As their frustration compounds over time, Ghanaian adolescents then decide to migrate (Naylor, 2000) to bigger cities where they identify with similar adolescent groups and conform to peer culture. They vent their anger and frustration with impulsive responses to their parents' divorce threats and provocative condition (Ankomah, 2002; Naylor, 2000).

In addition, as many youngsters need to vent their hostility, but are unable to express their rage directly towards their parents, adolescent boys choose to direct the expressions of their anger and conflicts in aggressive behaviours towards others in their environment (Simon et al., 1999) by way of engaging in thefts, misdemeanours, gang fights and several acts of delinquencies. Most Ghanaian adolescent boys in peer groups tend to act on impulse and their impulsiveness (Schacher, Tannock & Logan, 1993) is the most crucial personality dimension that predicts externalizing behaviours. Schacher et al. (1993) opined that society's expectations for males influenced boys to be more aggressive and demonstrate

more externalizing types of behaviours than girls. Such externalizing types of behaviours include fighting, stealing, drug use, truancy and other social vices.

### CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the study has confirmed that divorce has negative impact on adolescent students with the negative impact being on both males and females. It was also confirmed in this study that adolescents manifest the negative impact in the form of internalizing and externalizing types of behaviours. Therefore, parents must be encouraged to provide the social, economic and psychological needs of their wards to enable them overcome their negative behaviours. In confirmation to the existing literature it was found that males demonstrate more externalizing behaviours than females. However the study did not confirm the finding from the bulk of adolescent gender studies with the view that girls demonstrate more internalizing behaviours than boys. Rather this study confirmed the views of the few studies that reported that adolescent girls demonstrate less internalizing types of behaviours than boys.

### Recommendation for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings and conclusions from the study, the following recommendations are made. Guidance and counselling programmes should be organised for students from divorced homes to enable them cope with the situation and properly adjust psychosocially. In order for children to cope with the divorce situation, schools should organize sensitization meetings for parents and encourage them to improve upon the living conditions of their children through provision of needs such as text books, school fees, clothing and exercise books. These would let them overcome their social misconducts such as stealing and sexual promiscuity. Moreover, in helping teachers to identify and assist students to cope with the challenges of divorce in school, in-service training should be organised periodically for teachers on how to identify and assist children from divorced homes to enable them cope with their academic challenges.

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