

Perceived Problems and Academic Stress in Children of Disrupted and Non-disrupted Families

M.P. Ganesh

and

Sujaritha Magdalin

Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay

Presidency College, Chennai

The purpose of the study is to compare children from disrupted families (institutionalized) and children from non-disrupted families in terms of academic stress and perceived problems. A sample of 80 boys, 40 from disrupted families (institutionalized) and 40 from non-disrupted families were matched in their age and socio economic status. Tools used were as follows: i) Mooney's Problem Checklist, and ii) Rajendran's Academic Stress Questionnaire. Results indicate that children from non-disrupted families have higher academic stress than children from disrupted families. Similarly, with regard to perceived problems, significant difference was found between the two major groups in the following sub-scales: Health and Physical Development, Finance, Living Conditions and Employment, Social-Psychological Relations, Personal Psychological Relations, Courtship, Sex and Marriage, Adjustment to School Work, Future: Vocational and Educational.

Key words: Academic stress, disrupted families, adjustment, institutionalized children

The family is the oldest form of institution in the history of mankind. It plays a significant role in the personality development and socialization of the child at different developmental stages. Any major disturbance in the functioning of the family can have adverse effects on the children. According to Amato and Keith (1991), parental separation can have negative effects on children through parental absence, economic disadvantage, and family conflict. Absence of a parent due to parental separation can lead to decreased parental attention, help, and supervision, lack of parental models in learning social skills such as cooperating, negotiating, and

compromising. Economic implications of parental separation may affect children by decline in the standard of living (especially in mother-headed families) and poor nutrition and health. Family conflicts before and during parental separation may lead to interparental hostility and create an aversive home environment.

Family disruption in the form of parental separation, abandonment, death of a parent, and divorce can have both short term and long term effects on the child. Based on earlier research findings, Lauer and Lauer (1991) have listed the short term and long term effects of family disruption on children. In short term,

children are likely to suffer a variety of physical and emotional problems when parents divorce. Intense anger, fears about the future, loyalty conflicts, depression, withdrawal, health problems, lack of social competence, academic problems, drug abuse, and early indulgence in sex are some of the short term problems identified.

In terms of long term effects, children from disrupted families tend to attain less education, marry at an earlier age, and have a less stable marriage than those from intact families which may be due to lack of trust and happiness.

The present study

Though various researches have been conducted in west to understand the effect of family disruption on children, few studies have been undertaken in India on the subject. Understanding the influence of disrupted families on the lives of children in Indian setting would be useful for programming remedial measures. This study aims to understand the effect of family disruptiveness on the academic stress and perceived problems of children. Acquiring detailed information on those areas will help improve coping skills of the children (i.e. to handle academic stress and perceived problems) and thus foster their mental health. Social workers can design suitable rehabilitation programs for these children.

Hypotheses

Since most of the earlier studies have shown that children from disrupted families tend to have more emotional and health-related problems (Bonkowski, Boomhower, & Bequette, 1985; Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985), we hypothesize that:

1. There will be a significant difference between children from disrupted families (institutionalized) and children from non-disrupted families with regard to their perceived problems.

Also, earlier studies have shown that children from divorced families also tend to

have lower academic self-concepts; more absences; lower popularity ratings; lower IQ, reading, spelling, and math scores; and a greater number of behavioral problems (Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987; Smith, 1990). With this background we hypothesize that:

2. There will be a significant difference between children from disrupted families (institutionalized) and children from non-disrupted families with regard to their academic stress.

Since, researches indicate that school-related stress contributes to the development and maintenance of subjective health-related problems (Aro, Paronen, & Aro, 1987; Wagner & Compas, 1990), we hypothesize that:

3. There will be a significant relationship between academic stress and perceived problems in both the groups.

Method

Sample

A sample of 80 boys (14 to 16 years) was selected by purposive sampling method for the study. Variables such as age and socioeconomic status were controlled. 40 boys of the sample were from disrupted families and they were at an institution (residential school) which provides them free education, food, and shelter. The causes of family disruption among the institutionalized children were varied, like separation of the parents, death of a parent, imprisonment of a parent, and divorce. The remaining 40 boys of the total sample were selected from a Government school.

Tools

To assess the perceived problems among the subjects, Mooney's Problem Checklist (1950) consisting of 330 questions was used. The checklist was used to measure the perceived problems in the following areas: 1) Health and Physical Development (HPD), 2) Finance, Living Conditions and Employment (FLE), 3) Social and Recreational Activities

(SRA), 4) Social Psychological Relations (SPR), 5) Personal-Psychological Relations (PPR), 6) Courtship, Sex and Marriage (CSM), 7) Home and Family (HF), 8) Morals and Religion (MR), 9) Adjustment to School work (ASW), 10) The Future - Vocational and Educational (FVE), 11) Curriculum and Teaching Procedure (CTP). The reliability coefficient of this checklist was found to be 0.93.

Academic Stress Questionnaire developed by Rajendran (1990) was used to measure the

academic stress among the students. It consists of 67 items. The factors which underlie these items are: 1) Personal inadequacy, 2) Fear of failure, 3) Interpersonal difficulties and, 4) Inadequate study facilities.

Results

Relevant data were collected and examined in the light of the formulated hypotheses. The t-test was used to test the significance of the difference between the two groups.

Table – 1: Significance of difference between children from disrupted and non-disrupted families in the different areas of perceived problems

Area of perceived problems	Groups	Mean	SD	t value
Health and Physical Development (HPD)	DF	18.075	5.604	3.62**
	NDF	13.85	4.7907	
Finance, Living Conditions & Employment (FLE)	DF	15.575	4.966	3.159**
	NDF	19	4.7285	
Social & Recreational Activities (SRA)	DF	23.075	4.537	2.250*
	NDF	20.575	5.3679	
Social-Psychological Relations (SPR)	DF	10.15	7.3294	3.843**
	NDF	16.025	6.3062	
Personal-Psychological Relations (PPR)	DF	22.825	6.6598	3.263**
	NDF	18.275	5.7823	
Courtship, Sex & Marriage (CSM)	DF	21	6.575	2.904**
	NDF	17.1	5.3771	
Home & Family (HF)	DF	19.2	6.2191	0.651
	NDF	18.375	5.057	
Morals & Religion (MR)	DF	16.325	6.1826	0.726
	NDF	15.425	4.8192	
Adjustment to School Work (ASW)	DF	12.025	6.435	5.11**
	NDF	18.475	4.723	
The Future: Vocational & Educational (FVE)	DF	22.375	5.7632	4.111**
	NDF	17.45	4.9196	
Curriculum and Teaching Procedure (CTP)	DF	21.25	5.7635	1.465
	NDF	19.4	5.5322	

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01 DF: children from disrupted families, NDF: children from non-disrupted families

The table - 1 shows a significant difference between the two groups in most areas of the perceived problems. Children from disrupted families have higher scores in the areas of Health and Physical Development, Social and Recreational Activities, Personal-Psychological Relations, Courtship, Sex and

Marriage, The Future: Vocational and Educational in the Perceived Problems Checklist. Children from non-disrupted families are found to have higher scores in Finance and Living Conditions, Social-Psychological Relations, and Adjustment to School Work.

Table 2: Significance of difference between children from disrupted and non-disrupted families in the different areas of academic stress

Dimensions of Academic Stress	Groups	Mean	SD	t value
Academic Stress (overall score)	DF	108.7	41.542	3.061**
	NDF	133.375	29.569	
Personal Inadequacy	DF	49	19.43	3.689**
	NDF	63.025	14.168	
Fear of Failure	DF	33.25	16.858	3.341**
	NDF	43.6	9.986	
Inter Personal Difficulties	DF	21.025	8	0.07
	NDF	21.15	8	
Inadequate Study Facilities	DF	5.425	3.671	0.205
	NDF	5.6	3.9665	

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

DF: Children from disrupted families NDF: Children from non-disrupted families

The table - 2 shows that children from non-disrupted families have significantly higher levels of academic stress (overall) than children from disrupted families. In terms of

sub-dimensions of academic stress, children from non-disrupted families have scored significantly higher in the Personal Inadequacy and Fear of Failure dimensions than children from disrupted families.

Table 3: Correlation coefficient between perceived problems and academic stress in children from disrupted families

Dimensions	HPD	FLE	SRA	SPR	PPR	CSM	HF	MR	ASW	FVE	CTP
Personal Inadequacy	-.10	-.01	-.06	.18	-.21	-.18	-.24	-.03	-.02	-.01	-.23
Fear of Failure	-.01	.06	.03	.22	.01	-.01	-.08	.11	.13	.15	0
Inter Personal Difficulties	-.24	-.20	-.21	.05	.34*	.40*	.42**	-.15	-.18	-.17	-.22
Inadequate Study Facilities	.02	-.13	.14	-.24	-.01	-.02	-.09	-.01	-.2	-.06	-.03

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

The table 3 shows that among children from disrupted families, the interpersonal difficulties dimension of academic stress has a significant positive relationship with the following items of the problem check list: Personal-Psychological Relations (PPR), Courtship, Sex & Marriage (CSM), and Home & Family (HF). With regard to children from non-disrupted

families, we did not find any significant correlation between perceived problems and academic stress.

Discussion

Children from disrupted families and those from non-disrupted families were found to be different in most areas of perceived problems

and academic stress. A study by Guidubaldi and Cleminshaw (1985) has shown that children from disrupted families received lower physical health ratings, as assessed by their parents. In line with this earlier research, the results of the present study also show that children from disrupted families perceive significantly more problems in the areas of health and physical development than children from non-disrupted families. The reasons for such a finding may be varied. From the economic disadvantage perspective, single parenthood may lead to economic hardships, which may negatively affect children's nutrition and health (Williams, 1990). Also, conflict between parents before and during the separation period is a severe stressor for children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983) and would have resulted in their health and physical problems.

Though the institution provides a better living condition for children from disrupted families, these children lack recreational activities. This would have led to their perception of more problems in the areas of social and recreational activities. On the other hand, these children have fewer perceived problems in the areas of finance, living conditions, and employment than children from non-disrupted families. Most of the present and future needs of these children like food, shelter, education, and future jobs in the form of vocational training are taken care of by the institution free of cost.

For children, family disruptiveness can be an important psychological trauma, especially in early childhood. The psychological wounds resulting from this trauma may cause adjustment problems in their social relationships. Similarly, institutionalization may limit these children from learning necessary social and interpersonal skills through socialization. These factors would have made children from disrupted families perceive significantly more problems in their social-

psychological and personal-psychological relations. Our findings are supported by an earlier research where children from disrupted families rated themselves low in social competence (Devall, Stoneman, & Brody, 1986). Apart from the present social and psychological relationships, children from disrupted families were highly concerned about their future marriage and courtship relations. Earlier researches have also shown that adults from disrupted families tend to marry at an earlier age and have less stable marriages than those from intact families (Keith & Finlay, 1988; Mueller & Cooper, 1986). Also, the study by Albers, Doane, and Mintz (1986) found that children who grow up in conflict-ridden homes may have a lower quality of intimate relationships as adults.

Though most of the needs of these institutionalized children are taken care of by the institutions they belong to, these children were found to be insecure about their future. Feelings of emotional insecurity and lack of significant people to guide them are some of the potential factors that may intensify their feelings of future insecurity. This insecure feeling towards their future has reflected in their significantly high Future - Vocational and Educational scores of Mooney's Problem Checklist. An earlier research has reported that 40% of the young men from disrupted families had no set goals and felt having limited control over their lives (Lauer & Lauer, 1991).

Apart from these factors, children have not shown any significant differences among themselves in other factors of Mooney's Problem Checklist. Surprisingly, no significant difference is found between the two groups in their perceived problems with regard to their home and family. Maybe children from disrupted families have tried to portray a positive picture about their families, which may not be true. It could also be the factor of social desirability, that is, not wanting to admit their unpleasant feelings about their home to

others. It might also indicate denial or repression of their unpleasant family conditions.

The children from non-disrupted families experience higher academic stress than children from disrupted families, especially in the areas of Personal Inadequacy and Fear of Failure. It is important to note that these children were found to have significantly high level of perceived problems in Adjustment to School Work than children from disrupted families. This pattern of results could be due to the conducive study environment and less parental pressures on academic performance of the institutionalized children. Moreover, institutions provide a supportive academic environment, which can be a major motivating factor. In the case of children living with their parents, their relationship with the parent deteriorates during his/her transition towards adolescence. The child may perceive parents as hypercritical and non-empathetic and parents may also fail to have realistic expectations towards their children's academic performance. Such phenomena may aggravate the fear of failure and personal inadequacy among the children.

There was a significant positive relationship between the interpersonal difficulties dimension of the academic stress scale and three specific dimensions in the perceived problems scale among children from disrupted families. Those three specific dimensions (Personal-Psychological Relations, Courtship, Sex & Marriage, and Home & Family) have the common thread of interpersonal relations. This indicates that interpersonal relations are a crucial area of concern for these children.

Conclusions

The present study showed that children from both the groups had their own set of problems. Areas like health and physical development, social and recreational activities, personal relations, future in terms of marriage and career, are found to be the important

areas of concern for children from disrupted families. In general these children are more concerned about their future than their present; this shows that though their present is taken care of by the institution which they belong to, their future is still highly uncertain. Therefore, it becomes important for both government and non-government organizations to help these children handle their future by providing them vocational training as well personal counseling programs.

Findings from children from non-disrupted families reveal that they are highly concerned about their adjustment to school work. Also, their scores in academic stress scale reveal that they have higher level of academic stress. Therefore the findings of the present research insist on the need for mechanisms both at macro and micro level to alleviate children's apprehension with regard to school and education. At macro level, designing student-friendly curricula and study methods can be very effective; at micro level, employing school psychologists or providing sensitivity training for teachers can help students manage academic stress effectively.

References

- Albers, L. J., Doane, J. A., & Mintz J. (1986). Social competence and family environment: 15-year follow-up of disturbed adolescents. *Family Process, 26*, 379-389.
- Amato, P. R., & Keith, B (1991). Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis, *Psychological Bulletin, 110*, 26-46.
- Bonkowski, S. E., Boomhower, S. J., & Bequette, S. O. (1985). What you don't know can hurt you: Unexpressed fears and feelings of children from divorcing families. *Journal of Divorce, 91*, 33-45.
- Devall, E., Stoneman, Z., & Brody, G. (1986). The impact of divorce and maternal employment on pre-adolescent children. *Family Relations, 35*, 153-159.
- Guidubaldi, J., & Cleminshaw, H. (1985). Divorce, family health, and child adjustment. *Family Relations, 34*, 35-41.

- Guidubaldi, J., Perry, J.D., & Nastasi, B.K. (1987). Growing up in a divorced family: Initial and long-term perspectives on children's adjustment. In S. Oskamp (Ed.), *Family processes and problems: Social psychological aspects* (pp. 202-237). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Keith, V. M., & Finlay, B. (1988). The impact of parental divorce on children's educational attainment, marital timing, and likelihood of divorce. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 797-809.
- Kinard, E. M., & Reinherz, H. (1986). Effects of marital disruption on children's school aptitude and achievement. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48, 285-293.
- Lauer R.H., & Lauer, J.C. (1991). The long-term relational consequences of problematic family backgrounds. *Family Relations*, 43, 286-290.
- Maccoby, E., & Martin, J. A. (1983). Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology*, Vol. IV: Socialization, personality, and social development (pp. 1-101). New York: Wiley.
- Mooney, R. L., & Gordon, L. V. (1950). *Manual: the Mooney problem checklists*. New York: Psychological Corporation.
- Mueller, D. P., & Cooper, P. W. (1986). Children of single parent families: How they fare as young adults. *Family Relations*, 35, 169-176.
- Rajendran, R., & Kaliappan, K. V. (1990). Efficacy of behavioural programme in managing the academic stress and improving academic performance. *Journal of Personality and Clinical Studies*, 6, 193-196.
- Smith, T. E. (1990). Parental separation and the academic self-concepts of adolescents. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 107-118.
- Williams, D. R. (1990). Socioeconomic differentials in health: A review and redirection. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 53, 81-99.

Received: July 31, 2006

Accepted: December 02, 2006

M.P. Ganesh, Research Scholar, Humanities & Social Sciences Department
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, Powai, Mumbai -400 076
Maharashtra, India. Email: mpganesh@iitb.ac.in

Sujaritha Magdalin, Selection Grade Lecturer, Presidency College, Chennai
Chepauk, Chennai -600 005, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: simsudin@yahoo.co.in

Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology

(A biannual publication of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology)

Editor

Dr. Panch. Ramalingam
17, 14th Street
Krishna Nagar
Puducherry - 605 008, India

Subscription:

Institutional /Individual (Annual) - Rs.400
Foreign (Annual) - \$ 50
IAAP Life Members (Annual) - Rs.100

All payments should be through bank draft in favour of the Editor,
Journal of the Indian Academy of Applied Psychology payable at
Pondicherry or MO.