



## Comparing empathy in young adults of divorced and married parents

### KEYWORDS

Empathy, Marital Status, Married Parents, Divorced Parents and Young Adults.

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### ABSTRACT

*The objective of this study was to assess the relationship between the marital status of parents of young adults and their empathy level, in the Indian context with a sample drawn from Bangalore, Karnataka. This study employed a quantitative method utilizing comparative analysis to measure the empathy level of young adults, of married parents and divorced parents, across the domains of Fantasy, Perspective Taking, Empathetic Concern and Personal Distress. The contradiction between the the previous literature, suggesting that marital conflict and divorce may culminate in reduced empathetic functioning, and current finding, that there exists no significant difference between the same, may be attributed to a cultural difference. These findings provide scope for a more in depth qualitative study of the impact of parenting styles, parent-child relationships, social support, age and personality factors as well as those of culture in regard to the relationship between empathy level and marital status of parents.*

### INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social animals and, for them, to exist within a social structure it is integral they are able to understand and respond appropriately to others. Crucial for social competence is the individual's empathy level. Since time immemorial there has been great conjecture about the exact nature of empathy. According to Spencer (1870) empathy has two components- the instinctive (or emotional) and the intellectual (or cognitive) (Davis, 1983).

Hoffman (1988) had referred to empathy as a vicarious affective response that relies on a developed cognitive sense (Volbrecht, Lemery-Chalfant, Aksan, Zahn-Waxer, & Goldsmith, 2007). Etymologically, the word 'empathy' is derived from the word 'Einfuhlung', which Theodor Lipps used as an explanation for the individual's experiencing of art and aesthetics as well as the other's mental state (Coplan & Goldie, 2011, p. XII). From here forward the term, and all it represents developed into what one knows of the concept of empathy today, which, in lay man's terms is the ability to undergo affective experiences akin to another persons' (Snow, 2000). This experiencing of another's emotion, however, occurs in conjunction with an individual's cognitive actions during the situation.

The aforementioned explanations of empathy highlight the confluence of both a cognitive process as well as an emotional reaction. Complementing the cognitive aspect, affective empathy relates to an individual's appropriate emotional response to another's situation, which helps mediate behaviour (Felt, 2011). The affective or emotional reactions can be further classified as self-oriented, other-oriented or mixed. These responses are distinguished on the basis of focus of the response. Empathy, as an entire concept, is better understood as a processual construct (Felt, 2011) that allows for the experiential understanding (Coplan & Goldie, 2011) of the other individual's internal situation.

The foundations for empathy, as well as several other psychological competencies, are laid down during the formative years of a child and shaped via several experiences during the course of the individual's life. During these critical ages, parents provide the building blocks which help de-

termine future outcomes of the child's behaviour and his or her ability to face the obstacles and challenges of his or her respective lives. (Bronstein, Duncan, D' Ari, Pieniadz, & Fitzgerald, 1996) Optimal and ideal functioning in an individual would require him or her to be able to balance negative emotions, without distortions in general affective behaviour or mannerisms. (Davidov & Grusec, 2006) The general assumption is that empathy development occurs in the more conducive, socially supported and legitimized two-parent nuclear family. Divorce is seen as a traumatic experience that is more likely, than in an intact nuclear family, to result in poorly socialized, cognitively deficient children with poorer relations with parents. (Crossman & Adams, 1980)

Drawing from research that relate children's empathy development to parental expression of positive affect (Zhou, Eisenberg, Losoya, Fabes, & Reiser, 2002), one may conclude that changes in affect of a parent at the time of divorce in turn may negatively effect empathetic responsiveness in children and these patterns of response once developed are relatively stable through the life course. With increasing rates in divorce and separation, the phenomena may soon be looked upon as a "normative life crisis" and as per crisis theory, such conditions lead to psychological disequilibrium (Crossman & Adams, 1980). One specific psychological implication of divorce, thus, might be reduced empathetic functioning amongst children of separated and divorced households.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The consequences of divorce, and subsequent single-parenthood, have been a subject of scrutiny amongst psychologists and sociologists alike. Across the expanse of literature that is available, there is a multitude of evidence pointing to the detrimental effect of divorce on the life and functioning of children. However, at the same time there have been several studies which have proved no significant difference amongst individuals from a divorced parenthood and those from an intact family. . At the same time, not only is greater portion of the research available focused on Western samples, thereby making its results difficult to generalize, but also the studies focused mostly on immediate, short term effects and drew samples from children and adolescent age groups.

In a study by Tschann and colleagues (1989), the child's psychological and behavioural adjustment was studied in relation to his or her environmental predictors such as marital conflict, parent-child relations and the child's intrinsic factors (such as temperament and personality). Partially confirming previous theorist's views that children from divorced children show poor patterns of social adjustment (Crossman & Adams, 1980), this study attributed poor emotional and behavioural regulation to a strain in parent-child relationships due to increased marital conflict.

In one study by Kline and colleagues (1991), it was noted that previously conducted longitudinal studies have pointed, consistently, towards marital conflict negatively straining parent-child relationships and hence leading to greater risk of emotional dysregulation and negative behavioural manifestations. The study reaffirmed previous results of behavioural and emotional maladjustments during divorce. This period sees a direct link between marital conflict and negative child outcomes. However, an after divorce duration of one year, the relationship becomes increasing indirect, with conflict being replaced reduced warmth, reduced empathy and reduced expectation of ego control, especially in mother-child relationships. Thus, parental behaviour would show a reduced usage of inductive discipline that, consequently would not allow for the development of empathetic maturity and empathetic guilt. (Krevans & Gibbs, 1996)

In a study by Zhou, Eisenberg, Losoya, Fabes, & Reiser (2002) the link between certain parental socializing factors and children outcomes of prosocial behaviour and empathy related functioning were measured. The study focused on the effect of parental warmth and expression of positive affect, in the presence of the child and not necessarily oriented towards the child. The main theoretical background for the study stems from the attachment theory, theory on child rearing practices, and the process of socialization suggest that there is a significant degree of vicarious learning. The child begins to emulate the responses of the parent, and it is from them that the child first learns how to respond to or cope with emotionally evocative situation. This study because of its focus of parental affect highlight several facts such as an inherent improvement in masking negative affects in the children, with age. And parental warmth and responsivity and emotional expressiveness play a role in empathic responses, especially when the child is in a negative affect.

In a study by Videon (2002) the variegated response of children to parental separation was observed. The limitation of previous research is highlighted, wherein often times whilst parent-parent relationships are stressed upon, parent-child relationships at the time of separation are underscored. Whilst, the study highlights that there exists a minority of adolescents who benefit from the separation (primarily due to unsatisfying relations with one parent), a good proportion of separation occurs on a population where the child shares an amicable relationship with both parents. In such cases, behavioural problems are implicated as a consequence of residence with opposite-sex parents, along with timing of divorce and frequency of contact with non-custodial parent. The study, thus, proposes that delinquency in children (an outcome of reduced empathy) is often times a possible expression of unsatisfactory parental relationship with the custodian. Thus, most often, a child does not have a say in who his or her custodian is and consequently, negative relations with custodian may lead to improper empathy development and display of prosocial behaviour.

Parental behaviour has been time and again been proven to have considerable influence on empathy development in individual. Thus, a change in family structure, consequently, should have a concrete effect on the individual's empathy level. Though definitive research is yet to be done to specifically link empathetic behaviour to parental separation, this study hopes to somewhat provide a stepping stone to more elaborate research as well as put into perspective the long term effects with regard to the comparison of the empathy level of young adults from divorced and married parenthood.

#### AIM

The aim of this study was to compare the empathy level in young adults from divorced and married parenthood in Bangalore.

#### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study was

- To study the empathy levels in young adults
- To study the empathy level in young adults of married parents.
- To study the empathy level in young adults of divorced parents.
- To compare the overall empathy levels amongst young adults of divorced parents and married parents.

#### HYPOTHESIS

- H1. There exists an association between the togetherness of parents and empathy development in young adults
- H2. Young adults with married parenthood display higher levels of empathy as compared to young adults with divorced parenthood.

#### METHODS

##### RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was a quantitative study using comparative analysis to measure the differences in empathy level in mid-adolescents of divorced and married parents

##### SAMPLING

The study consisted of a total of 55 participants of young adults age group. It included 25 participant from a divorced parenthood and 30 participants from married parenthood. The sample was drawn from the the college going population of Bangalore using purposive sampling

##### INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Individuals who were young adults (18-24 years)
- Individuals from families where both parents were high-school graduates.
- Parents of the individuals belonged to a middle socio economic status.
- In the case of divorced parenthood, parents had been divorced for a period of 2 years minimum prior to the participation in the study.
- Young adults of divorced parents who were residing with his/her mother.
- Young adults who were fluent in the English language.

##### EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- Subjects brought up by individuals other than parents.
- In the case of divorced parenthood, individuals who were receiving counselling to cope with the separation.
- Individuals who had death of a parent as a cause of single parenthood.

**TOOLS USED****DEMOGRAPHIC DATA SHEET**

The age, sex, socio-economic status, education and the participant's parenthood (divorced or married) were recorded on the demographic data sheet.

**INFORMED CONSENT**

It was signed by all the participants and the intention of research was made clear to the participants. The participants were informed as to the purpose of the research and it was made clear to them what they were signing for.

**THE INTERPERSONAL REACTIVITY INDEX (IRI)**

The inventory was developed by M.H. Davis as a multidimensional approach to empathy (Davis, 1983). Empathy was defined as the reactions of one individual to be observed experiences of another. It consisted of 28 items, to be answered of 5 point likert scale. The subscales included in the Index are perspective taking, fantasy, empathetic concern and personal distress. The tool does not use one consolidated score, but rather observes a factorial view of empathy. (Davis, 1983) The tool was face validated by experts so as to ascertain the relevance of the items as well as to determine if the items displayed cultural bias. The experts included two faculty members from the department of Psychology from Christ University and a Psychologist from La Martiniere for Girls, Kolkata.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The method of data analysis that was employed was a parametric independent sample t-test to compare the empathy levels in young adults with divorced parents and those with married parents. The Shapiro-Wilk Normality Test was carried out prior to the data analysis to ascertain the method of data analysis that was to be used. The empathy levels amongst the different genders was assessed using both the independent sample t-test and the Mann-Whitney U Test.

**RESULTS**

Normality of data was found across the sample of individuals with married and divorced parents in the domains of Fantasy Scale and Personal Distress. A significance of 0.846 for those with divorced parents and 0.414 for those with married parents was found in the case of the Fantasy Scale and a significance of 0.176 and 0.063 was found in the case of the independent samples for the Personal Distress scale. The subscale of Empathetic concern had a significance of 0.052 and 0.745 for the sample groups. The results of the t-test displayed no significance at either a 0.05 or 0.01 level. The significance between the two groups for the Fantasy Scale was 0.738, 0.765 for Perspective Taking, 0.481 for Personal Distress and 0.619 for Empathetic Concern. These findings reject the hypothesis that there exists a relationship between the marital status of an individual's parents and their level of empathy.

The results of the independent sample t-test comparing the results of the four subscales of empathy across genders, to test hypothesis 3 yielded no significant difference in the empathy levels dependent on the gender for the subscales of Fantasy (0.391), Perspective Taking (0.806) and Empathetic concern (0.405). However, there was a significant relationship between the individual's gender and the level of personal distress displayed at a 0.05 level (0.029) with females scoring a mean higher than that of males by 0.4031.

**DISCUSSION**

Previous literature on the impact of the parental divorce on the child's functioning have focused attention on the attachment theory, positing that a significant degree of vicarious learning takes place within the child. According to Zhou, Eisenberg, Losoya, Fabes, & Reiser (2002), the child emulates the parent's responses to situations and hence develops certain styles of empathy. However, most of the literature focuses on the impact of divorce on children and adolescence. At a young adult age, there maybe several intervening factors that may influence the empathetic responses. Furthermore, several of the participants of the study witnessed the divorce of the parents at a much younger age and have had time to adjust to the living condition. Though, the theoretical notions that females display a greater degree of empathy have been seen in the mean scores obtained, these are not to a significant degree. This might be explained by way of the small sample size making the data lacks reliability and generalizability.

Another crucial factor that might act as an intervening variable is cultural variegation. Previous literature has been conducted primarily in individualistic cultures. Studies focusing on differences in parenting styles across culture, for example, highlight the preference amongst the Indian population for what Baumrind titled 'permissive parenting' (Barnhart, Jansari, Raval & Raval, 2012) Thus, a more qualitative approach is required to determine the presence or absence of parental responsiveness (Bronstein, Duncan, D' Ari, Pieniadz, & Fitzgerald, 1996), parenting styles and pre-divorce conflict and schism (Tschann and colleagues) in individuals not from a marital dyad as predictors of the individual's functioning and adjustment

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH**

This result can be used to explore the difference between genders, especially in the domain of personal distress. The study suggests that there is a possibility of the presence of a sound system of social support that may minimize the impact of parental conflict. There may exist a cultural difference that may account for the differences in a Western setting but not in an Eastern one.

**LIMITATIONS**

There was difficulty in the obtaining of the sample due to the sensitive nature of the independent variable. The researcher was unable to account for a number of variables such as the length of divorced period, relationship with parents and family environment. The participants, due to their older age, might be influenced by several extraneous factors. The literature found and reviewed focused primarily on western population as well as on children and young adolescents. The family environment and relationship between the parent and child were not measured due to time constraints.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

A qualitative study on the role of parental divorce on the empathy level could be explored. A larger sample group could be used to determine whether or not a significant difference existed. The influence of personality traits, coping styles, parenting styles, family environment and parent-child, parent-parent relationships can be taken into consideration. A longitudinal study could be carried out to determine whether there is greater amount of adjustment with age. A comparison of genders in relation to empathetic responsivity can be carried out, as a finding of current study was a significant difference in the level of 'Personal Distress' amongst boys and girls.

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