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Child Abuse & Neglect



The relationship between child abuse, parental divorce, and lifetime mental disorders and suicidality in a nationally representative adult sample[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To determine how the experiences of child abuse and parental divorce are related to long-term mental health outcomes using a nationally representative adult sample after adjusting for sociodemographic variables and parental psychopathology.

Methods: Data were drawn from the National Comorbidity Survey (NCS, $n=5,877$; age 15–54 years; response rate 82.4%). Logistic regression models were used to determine the odds of experiencing lifetime psychiatric disorders and suicidal ideation and attempts.

Results: Parental divorce alone was associated with some psychiatric disorders after adjusting for sociodemographic variables (AOR ranging from 1.30 to 2.37), while child abuse alone was associated with psychiatric disorders (AOR ranging from 1.39 to 6.07) and suicidal ideation (AOR = 2.08; 95% CI = 1.57–2.77) and attempts (AOR = 1.54; 95% CI = 1.02–2.31) after adjusting for sociodemographic variables. However, having experienced both parental divorce and child abuse together resulted in significantly increased odds for lifetime PTSD (AOR = 9.87; 95% CI = 6.69–14.55), conduct disorder (AOR = 4.01; 95% CI = 2.92–5.51) and suicide attempts (AOR = 2.74; 95% CI = 1.84–4.08) compared to having experienced either parental divorce or child abuse alone. These results were attenuated when further adjusting for parental psychopathology.

Conclusions: When the experience of parental divorce is accompanied with child abuse, the associations with some poor mental health outcomes are significantly greater compared to the impact of either parental divorce or child abuse on its own. Therefore, parental divorce is an additional childhood adversity that significantly contributes to poor mental health outcomes especially when in combination with child abuse. Parental psychopathology attenuated these relationships suggesting that it may be one possible mechanism to explain the relationships between child abuse, parental divorce, and psychiatric disorders and suicide attempts.

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The experience of childhood adversity is known to be associated with adult psychopathology in large community samples as well as in clinical populations (Afifi, Brownridge, Cox, & Sareen, 2006; Chapman et al., 2004; Dube et al., 2001, 2003; Kessler, Davis, & Kendler, 1997). Furthermore, there appears to be a graded relationship between the number of childhood adverse experiences and the subsequent development of depressive disorders, substance use disorders and suicidality (Afifi et al., 2008; Chapman et al., 2004; Dube et al., 2001, 2003; Enns et al., 2006).

Parental divorce is also considered to be a significant adverse childhood experience, in addition to the often-reported exposures to abuse, neglect or violence. There is a substantive body of literature regarding the impact of divorce on children. Children of divorced families are reported to demonstrate higher levels of problematic behaviours and adjustment problems compared to children of nondivorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991). Higher rates of pathology are seen in children and adolescents of divorced families, including internalizing and externalizing disorders and substance use disorders (Barrett & Turner, 2006; Fergusson, Horwood, & Lynskey, 1994; Lansford et al., 2006). Moreover, studies with long-term follow-up suggest a continuum between such childhood disorders and subsequent adult adjustment problems (Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Rutter, Kim-Cohen, & Maughan, 2006). In cross-sectional surveys, childhood experience of parental divorce has been associated with increased rates of psychological distress in adulthood (Rodgers, Power, & Hope, 1997; Storksen, Roysamb, Gjessing, Mowm, & Tambs, 2007). From a biological perspective, childhood experience of parental divorce has been associated with alterations in Hypothalamic Pituitary Axis functioning in young adults without psychopathology (Bloch, Peleg, Koren, Aner, & Klein, 2007). In a longitudinal study, the experience of parental divorce in early childhood was associated with elevated lifetime risk of major depression (Gilman, Kawachi, Fitzmaurice, & Buka, 2003). This relationship was more pronounced with exposure to parental conflict, though childhood exposure to abuse and neglect was not accounted for in this study.

Childhood experience of parental divorce is complicated by the complex difficulties of families who divorce, frequently co-occurring with other adverse childhood experiences. Importantly, divorce alone is associated with an increased likelihood of experiencing child abuse and/or witnessing spousal abuse (Dong et al., 2004; Oliver, Kuhns, & Pomeranz, 2006). It is not clear if the childhood experience of parental divorce is associated with lifetime psychopathology independent of other childhood adversities, or to what impact the experience of both parental divorce and child abuse has on psychopathology. To our knowledge, no study has examined the relationship between parental divorce, child abuse, parental psychopathology, and mental health outcomes using a nationally representative sample. The current study uses a nationally representative adult sample to examine how the experiences of child physical maltreatment, child sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, and parental divorce are related to a range of lifetime DSM-III-R psychiatric disorders and suicidal ideation and attempts after adjusting for sociodemographic variables and parental psychopathology.

It was hypothesized that: (1) respondents having experienced parental divorce would have increased odds of experiencing child abuse; (2) respondents having experienced parental divorce alone would significantly increase the odds of lifetime psychiatric disorders and suicidal ideation and attempts after adjusting for sociodemographic variables; (3) respondents having experienced both parental divorce and child abuse would be associated with significantly increased odds of psychopathology after adjusting for sociodemographic variables compared to having experienced parental divorce or child abuse alone; (4) when parental psychopathology was taken into account, the associations between parental divorce and child abuse with poor mental health outcomes would be attenuated.

The sample used for the current research was drawn from the original National Comorbidity Survey (NCS) data. Although more contemporary data (NCS-R) are available, the more recent data does not include a measure of child neglect and does not include as detailed measures of child physical maltreatment and witnessing domestic violence relative to the NCS. Therefore, the NCS data were better able to address the objectives of the current research and were used for this investigation.

Methods

Sample and procedure

The original NCS ($n = 5,877$; response rate 82.4%), a landmark mental health study of the United States general population, was conducted in early 1990s (Kessler et al., 1994). The NCS used a stratified, multistage, area probability sample design with statistical adjustments made for nonresponse bias (Kessler et al., 1997). The NCS assessed individuals aged 15–54 years (response rate = 82.4%) and was representative of the American population on several census indicators (i.e., age, gender, race, education, marital status, region) (Kessler et al., 1994). The University of Michigan provided ethical approval for the primary data collection of the NCS (R.C. Kessler, personal communication, March 14, 2006). Details of the design of the survey have been published elsewhere (Kessler et al., 1994). The inclusion criteria for the current research was respondents living in two parent intact families until the age of at least 15 years and respondents experiencing parental divorce at age 15 years or younger. Respondents who lived in one parent families for reasons other than divorce (i.e., parental death, father unknown) were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, the total sample size used for this research was 5,159.

Measures

Parental divorce. Respondents were asked if they had lived with both parents until at least age 15 years. Those indicating that they had not lived with both parents because of parental separation or divorce were coded as experiencing parental divorce.

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