

# Post-divorce Parental Conflict, Economic Hardship and Academic Achievement among Adolescents of Divorced Families

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the relationships between post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and adolescents' academic achievement among 800 adolescents (424 girls and 376 boys) aged 15 to 18 years from divorced families. The instruments used for data collection were the Post-divorce Parental Conflict and Economic Hardship scales. In conclusion, the results obtained from the current study revealed that post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship had significant relationships with adolescent academic achievement among divorced families. Post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship may affect parental quality that consequently leads to poor parent-adolescent relationship. Poor parent-adolescent relationships adversely influence adolescent functioning.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Post-divorce parental conflict, Economic hardship, Academic achievement

## 1. Introduction

Parental conflict that is hostile, intense, and unresolved is associated with more negative outcomes for children and adolescents. Past studies showed that children and adolescents who are exposed to high level of parental conflict had more academic problems compared with children and adolescents who had not experience parental conflict. These children and adolescents have two to three times more tendencies to drop out from school (Kelly, 2000; Amato, 2001; Rodgers & Rose, 2001; Sun & Li, 2002; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010).

Rodgers and Rose (2001) examined the relationship between family factors and academic performance among a sample with a mean age of 15 years old from intact, divorced, and blended families. This study revealed that

adolescents of divorced families reported less parental support and monitoring which strongly predicted their academic achievement. Support from family is critical because poor support contributes to lower academic achievement among adolescents even in intact families (Siti Nor & Zaline, 2005). Ghazarian and Buehler (2010) revealed that parental conflict is more stressful for adolescents and these adolescents tend to blame themselves more and feel threatened; these situations can mediate internalizing and externalizing behavior problems including academic achievement.

According to Sun and Li (2002), high parental conflict is associated with lower score on mathematics and reading exams among adolescents from divorced families compared to adolescents in intact families. They suggested that divorced parents have fewer financial resources for their children and adolescents and they are less involved in their adolescents' school programs. Parental conflict following divorce may indirectly diminish parental emotional energy and ability to respond appropriately to the needs of their children and adolescents (Hetherington, 2003; Hetherington & Parke, 2003; Kelly, 2007).

Based on parental conflict perspective, an unhappy home environment which is marked by high levels of parental conflict can negatively affect children and adolescents' adjustments. Adolescents react to their parental hostility with fear, anger, and distress and may even blame themselves for conflict between their parents. These reactions may contribute to more problems such as drop out of schools (Amato, 2000).

Parental emotional distress due to economic hardship predicts conflict between parents and reduces parental warmth, support and relationships with children which contribute to adolescents' academic failures (Conger et al., 1992; Conger & Elder, 1994; Conger et al., 1997; Pong and Ju, 2000; Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger et al., 2002; Mistry et al., 2009; Yu & Patterson, 2010). The economic hardship perspective proposed that economic hardship related to divorce is more accountable for the problems encountered by children from divorced families. Majority of children live with their mothers following divorce. Divorce generally leads to a severe decline in the standard of living of single mother families, and this decline may increase children's developmental risk in various aspects including academic achievement. According to Sun (2001) and Sun and Li (2001), the economic hardship associated with divorced families was found to mediate the educational defects of children in such families.

Conger et al. (1992) in a study with a sample of European American two-parent families of adolescent boys, found that economic hardship were significantly related to parental depression which were correlated with disruptions in parenting behaviors such as parental involvement, parental warmth, and discipline. These disruptions in parenting practices mediated the relation between parents' depressed mood and adolescents' positive adjustment, including performance in their school. In addition, Conger et al. (1997) found that the effects of economic conditions on adolescents' school performance were largely accounted for by the economic hardship and parents' responses to these problems. A study by Pong and Ju (2000) revealed that students who experienced family income changes and family economic hardship were more likely to drop out of school.

Mistry, Benner, Tan, and Kim (2009) examined the relationships between adolescents' perceptions of the family economic stress, youth emotional distress and educational outcomes among Asian American adolescents. They indicated that adolescents' perception of their families' economic stress has a significant negative impact on adolescents' academic outcomes. Past studies (e.g. Conger et al., 1992, 1994, 1997; Gutman et al., 1999) also suggested that family economic hardship will increase the probability of negative family interactions such as parental conflict and hostility, parental harsh discipline, and poor parent-adolescent relationship, which in turn negatively impact children's and adolescents' adjustment. Poor parent-adolescent relationships assumed in terms of parent-adolescent conflict and parental harsh discipline will undermine adolescents' academic achievement.

Researches (e.g. Amato, 2000; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005) have also indicated that parents who face economic hardship are not able to purchase and provide goods (such as books, educational instruments, and computers) which may promote children's success in school and educational progress. Furthermore, these parents are often forced to live in places with inadequate schools and facilities. Even if children from poor families can graduate from high school, their parents usually cannot help them for college expenses (Amato, 2000; Sobolewski & Amato, 2005).

## **2. Research objective**

The main objective of the present study is to determine the relationships between post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and academic achievement among adolescents of divorced families in Mashhad-Iran.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Location and respondents of the study

This study was conducted in high schools of selected districts in Mashhad, Iran. Mashhad, located in north-east of Iran, is the capital and the largest city of Khorasan province, with a population of 2.5 millions. A sample of 800 adolescents of divorced families (424 girls and 376 boys) aged between 15 to 18 years ( $M = 16.52$  years,  $SD = 1.12$ ), were selected as respondents of the study from the daily high schools in Mashhad, Iran.

#### 3.2 Measures

**Post-Divorce Parental Conflict (PDPC):** The 39 item Post-Divorce Parental Conflict Scale (PPCS) developed by Sonnenblick and Schwarz (1992) measured PDPC. Respondents were asked to assess parent's behavior on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Never" to 5 = "constantly") across two time periods; the first year after the divorce and the past 12 months. For the purpose of this study, only PPCS during the past 12 months was used in the analysis. A higher score on post-divorce parental conflict indicates more conflict between parents following divorce. Example of items in the scale include: "my mother discussed issues calmly with my father"; "my mother threw things at my father"; and "my mother bit my father during an argument". The PPCS has three subscales: verbal hostility, indirect hostility, and physical hostility. Reliability assessment of the post-divorce parental conflict scale in this study yielded the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .704.

**Economic hardship:** Economic Hardship scale is a 12-items measure designed to assess economic hardship drawn from the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll (Lasley, 1984). These items focused on changes in the family's style of living. The response for each item ranged from 1 (Never) to 4 (Very often). A higher score on economic hardship scale indicates higher economic hardship. Reliability assessment of the economic hardship scale in this study yielded the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .832.

**Academic achievement:** Department of Education of Iran, divided CGPA into four categories: A score from 0 to 9.99 is considered as fail (grade D), a score of 10 to 14.99 is considered weak (grade C), a score of 15 to 16.99 is considered moderate (grade B), and a score of 17 to 20 is considered excellent (grade A). In this study, academic achievement refers to the students' last year's cumulative GPA (0-20). High score indicates high academic achievement.

**Background variables:** Background information such as adolescent's age, and gender was also obtained in the present study.

#### 3.3 Procedure

After obtaining approval from the Department of Education of Mashhad, respondents were selected by using proportion random sampling technique from the high school in the selected districts in Mashhad. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and were requested to sign the consent form, if they agree to participate in the study. All students who participated in the study had received parental permission. The students were told that their responses would be confidential (confidentiality was obtained by means of a code system). Pilot study was conducted prior to the actual study on 30 respondents to establish the internal validity and reliability of this instrument, and to reduce data collection error.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

A descriptive statistical analysis (frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations) was conducted to describe the variables of the study. A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the association between the post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and adolescent academic achievement.

### 4. Results of the study

#### 4.1 Descriptive findings

The means and standard deviations for post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and adolescent academic achievement are presented in Table 1. The mean score for post-divorce parental conflict was 142.16. The mean score for economic hardship was 40.23. The mean score for adolescent academic achievement was 14.78. Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents by categories of post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and adolescent academic achievement. The results of analysis indicated that based on the mean score as cut-off point, 49.3% of the respondents reported high level of post-divorce parental conflict and 49.8% reported high level of economic hardship. Based on the mean score, 57% of adolescents reported to have low academic achievement.

#### 4.2 Bivariate findings

Results of bivariate correlation analysis for post-divorce parental conflict, economic hardship and adolescent academic achievement are summarized in Table 3. As depicted in Table 3, a statistically significant and negative correlation was found between post-divorce parental conflict and adolescents' academic achievement ( $r = -.698$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Respondents who reported high level of post-divorce parental conflict also reported low level of academic achievement. Parents with high level of conflict following divorce were more likely to have adolescents with lower level of academic achievement. The  $r$  value indicates a moderate relationship between post-divorce parental conflict and adolescent academic achievement.

The analyses also revealed a statistically significant and negative correlation between economic hardship and adolescent academic achievement ( $r = -.664$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ). As expected, high level of economic hardship was associated with lower level of academic achievement among adolescents of divorced families. The correlation coefficient showed that the relationship between maternal economic hardship and adolescents' academic achievement was moderate.

#### 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the influence of post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship on academic achievement among adolescents of divorced families in Mashhad-Iran. The current study revealed that post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship had an impact on adolescents' academic achievement in divorced families. Consistent with previous research (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Kelly, 2000; Amato, 2001; Rodgers & Rose, 2001; Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010), children and adolescents who reported higher level of post-divorce parental conflict were more likely to demonstrate lower academic achievement through less parental warmth, support and monitoring. This study suggests that post-divorce parental conflict is harmful for adolescent and may diminish their potential to excel in academic achievement. These may be due to the reason that parents with high level of post-divorce conflict were less involved in their adolescents' education, and provided fewer financial resources for their children and adolescents (Sun & Li, 2002).

The present finding also supported past studies which suggest that economic hardship was associated with adolescents' academic achievement in divorced families. Financial problems following divorce may reduce parental warmth and support and disrupt the quality of parent-child relationships. These relationships disruptions contribute to adolescents' academic failures (Conger et al., 1992; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Conger et al., 1997; Conger & Elder, 1994; Pong and Ju, 2000; Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger et al., 2002; Mistry et al., 2009; Yu & Patterson, 2010). Parents who are faced with economic hardship are not able to purchase educational resource to promote children's success in school (Sobolewski & Amato, 2005). Moreover, parent with high level of economic hardship have to live in a place with inadequate schools and facilities; and they are not able to pay for college expenses even if their children manage to graduate from high school with good grades.

#### 6. Conclusion

This study examined the relationships between post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship with academic achievement among adolescent of divorced families. Based on the findings of the present study, it is concluded that academic achievement among adolescents of divorced families is influenced by both post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship. Families with high level of conflict following divorce are detrimental for adolescents' academic achievement. Parental conflict may disrupt normal family functioning that encourages high motivation and achievement among its members.

Economic hardship may relate to academic achievement through availability of resources necessary for educational attainment. In general, divorced families are often faced with financial instability that reduces their capacity to provide environment conducive to and material and nonmaterial support that enhance learning. Economic hardship can also increase the likelihood of negative family interactions such as parental conflict and hostility, parent-adolescent conflict, and parental harsh discipline, which in turn negatively impact adolescents' academic achievement.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in relation to the limitations of the study. First, all participants in this study were adolescent girls and boys of high school age (15-18 years old) in Mashhad/Iran. Thus, the findings should not be generalized beyond this population. Secondly, this study is cross-sectional and correlational in nature. Therefore, the findings cannot demonstrate causal relations between the variables and cannot determine the long-term effect of post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship on academic

achievement. Finally, the findings of this study were based on self-report data which may result in some kind of bias.

The present study focused only on post-divorce parental conflict and economic hardship in understanding academic achievement. Future studies may utilize a more holistic approach in exploring factors contributing to academic achievement among adolescents of divorced families. Factors related to self, family, and school may be examined concurrently to determine their relationships in explaining academic achievement among adolescents of divorced parents.

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Table 1. Mean and Standard deviation of study variables

| Variable                               | Mean   | Standard deviation |
|--|--------|--------------------|
| <b>Post-divorce parental conflict</b>  | 142.16 | 4.36               |
| <b>Maternal economic hardship</b>      | 40.23  | 3.46               |
| <b>Adolescent academic achievement</b> | 14.78  | 2.48               |

Table 2. Respondents' level of study variables

| Variable                              | n   | %    |
|---------------------------------------|-----|------|
| <b>Post-divorce parental conflict</b> |     |      |
| Low                                   | 407 | 50.7 |
| High                                  | 395 | 49.3 |
| <b>Economic hardship</b>              |     |      |
| Low                                   | 403 | 50.2 |
| High                                  | 399 | 49.8 |
| <b>Academic achievement</b>           |     |      |
| High= A ( $\geq 17$ )                 | 276 | 34.4 |
| Moderate= B (15-16.99)                | 67  | 8.4  |
| Low= C (10-14.99)                     | 457 | 57   |
| Fail=D ( $\leq 9.99$ )                | 0   | 0    |

Table 3. Pearson's Product-moment correlation coefficients matrix between the study variables in overall sample (n=800)

| Variables                                 | 1       | 2       | 3 |
|---|---------|---------|---|
| <b>1. Post-divorce parental conflict</b>  | -       |         |   |
| <b>2. Economic hardship</b>               | .690**  | -       |   |
| <b>3. Adolescent academic achievement</b> | -.698** | -.664** | - |

Note: \*\*. p<.001