THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ADAPTATION OF THE ADOLESCENTS FROM DIVORCED FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

How do adolescents nowadays react to family instability caused by parental divorce? How does this situation influence the adolescent socially and psychologically?

These questions relate to the growing increase of the divorce rate and the fact that this phenomenon can be considered one of the most adverse events in the life of the children involved, especially in adolescents, since in this phase a stable family structure with consistent references is essential.

According to a report published by the European Union, such as the following modern trends, the number of Portuguese couples divorcing has steadily increased. Statistics recently released show one in three marriages now and in divorce. In many cases divorce is not only the end of a marriage, but also the breakdown and the separation of a family unit. So, it is important to ascertain how divorce affects the adjustment of the family member.

The present study will examine the relationship between parental divorce and the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents. It is therefore intended that a representative sample of Portuguese adolescents (ages from 11 to 16 years) complete a questionnaire regarding their psychosocial adaptation. We will focus on the following aspects: background, the family relationship, the level of intimacy between parents, health, school and work, religion, types of school and community activities, risks behaviours (smoking; alcohol; drugs; dating, sex and contraceptive and eating habits), life satisfaction, depression, anxiety and stress.

We will combine two different methods of collecting data: the questionnaire and some exploratory interviews. Both of them will be used to discuss the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescents from divorced families, and to provide theoretical support and intervention.

OBJECTIVES

Given that the impact of divorce is not invariable negative, and that its consequences are the result of interaction between extrinsic factors (external influences) and intrinsic factors (internal vulnerability), it is the same situation not experienced in a similar way by the people involved and, even if they feel the incidents as disturbing, they develop reactions (defensive or offensive) individual or collective strategies, which allow them to adapt, solve their problems and deal with them.

In this way, we set out to evaluate this purpose through a theoretical model of the functioning of a person in a particular situation, that is collective strategies, which allow them to adapt, solve their problems and deal with them.

So, the processes of adaptation regarding diversity will be analysed, challenging conjecture according to which the children of divorced parents invariably have a weak psychosocial adaptation.

According to the conceptual framework, it is important to know about these individual stress levels, well-being, values, coping strategies, school and school work, health, religion, school and community activities and risk behaviours (smoking; alcohol; drugs; eating habits, sex and contraceptive). This group of indicators will be articulated with other aspects of greater objectiveness: the level of inter-parental conflicts and the degree of intimacy between parents.

METHODS

Two different methods will be used for collecting data.

The main method is the questionnaire individually presented to the adolescents. The questionnaire approached here constitutes a study which will compare a two representative samples of Portuguese adolescents (2 groups of 125 adolescents) - one of them being from families in which the parents are divorced / separated; and the other from "intact" families. The results will be interpreted through the crosschecking of all the variables to be explained, for which the SPSS operating system (Statistic Pack for Social Sciences) will be used. This will consist of a qualitative analysis.

Nevertheless, it is important to combine quantitative and qualitative methods, so a qualitative analysis of individual interviews will also be made.

The questionnaire and the interviews will be administered in order to answer to research question. In short, they will be used to explore the adolescents' points of view and the relations between feelings, emotions, the risk behaviour, when they experience the parental departure. Both results will be used to discuss the psychosocial adaptation of the adolescents from divorced families, and to provide theoretical support and intervention.

Participants will be recruited through advertisements made at the school where the purpose of the survey is to be explained. The collaboration of the Psychology and Social Services team of the selected schools is required.

HYPOTHESIS

It is expected that the parenting marital status, but more specifically inter-parental conflicts and the intimacy with the parents, contributes to define the psychosocial adaptation of adolescents.

It will also be expected that adolescents who present high levels of inter-parental conflicts will reveal a weak psychosocial adaptation in comparison to adolescents who experience low levels of inter-parental conflicts.

Adolescents who present high levels of inter-parental conflicts are also expected to reveal low levels of intimacy with their parents, which will not contribute to the promotion of this type of behaviour.

Types of school and community activities - the evaluation of the extra-home activities will be a good variable to understand the psychosocial adjustment of adolescents from divorced families.

The evaluation of these last six variables will be estimated through the use of the scale adapted from Turino's scale (Ciaranho, 2004).

Details of the sample and the methods will be added in the final paper. The study is already finished and the results will be published on the near future.

HYPOTHESIS

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REFERENCES