

Self-esteem and Family Cohesion: The Child's Perspective and Adjustment

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This study investigated the relationship between children's self-esteem and their perceptions of family cohesion. Closeness to the family was identified in terms of five family types (one- and two-parent cohesive, divided, parent coalition and isolated child). Questionnaires assessing children's self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967; Piers and Harris, 1969) and perceptions of family happiness and support were administered to 467 fifth- and sixth-grade children. Teachers' knowledge of family relationships was also measured. The results indicated that children from different family types experienced varying degrees of closeness and support. Furthermore, those children reporting little family support tended to score low levels on self-esteem. The importance of examining the parent-child relationships as well as parental interactions in studies of the effects of divorce on children is discussed.

The sharp increase in divorce rates and marital breakdown in most Western countries and the concomitant effects on family welfare has generated much debate (Kelly and Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1975, 1976). Considerable effort has been directed towards analyzing the impact that different family structures (e.g., intact, broken or reconstituted) have on the psychological well-being of children; but regrettably, empirical findings remain equivocal (Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Raschke and Raschke, 1979).

The research reported in this paper was conducted in 1980.

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Criticisms of the emphasis on family structure in these studies has been widespread (Goode, 1956; Landis, 1960; Luepnitz, 1979; Nye, 1957; Rosenberg, 1965). Generally these critics argue that the impact of divorce on children cannot be understood simply in terms of a family's physical composition, that the degree of marital harmony also warrants consideration. Studies following this approach have gathered information about the quality of the marital relationship from different sources with mixed success.

Relying on parental reports of marital discord, Stroup (1956) and Burchinal, Hawkes, and Gardner (1957) failed to demonstrate that the marital adjustment of parents affected the personality development of their children. By contrast, Coopersmith's (1967) data support the hypothesis that conflict and tension between parents is associated with at least one important index of poor adjustment in children, low self-esteem. In Coopersmith's study, however, marital harmony was assessed according to relatively subjective criteria by an outside interviewer. The connection between marital harmony and children's psychological well-being is supported also by studies that have relied on children's reports of the parents' relationship. Those who report a high

incidence of parental or family conflict are more likely to show poor adjustment and low self-esteem, even where this conflict occurred several years earlier (Landis, 1960; Nye, 1957; Raschke and Raschke, 1979; Watkins, 1976). Thus, the research findings show consistency when the empirical focus shifts from parental perceptions of marital harmony towards the perceptions of the child or an outside observer.

If children's perceptions of marital harmony are related to their psychological well-being, the question arises as to why this relationship exists. Rosenberg (1965) noted that conflict between parents and their children, rather than conflict between the parents, may increase a child's feelings of worthlessness, i.e., lower their self-esteem. Children may bear the brunt of much parental hostility, be encouraged to take sides in parental disputes, or be ignored as parents become preoccupied with their own problems. Presumably, any of these events could affect a child's self-esteem adversely, especially if they are interpreted to mean rejection by at least one parent. As yet, there is little empirical evidence to test this interpretation. Nevertheless, the argument draws attention to the fact that the marital relationship is merely one dyad among a complex set of family interactions. These other interactions also might play an important role in moderating the impact of marital disharmony on the psychological well-being of children. Simply isolating the parental relationship for examination ignores the complexity of family life and severely limits the generalizability of research findings.

FAMILY TYPES AND HYPOTHESES

The current study extends research in this field by investigating family interactions—not solely adult interactions—and their relationship to children's self-esteem. Family interaction is defined in terms of children's perceptions of the closeness of parents and siblings. Five major family types are empirically identified as meaningful from a child's perspective. If, as Coopersmith (1967:37) argued, self-esteem is "first and foremost . . . the amount of respectful, accepting and concerned treatment that an individual receives from the significant others in this life," it should be possible to hypothesize how self-esteem will be affected by perceptions of closeness to family members. The family types and their expected relationships with children's self-esteem are outlined below:

Family Types

1. Two-parent cohesive families, where children perceive close ties between themselves, both parents and their siblings;
2. One-parent cohesive families where children

also see their single-parent family unit as close;

3. The isolated child, where children perceive themselves as isolates within the family;
4. The divided family, where children perceive division between their parents and can attach themselves to either mother or father;
5. The parent-coalition family, where children perceive some family division, with one cohesive group formed by the parents and another by the children.

Hypothesis A. In the first and second family types, children perceive unity and closeness within the family and will experience acceptance and support from significant others. This environment is expected to be associated with high self-esteem.

Hypothesis B. In the third family type, children who perceive themselves to be isolated from all members of their family will experience rejection by significant others and will have low self-esteem.

Hypothesis C. In the fourth and fifth family types, children who are close to some family members but not to others will have intermediate levels of self-esteem, since they probably are experiencing some acceptance and some rejection. If parents are more significant in the lives of children than are siblings, it is anticipated that children from parent-coalition families would experience greater rejection than children from divided families and, therefore, would have lower self-esteem.

METHOD

Sample

The study involved 467 school children (258 boys, 209 girls) from the fifth and sixth grades of six randomly selected primary schools in Canberra, Australia. Their ages ranged from 9 to 12 years with the majority (85%) being 10 or 11 years of age. The family's socioeconomic status was indexed by the head of the household's occupation (Broom, Jones and Zubrzycki, 1965). Forty percent of families fell into the high socioeconomic category (professional or managerial occupations), 33% in the middle socioeconomic category (clerical, sales and skilled occupations) and 27% in the low socioeconomic category (unskilled and semiskilled occupations). The response rate was a high 80%, with nonparticipation primarily due to parents failing to provide written permission for their child's participation.

Instruments

Self-esteem. This was assessed using two self-report instruments suitable for primary-school

children: (a) the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory (Coopersmith, 1959) and (b) the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers and Harris, 1969).

Child and Family Questionnaire. This instrument was designed to elicit data concerning the child's happiness in the family (e.g., Do you feel happy and have fun with your family?) and perceptions of conflict in family relationships (e.g., Do the grown-ups who live with you often get mad with each other? Do the grown-ups who live with you often get mad with you? Are there a lot of arguments in your family?) In addition, demographic information including socioeconomic status and family structure was obtained. The family structure measure was only concerned with whether the family was a one- or two-parent unit. Since the main purpose of the research was to focus on the child's perception of family relationships, the present study makes no attempt to distinguish between natural parents, stepparents and de facto parents. Children are considered to have two parents if they have a male and female adult living in their house and whom they regard as parents.

Family Cohesion Index. In a pilot study it was found that children had a clear conception of the closeness of family relationships and could most readily represent them pictorially. Consequently, a pictorial measure of family cohesion was devised.

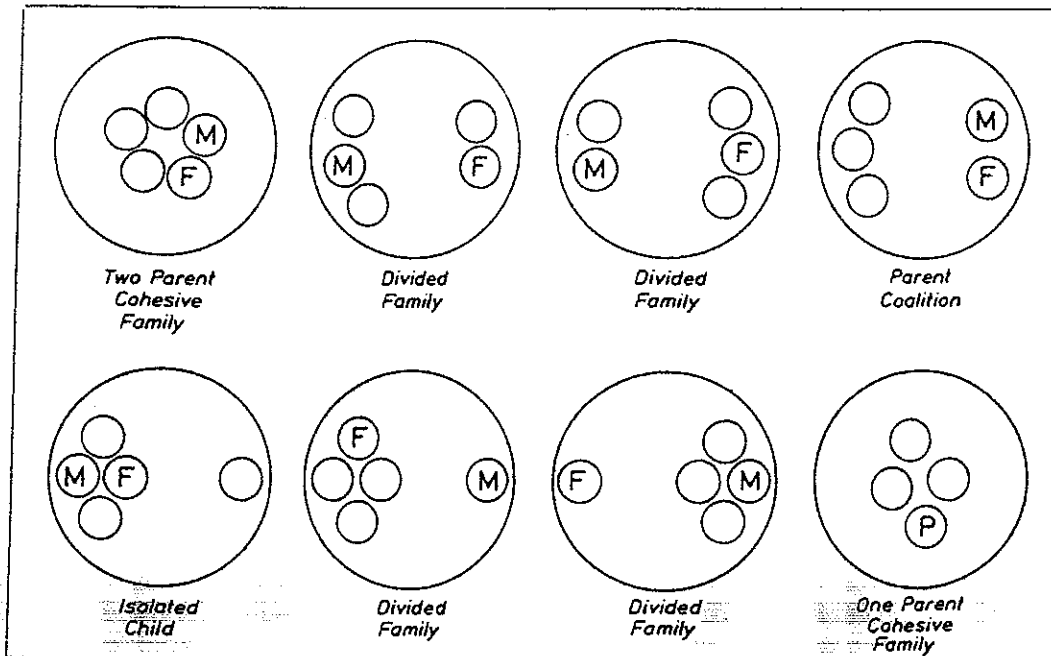
As illustrated in the Figure, different family types were represented by diagrams that depicted family members as small circles within a larger circle. In two-parent families, the letters M and F were used to denote mother and father whereas, in a one-parent family, the letter P was used. The children were represented as unmarked circles, which avoided the need for male or female labels. Subjects were encouraged to add or delete children so that the diagram resembled their own family and to identify themselves by coloring in one circle. The children demonstrated a clear understanding of this pictorial concept of family structure. The sequence of the family types presented on a page was randomly varied across subjects to minimize a position response bias.

Teacher Questionnaire. Finally, teachers' knowledge of family structure and relationships within the home was used to provide an alternative source of information. Teachers were assumed to be knowledgeable in this area, since in Australian primary schools one teacher is assigned to a class of approximately 25 pupils for the duration of the academic year. The present study was conducted toward the end of this period.

Procedure

The Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, the

FIGURE. DIAGRAMS REPRESENTING THE FAMILY TYPES. M = MOTHER; F = FATHER; P = SINGLE PARENT; O = CHILDREN.



Child and Family Questionnaire incorporating the Family Cohesion Index were presented to children during a regular work period in their normal classroom. The presentation order was randomized, and confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants. Teachers completed their questionnaire concurrently.

RESULTS

Both the Coopersmith Self Esteem Inventory and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale provided reliable indices of self-esteem (Cooper, 1980). Their alpha reliability coefficients were 0.87 and 0.92 respectively, which compares favorably with those reported elsewhere (Edgar, Powell, Watkins, Moore and Zakharov, 1974; Piers and Harris, 1969).

The children were readily able to place themselves conceptually in various categories of family cohesion. Three hundred twenty-eight children (70%) perceived themselves as coming from a two-parent cohesive family, and 33 children (7%) came from a one-parent cohesive family. Forty-two children (8%) came from a divided family, where the children sided with one of the parents or where one parent was isolated. Twenty-one children (4%) came from households where they indicated there was a parent coalition. Finally, eleven children (2%) saw themselves as isolated within their family structure.

The Family Cohesion Index provides a measure of the closeness of the family, from which the degree of acceptance and support experienced by the child can be inferred. To investigate the validity of the index, the five family types also were related first, to children's reports of conflict in the family and second, to their reports of enjoyment with the family, using the chi-square test for independence.

Table 1 presents the frequency with which high parent-parent conflict, parent-child conflict, total family conflict, and fun with the family were experienced by children in the five family types.

Children from either one-parent or two-parent cohesive families were clearly less likely to report parent-child or total conflict and were more likely to have fun with their families. Less parental conflict also was reported in two-parent cohesive families. These findings are consistent with the assumption that children in one- or two-parent cohesive units feel close to their families and see them as a source of support.

By contrast, the divided family is characterized by higher degrees of all conflict and by reduced enjoyment in family activities. Children from divided families, therefore, appear to have a less supportive home environment.

Least family support seems to be associated with those children who feel isolated within the family. This group, reported highest parent-child conflict and, predictably, were least likely to have fun with their families.

In Table 1 the unexpected findings relate to parent-coalition families. Earlier it was suggested that children who identified with this category might feel rejected by both parents and receive less support than children from divided families, and that parent-child conflict might be relatively high. However, this was not the case. Parent-child conflict was notably less than that found in divided families, while having fun with the family was quite high. Surprisingly, parent-parent conflict was as high as that reported in the divided household. One possible interpretation is that, in the parent-coalition family, children may be distanced from their mother and father but do not necessarily feel rejected by them. Children certainly see their parents as closer to each other than to them, but at the same time they are aware of parental conflict. Perhaps these parents are attempting to shield their children from the marital conflict in an effort to reduce family disruption. While apparently aware of the conflict, such children tend not to feel threatened.

These data suggest that children from different family types experience varying degrees of

TABLE 1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY TYPES AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Family Types	Indices of Intrafamily Support			
	Percentage of children reporting			
	High Parent-parent Conflict	High Parent-child Conflict	High Total Family Conflict	Having Fun with Family Most of the Time
Two-parent cohesive	4.9	8.0	11.9	90.9
One-parent cohesive	— ^a	9.4	16.1	84.4
Parent coalition	19.0	14.3	28.6	81.0
Divided	19.0	23.8	35.7	76.2
Isolated child	9.1	27.3	27.3	54.5
χ^2	15.91*	13.88*	20.05*	20.39*

^aParent-parent conflict was not examined where there was only one parent living in the home with the child.

*Significant at the .001 level.

TABLE 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY TYPES AND SELF-ESTEEM

Family Types	Self-esteem Scales	
	Piers-Harris	Coopersmith
Two-parent cohesive:	233	231
One-parent cohesive	223	220
Parent coalition:	198	198
Divided family	145	164
Isolated child	70	64
χ^2	34.24*	28.39*

*Significant at the .001 level.

closeness and support within the family. Highest closeness and support was perceived in two-parent cohesive households, followed closely by one-parent cohesive families. Next was the parent-coalition family where parental conflict was present but unaccompanied by marked parent-child conflict. Children in divided families and particularly isolated children experienced less supportive environments. These children were directly involved in conflict with at least one parent.

Since these family types differ in the degree of perceived closeness and support, it is reasonable to expect such differences to be reflected in self-esteem. Table 2 presents mean rankings between family types and self-esteem. A Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric analysis of variance¹ was employed to examine the relationship between family types and self-esteem. Both the χ^2 of 34.24 obtained with the Piers-Harris scale and the χ^2 of 28.39 obtained with the Coopersmith scale were highly significant ($p < .001$). Table 2 illustrates that self-esteem decreased with diminishing family support.

One further question examined was whether children's perceptions of family relationships were similar to those of an outside observer, in this case, the school teacher. In terms of family structure, 100% correspondence was found between teachers' and children's reports. Such com-

parability did not exist, however, with regard to the quality of family relations. Table 3 shows that teachers associated good family relationships with two-parent cohesive households; parent-coalition families and the isolated-child family. Poor family relationships, however, were reported for divided families and single-parent cohesive households. When teachers evaluated their pupils' school behavior, their assessments reflected the pattern found for self-esteem scores. As family support decreases, social relations with peers and the child's sense of worth are seen to deteriorate. Finally, it should be noted that, in this study, self-esteem was not related to the age or sex of a child nor to the family's socioeconomic status.

DISCUSSION

This research indicates that family cohesion, when measured through the child's perceptions of family relationships, has an important influence on the development of self-concept in children. Where children perceive conflict between parents or between themselves and their parents, lower self-esteem can be expected. Furthermore, the results clearly show that family structure alone (i.e., one or two parents) does not have the most damaging effect on children's self-esteem. Indeed, the adjustment and well-being of children from single-parent cohesive families was second only to that of children from two-parent cohesive families. Faring consistently less well were children from the two-parent coalition, divided and isolated-child families. Hence, this research supports the earlier findings of Raschke and Raschke (1979) that broken homes need not yield broken lives and that the quality of family life is crucial to the psychological well-being of the child.

The present study has advanced previous research by clarifying the importance of children's perception of self-involvement with parental conflict. The measures used by Raschke and Raschke

TABLE 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY TYPES AND TEACHERS' EVALUATIONS

Family Types	Teacher's Evaluation of the Percentage of Children Below Average on			
	School Attendance	Social Relationships with Peers	Family Relationships	Sense of Self-worth
Two-parent cohesive	5.2	11.0	1.8	13.1
One-parent cohesive	12.5	18.8	15.6	21.9
Parent coalition	4.8	28.6	4.8	23.8
Divided	4.8	21.4	11.9	26.2
Isolated child	9.1	54.5	0.0	45.5
χ^2	3.20	22.82**	22.90**	13.77*

*Significant at the .01 level.

**Significant at the .001 level.

were children's reports of the amount of conflict first, between parents and second, within the family as a whole. The current research points to the inadequacy of both these measures. On the one hand, to examine total conflict ignores the possibility that different types of conflict have different effects on children's self-esteem. On the other hand, to focus solely on marital disruption denies the existence of other family relationships, particularly those involving the child. The quality of such bonds could serve either as a buffer against parental conflict or could exacerbate feelings of insecurity experienced by the child.

The data clearly demonstrate the need to examine the parent-child relationship in conjunction with the parent-parent relationship. If, in the current study, only marital conflict had been used as the independent variable, a quite different pattern of results would have emerged. Children from parent-coalition and divided families would have been classified as having conflict-ridden home environments, whereas children who feel isolated or who have cohesive families would be categorized as having harmonious home environments. To dichotomize the family types in this way is to distort the degree to which children perceive their home environment as free from discord. Additionally, this procedure may mask important differences in the self-esteem of children who identify with various family types.

Not surprisingly, children who feel isolated from their families do not find their home environments supportive and happy. Such children score lowest on self-esteem and significantly, the parent-child relationship is the dominating variable in this case. If this variable had been ignored, a harmonious parental relationship might have predicted higher self-esteem for these children than for children of conflicting parents.

Another trend that is concealed by examining only parental conflict is the consistent tendency for children from parent-coalition homes to fare considerably better than children from divided homes. The notion that arguments between parents will have a less damaging effect on child development if the children are not embroiled in parental squabbles warrants further investigation. At a time when divorces often involve the children in choosing the custodial parent, appropriate and sensitive ways of arranging such involvement should be seriously examined.

One further issue requiring discussion concerns the source of information about family relations. In the current study, children's perceptions were selected for investigation, though every effort was made to test the validity of this data base by using

teacher evaluations as well. The weakness of this approach, however, was that teachers who were knowledgeable about family structure (i.e., single- or two-parent families) and marital status appeared to rely heavily on such variables in making their judgments of family conflict. Thus, children from one-parent cohesive families were seen to have poorer family relations than the children's reports would indicate. Thus, the present study is discouraging about the usefulness of teacher evaluations. Nevertheless, it is essential that future research in this area continue to seek alternative sources of information for comparison with children's perceptions. On the basis of the current study, conflict perceived by the child appears to be the crucial variable. The next question is whether this conflict can be corroborated by an informant or whether it exists largely in the child's imagination. It is possible that children with low self-esteem, isolated children for instance, are not family victims but rather prefer to portray themselves as victimized. Alternatively, they may see gloom all around them.

While this issue deserves further investigation, the current data do not enhance such an explanation. If indeed these children simply view everything pessimistically, one would expect relatively elevated levels of parent-parent conflict to be reported. This was not the case. Nor do the data support the idea that such children are unrealistically pretending to be victimized. If the teachers' reports can be regarded as valid, children isolated within their families seemed to have poorer social relationships with their peers. If these poor social relations reflect the child's interactions at home, then the parent-child conflict they report may well be real.

Finally, a note of caution should be raised in relation to the question of causality. As noted by Parke (1977), there is an urgent need to avoid the overly simplistic and unidirectional approach which for so long has plagued traditional investigations of social development. This problem occurs particularly with studies of family relations that assume that the quality of family life determines a child's self-esteem. While this is intuitively appealing for those interested in the effects of divorce on children, the direction of causality has yet to be established empirically. For instance, in the case of the isolated child, it's quite plausible that the poor adjustment of the child had precipitated parent-child conflict and not vice versa. That family type, in fact, may determine the direction of causality is a point deserving both emphasis and further exploration.

FOOTNOTE

1. A nonparametric test was used because of unequal variance among groups.

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