

The Effect of Parental Divorce on Children's Mental Health in Contemporary China

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Abstract—Divorce has become a common social phenomenon in China. For children, parental divorce is a major life event that can have an impact on their mental health. This thesis aims to understand the impacts of parental divorce on children's mental health, the mechanisms behind it, possible factors, and current approaches. This thesis draws from a review of existing literature in contemporary China in the past 6 years. The results show that parental divorce may negatively impact children's mental health in terms of anxiety and depression, but results are not consistent and depend on various factors such as parental conflict, family structure, and financial burden. To better support children during and after divorce, parents, caregivers, and professionals need to consider the unique needs of each child and provide the necessary resources and emotional support. Further research used consistent measurements and family structure, specified age group, and longer follow-up are needed to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences of parental divorce on children's mental health and to develop effective interventions to promote their well-being.

Keywords—children, China, mental health, parental divorce

I. INTRODUCTION

Parental divorce has become a common issue in China in recent years. For the past 20 years, the divorce rate in China has been rising steadily. Specifically, from 2003 to 2019, the divorce rate tripled from 1.05% to 3.36% [1]. It means that a total of 4.8 million couples divorced across the country in 2019. To be noted, China decided to establish a cooling-off period of 30 days for couples who decided to divorce in the Civil Code to deal with the social problem of high divorce rates, which led to the divorce rate in 2021 dropping to 2.01%.

Parental divorce is a significant life event that can have profound effects on children's mental health. Parental divorce can disrupt the family structure, alter established routines, and introduce emotional and psychological challenges for children. Understanding the influence of parental divorce on children's mental health is crucial for developing interventions and support systems to mitigate potential negative outcomes and promote their overall well-being [2].

Research has consistently indicated that children of divorced parents are at an increased risk of experiencing various mental health issues compared to their peers from intact families. Emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and long-term mental health consequences have been identified as common outcomes in this population. However, the impact of parental divorce on children's mental health is not uniform, and several factors can influence the magnitude and nature of these effects.

This literature review aims to explore and synthesize

existing research on the influence of parental divorce on children's mental health in contemporary China. By examining empirical studies in the past 6 years, researchers seek to identify the specific mental health outcomes observed in children of divorced parents and understand the underlying mechanisms and contributing factors involved. Additionally, this review will discuss protective factors, such as the difference between China's culture and Western culture, highlighting the potential avenues for intervention and support that can help mitigate the negative effects of parental divorce on children's mental health.

By examining the literature in this field, this paper can gain insights into the challenges faced by children of divorced parents and the specific mental health concerns they may encounter. Furthermore, understanding the factors that mediate or moderate the impact of parental divorce on mental health outcomes can provide valuable information for developing targeted interventions and support systems. By addressing these issues, it can work towards promoting the psychological well-being of children who have experienced parental divorce and help them navigate the associated challenges to lead fulfilling and resilient lives.

Overall, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing knowledge base by synthesizing empirical evidence, exploring factors that impact children's mental health, identifying gaps in current research, and providing recommendations for future studies and interventions. By investigating the influence of parental divorce on children's mental health, the findings from this dissertation may assist in providing useful information in developing strategies to improve children's mental well-being.

II. TOPIC OVERVIEW

A. Definition of Divorce

1) What is divorce

Divorce is the legal dissolution of the marital relationship between the parents of a child or children, resulting in the termination of the rights and obligations between husband and wife. Divorce involves various legal procedures, including filing for divorce, division of communal property, determination of custody, alimony, or child support. Divorce often disrupts household routines and affects children emotionally, socially, and psychologically as they navigate the changes and adjustments resulting from their parents' separation [3].

2) Divorce process

The term "divorce process" refers to the legal proceedings between spouses aimed at dissolving their marriage. In China, different divorce procedures exist for cases where both

spouses voluntarily seek divorce and when one spouse requests it. Generally, this process involves applying for divorce and subsequent examination and approval by relevant departments. These departments assess the willingness of both parties and ensure proper handling of children and property. The custody decision is typically based on factors such as income, housing, education, companionship time, and care convenience [4].

3) Family structure after divorce

Following parental divorce, the family structure changes and reorganizes into five primary types: nuclear family, joint custody, separate custody, and blended family [5]. Firstly, a nuclear family arises when parents separate, and children predominantly live with one parent while maintaining regular visits or joint custody with the other. This transition changes the family structure from a two-parent unit to two separate families.

Secondly, joint custody involves both parents sharing custody of the child, allowing the child to spend roughly equal time with both parents. This arrangement may involve the child alternating between parents' homes weekly or daily.

Thirdly, Sole custody gives one parent full custody with limited visitation rights for the other parent. The family structure mainly revolves around the custodial parent and child. Lastly, blended families form when one or both parents enter new relationships or remarry after divorce, introducing stepchildren or stepparents to the family structure.

Regardless of the specific custody arrangements, successful co-parenting requires both parents to collaboratively make decisions about the child's upbringing, education, and other crucial aspects of life. Effective family structure involves regular communication and coordination between parents to ensure the child's healthy development.

B. Children's Mental Health

1) What is the definition of mental health?

Mental health encompasses our emotional, psychological, and social well-being, influencing our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It plays a pivotal role in managing stress, fostering social interactions and relationships, and making sound decisions. Throughout all stages of life, from childhood and adolescence to adulthood, maintaining optimal mental health remains crucial. Achieving a healthy mental state involves striking a balance in various life facets, such as emotional regulation, bolstering self-esteem, nurturing positive relationships, and effectively managing stress. The dynamic and multifaceted nature of mental health is influenced by biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Mentally healthy children tend to exhibit improved communication and cooperation skills in both personal and societal contexts. They can naturally express their emotional needs and function effectively within their households, schools, and communities [6].

2) What are common mental health assessments in research?

In research on Children's mental health, various measurements are commonly used to assess mental health conditions in terms of anxiety, depression, and psychological stress. These assessments provide reliable quantitative data that can be analyzed to draw conclusions and make informed decisions.

The Kessler Psychological Scale (K6) is extensively employed in large-scale mental health surveys and effectively screens the psychological distress within a population. This scale comprises 10 questions, with responses ranging from 1 to 5 denoting the frequency of each answer. The cumulative score is derived from these questions, categorizing individuals' mental health status into four levels: Level 1 (10 to 15 points) indicating a very low risk of mental illness; Level 2 (16 to 21 points) signifying a lower risk; Level 3 (22 to 29 points) indicating higher risk; and Level 4 (30 to 50 points) suggesting elevated risk [7].

Research frequently utilizes the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) and Social Anxiety Subscale of the Self-Consciousness Scale (SASS-CS) scale to measure anxiety. GAD-7 encompasses seven questions probing anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks, with responses graded from none to almost daily. Total scores range from 0 to 21, categorizing individuals into no anxiety disorder, mild, moderate, moderate to severe, or severe anxiety disorder [8]. Besides, SASS-CS evaluates emotional reactions during interpersonal interactions, consisting of six items rated on a 5-point scale [9].

The commonly used depression scales are the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). PHQ-9 assesses depression based on experiences over the last one to two weeks, with 9 questions scored from 0 to 3. Scores indicate no depression, mild, moderate, moderate to severe, or major depression [10]. CES-D gauges depressive symptoms through a self-report method, featuring items like depressed mood and psychomotor retardation. A four-point scale assesses the frequency, ranging from not at all to most of the time [11].

3) Why is this age group unique?

This thesis will focus on school-aged children, ranging from 6 to 18 years old. Divorce represents a pivotal and often traumatic shift in a child's world, disrupting family dynamics and routines. Children are chosen as the focus population of this research due to their limited ability to deal with the upheavals caused by divorce. For them, the experience can feel akin to the enforced loss of a parent, creating a situation where they might struggle to comprehend and manage the departure of a family member [12].

Lacking emotional insight, children might not realize the breakdown of their parent's relationship, instead solely perceiving an impending separation. This childlike perspective poses challenges in explaining divorce to them, leading to potential communication issues. However, this innocence also underscores their adaptability. Effective post-divorce communication and active parental involvement in their growth can significantly mitigate the negative impacts of divorce.

C. Factors of Parental Divorce Affecting Children's Mental Health

1) Financial burden

Financial burden resulting from parental divorce can negatively impact Children's mental health. Education often costs a substantial portion of a family's income, representing a significant investment in a child's growth and development. Such financial burdens can place parents in economic

dilemmas, leading to life pressures. This can drive parents to seek validation by subduing their family status and disciplining their children, reflecting a troubling social phenomenon rooted in financial strain. Consequently, children subjected to such coercive upbringing may repress their needs, fostering feelings of inferiority [13].

2) The lack of the traditional family structure

After parental divorce, children may face the situation of living with one parent, so they lack traditional family support. When children habitually overlook their emotional needs during their growth process, they may opt to share their experiences with same-aged peers instead of their parents. The diminished parental role in nurturing emotional development can lead to negative emotions and simplistic, extreme problem-solving approaches. This deficiency in effective parental influence can result in poor family communication and academic performance [14].

3) Parental marital conflict

Parental conflict during marriage and even after divorce can negatively impact children's mental well-being. Parents represent a child's first exposure to intimate relationships, making parental conflict a source of insecurity and distrust for children. Such experiences can hinder the formation of healthy relationships in adulthood. Children subjected to parents' disputes might experience confusion and impaired judgment. Verbal conflicts can weaken children's sense of belonging, encouraging withdrawal and ineffective coping mechanisms. Escalation to physical conflict can lead to helplessness and a belief that violence is a solution. This can breed irritability and even violent tendencies [15].

D. What Impacts of Parental Divorce on Mental Health in Children?

1) Psychological distress

The impact of parental divorce on children's mental health is multifaceted and intertwined with personal growth experiences. Children may encounter a range of intense emotions, including anger, sadness, confusion, and fear, in response to familial structure changes. Younger children may feel a deep sense of loss and sadness despite their limited understanding of their parental relationship breakdown. The emotional distress during the early stages of parental divorce can be profound and prolonged for children [14]. Besides, the emotional distress resulting from divorce can impact children's academic performance. They may struggle to concentrate, have trouble with memory retention, or exhibit a decline in overall motivation in school. This can lead to negative academic outcomes, including lower grades, decreased participation in class, and diminished educational attainment.

2) Anxiety

The uncertainties altered living arrangements, and disruptions to daily life after parental divorce can trigger anxiety symptoms in children. They might worry about their parents' well-being, financial stability, and the potential for further change or separation. Children might even blame themselves for the divorce, leading to negative self-perceptions. Divorce-induced upheaval could result in feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and diminished self-esteem. These anxiety symptoms can also further impact academic

performance, causing difficulty concentrating, memory retention issues, and decreased motivation.

3) Depression

The process of divorce can involve ongoing conflict and hostility between parents. Children exposed to constant parental conflicts, arguments, or even legal battles may experience chronic stress and anxiety. This chronic stress can increase the risk of developing depressive symptoms.

However, not all children will experience these effects; some may exhibit adaptability and resiliently adjust to the changes brought about by divorce. Factors such as conflict level, quality of post-divorce parenting, access to support networks, and a child's personal coping skills all play roles in either mitigating negative effects or facilitating a healthy adjustment.

E. Protective Factors: Differences in Parental Divorce Patterns between China and Western Countries

There are three differences in parental divorce patterns between China and Western countries. These differences may serve as protective factors for Children's mental well-being after parental divorce [16].

1) Socioeconomic status

When comparing China with Western countries in terms of family economic status, divorce is more common in families with lower socioeconomic status in Western countries. This implies that after divorce, they may invest less in their children's education and material resources. Conversely, in China, the risk of divorce is higher among groups with a higher socioeconomic status, such as women with higher levels of education. Additionally, the divorce rate is higher in cities than in rural areas, which may mitigate the negative impact of parental divorce on children to some extent.

2) Children's role in Chinese parents' divorce decisions

In China, it is common for parents to endure marital difficulties for the sake of their children. Children play an important role in parents' decisions regarding marriage, and society widely accepts that marriage has a significant impact. According to traditional concepts, each family member has a designated role, such as financial provision or family care. Parental divorce results in the departure of family members and the loss of their assigned roles, both explicit and implicit. Most Chinese couples are not consciously aware of the direct or indirect negative impact of parental conflicts on their children. Instead, they attribute the negative impact solely to the divorce itself and its process. Only a few couples intentionally shield their children from arguments or fights before divorce, and many caregivers emphasize that the reason they did not shield their children is that they were still young and ignorant at that time.

3) Chinese traditional family structure

The three-generation family structure is more prevalent in China than in Western societies. The main living arrangement is spouses living with children and their parents, so it refers to a family contains: 4 grandparents, 2 parents, and 1 to 2 children. This suggests that after divorce, children in China may receive better care and companionship from grandparents, which could potentially mitigate the adverse effects to some extent. All these factors suggest that the negative impact of divorce on children in China is likely to be

lower than in the West.

F. Current Strategies to Improve Child's Mental Health After Parental Divorce

Several policies have been implemented in China to promote Children's well-being. The single-parent family allowance is a policy supporting single-parent families raising minor children independently. Its purpose is to safeguard the well-being of single-parent households, promote children's education, alleviate economic burdens, and enhance living standards. For single-parent families with limited economic means, this subsidy provides essential assistance through social support measures and other means. Depending on the actual economic circumstances, additional preferential policies, such as tuition waivers, can be extended to them in areas like education.

Similarly, alimony is implemented to ease the financial pressure on the parent responsible for raising the children post-divorce. Alimony entails the parent who is not primarily caring for the children financially contributing to their living, educational, and medical expenses. The amount of alimony may be determined based on the child's actual needs, both parents' financial capacities, and the region's cost of living [17].

Lastly, family therapy can be a valuable resource for divorced families, which can provide a supportive and structured environment for addressing the challenges that arise from the separation of parents and promoting a positive adjustment and well-being after divorce. The primary focus of family therapy is on the family as a whole system, rather than on individual members in isolation. It recognizes that the dynamics and interactions within a family significantly impact the well-being of each member. The success of family therapy often depends on the willingness of family members' engagement and willingness for the betterment of the entire family [18].

Although family therapy is popular and effective in Western countries, family therapy is at the beginning stage in China. Few parents are aware of this therapy and are less motivated to attend, especially for those experienced marriage conflict. Besides, the current therapy model does not fit the needs of Chinese families, highlighting the needs to adapt and develop therapy based on the Chinese culture, such as the Chinese traditional family structures and children's role in divorce decisions.

In China, current strategies and policies mostly aim to address the financial burden after parental divorce, which serves as a factor that negatively impacts Children's mental health. Limited strategies focus on addressing or mitigating the negative impacts of parental conflicts and family structure changes on children's mental health. More strategies and interventions, such as effective co-parenting and community support, which have shown positive effects on children's mental health in Western countries, are needed and can be introduced in China in the future.

III. FINDING SUMMARY

A. Studies Conducted in Contemporary China

1) Search methods

It is important to synthesize empirical evidence of parental divorce on children's mental health in complementary China.

Search strategies (Table 1) were developed and utilized to search studies published recently in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database, which is the largest and most comprehensive Chinese literature database. After searching, four studies were identified.

Table 1. Search strategies in CNKI

Item	Keywords
#1	Parental divorce
#2	mental health OR depression OR anxiety OR psychological distress
#3	Children OR adolescent OR youth OR child
#4	#1 AND #2 AND #3
Search dates	2017 Jan-2023 Jane
Results	N = 4

2) Summary of findings

The main findings of four studies were summarized, all of which explored the relationship between special family structures and children's mental health. Taking adolescents from two-parent families as a reference, the psychological problems of adolescents from non-two-parent families increased significantly, and the depressive symptoms and social anxiety of adolescents from single-mother families were particularly prominent [19]. In terms of psychological distress, there is no significant difference between the children of divorced single-parent families and reorganized families and the children of intact families [20]. Compared with adolescents in nuclear families, adolescents in single-parent families and reorganized families are positively correlated with the occurrence of depressive symptoms [21]. The relationship between specific family structure and anxiety symptoms in adolescents is not obvious but may increase the risk of depressive symptoms in adolescents [22].

B. Discussion on Definitions of Family Structure across Different Studies

Four studies utilized similar definitions of family structure but with different comparison groups. Due to the different definitions of special families in each study, the research results vary. In Zou *et al.*'s study [19], the study families were divided into four categories: two-parent families, single-mother families, single-father families, and families with both parents absent. In Zhang's study [20], the categories were more detailed, including two-parent families, families where the father or mother is absent, single-parent families where the mother is divorced, single-parent families where the father is divorced, and reorganized families. According to Ding's study [21], family patterns were categorized into nuclear families living with parents, main families living with parents and grandparents, families consisting of two or more persons of the same sex-related by blood, their spouses and children, or joint families consisting of two or more siblings of the same generation who are married. These studies used various definitions, which may have contributed to differing results. Future research should prioritize specific research subjects, refine divisions, and employ professional definition methods to ensure research rigor.

C. Comments on Sample and Target Population

Among the four included studies, the sample size ranges from 4000 to 18700 with different age groups and region

coverage in China. Zou *et al.*'s study [19] selected teenagers from middle schools, high schools, and middle schools in 13 regions and cities in Jiangsu Province, with an average age of 14.71 years old. In this survey, 19,855 people were recruited, and 18,700 valid questionnaires were collected, including 9,565 male students and 9,135 female students. Zhang's research [20] extended to the entire country, sampling 19,986 households and targeting children under 16 years old from primary school to high school. Ding's study [21] surveyed four cities, Shanghai, Urumqi, Changsha, and Kunming, targeting 12 to 17-year-old middle school students, with a total of 8,311 questionnaires collected (8,102 valid), including 4,060 boys and 4,042 girls. Lin *et al.*'s study [22] surveyed middle school students aged 13 to 18 in Shangrao, Jiangxi Province, with an average age of 15.4 years, including 2,053 boys and 1,888 girls. These variations in sample selection, gender ratios, and geographical scope may have contributed to differences in results. Future research should aim for gender balance, equal representation across age groups, and broader regional coverage.

D. Comments on the Mental Health Measurement Use

The measurements of mental health were inconsistent among four studies. In Zou *et al.*'s study [19], the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to measure depressive symptoms, while the SASS-CS (Social Anxiety Sub-scale of the Self-consciousness Scale) assessed social anxiety. Zhang's study [20] used the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale to assess adolescents' mental health. Ding's study [21] also employed the CES-D to evaluate the degree of depression in adolescents. Lin *et al.*'s study [22] used the CAD-7 to assess structural family situations, depression, and anxiety symptoms in adolescents. Although these assessment methods are valid and widely accepted, their administration methods vary. Zhang's study [20] used evaluations from both parents and children, while the other three studies relied primarily on assessments conducted by teachers and students. The differences in these evaluation sources may introduce subjective biases and impact measurement objectivity and accuracy. To ensure effective questionnaire recovery, some studies excluded incomplete questionnaires, but issues related to respondent honesty and potential biases should be considered.

E. Discussion on Study Findings

Zou *et al.*'s study [19] showed that adolescents from single-mother families had higher depressive symptoms and social anxiety than adolescents from two-parent families, while adolescents from single-father families only had higher depressive symptoms than adolescents from two-parent families. However, this study was only conducted in Jiangsu. Due to the relatively developed economy in Jiangsu, the number of left-behind children is small, and the sample size is small, so the research results may be biased.

In Zhang's study [20], there was no significant difference in mental health indicators between children of divorced single-parent families and reorganized families and children of intact families. This result may be because the single-parent families in the sample are wealthier and have higher social status, and children will get more material and emotional compensation after their parent's divorce,

reducing the negative impact of divorce on children's mental health.

In Ding's study [21], adolescents in single-parent families and reorganized families were positively associated with the occurrence of depressive symptoms compared with adolescents in nuclear families. Lin *et al.*'s study [22] showed that the relationship between families with special structure and anxiety symptoms was not obvious, but it may increase the risk of adolescent depression symptoms. The different findings may be explained by the different family structure definitions and mental health scales used between the two studies.

F. Advantage and Disadvantage of Included Studies

This paper will discuss the respective or similar disadvantages and advantages in detail for the included studies. None of the four studies conducted a cohort study, the change of family structure is a dynamic process, so it is necessary to follow up on the impact of family structure change on adolescent mental health. Besides, it is possible that these children were negatively affected in the immediate aftermath of their parents' divorce, but they may gradually adapt or improve in the future. For the sake of study rigor, investigators should include follow-up as part of the study.

Among the four studies, except Zhang's study [20], the other three studies did not conduct a nationwide survey study. According to Zhang [20], the research samples were selected nationwide, and the sample base was large enough, which improved the accuracy of the research results and enabled more accurate estimates to be obtained. Although the other three studies are regional studies, they also help to understand the impact of different parental divorces in different regions on the mental health of different age groups of adolescents.

These four studies did not take into account the influence of other caregivers, such as maternal grandparents, on adolescents' psychology, and this needs to be further collected more detailed and comprehensive family data to understand deeply.

Moreover, the CES-D scale was used to assess the degree of depression in adolescents in Ding *et al.* [21] and Zou *et al.* [19] studies. Their results showed that adolescents from special families had a positive correlation with depressive symptoms compared with adolescents from intact families, or adolescents from families with absent parents had higher depressive symptoms than adolescents from two-parent families. Due to the different research group segmentation and research direction of the two studies, although the same scale was used, the research results were different. Use of the same scale can lead to comparable results and improve qualities of the study in future.

To sum up, the advantages of these studies are that the sample size is large, including all children of school age, and the representativeness is relatively strong. Secondly, all studies used quantitative regression methods to assess the correlations between parental divorce and children's mental health.

The disadvantages are that there is no follow-up survey for each included study, which cannot be followed up according to the changes in the respondents' family structure. Secondly, there is no nationwide study, and there are regional limitations. Thirdly, the included studies did not use a

consistent scale and the interviewed population was different, so the results of the study could not be compared and generalized to a wide population. Finally, the influence of other caregivers on adolescents' mental health is ignored, and only parents are studied, while other possible caregivers such as grandparents are ignored.

G. Advantage and Disadvantage of Included Studies

Future studies are needed to collect nationwide samples to improve the generalizability and accuracy of the findings, which can give a national estimate and more solid findings compared to previous studies. Due to the dynamic development of the study, it is necessary to conduct a follow-up study to observe the changes in mental health in the same group of children after their parents' divorce. Moreover, the expanded research is not limited to parents but collects more detailed and comprehensive family information of the respondents, identifies the specific caregivers of adolescents, and explores the psychological impact of other caregivers on adolescents. Lastly, the government can introduce and implement more strategies targeting different factors of parental divorce on children's mental health in community and primary care. Strategies, such as effective co-parenting and building supporting network, can be introduced in China, which has been shown positive effects in promoting Children's mental health.

IV. CONCLUSION

This dissertation reviewed the factors and impacts of parental divorce on children's mental health. The impact of parental divorce on children's mental health is multifaceted and various factors need to be considered.

On one hand, some factors may negatively impact children's mental health, including the loss of family structure, changes in family income, and parental conflicts. On the other hand, some differences are identified between Chinese and Western country culture, which includes socioeconomic status, children's role in divorce decisions, and traditional Chinese family structure. These differences serve as protective factors that may mitigate and even reduce the impacts of parental divorce on children's mental health.

Current research showed that parental divorce can have negative impacts on children's mental health in terms of anxiety and depression in contemporary China while inconsistent results were identified in psychological distress. In China, relevant research and strategies to improve children's mental health from parental divorce family are still limited. This thesis may help us better understand parental divorce on children's mental health and provide useful information in developing strategies to improve children's mental well-being.

Future research can explore the following aspects. Firstly, more strategies or interventions can be implemented or introduced in China to improve the mental health of children from divorced families. Secondly, large national studies with longer follow-ups are needed to assess the long-term effects of parental divorce on children's mental health. Thirdly, further research can use consistent mental health scales, consider other aspects of mental health, and explore the

mental health impacts from other caregivers after parental divorce.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has claimed that no conflict of interest exists.

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