



The Association Between Parental Separation/Divorce and Generalized Anxiety Disorder



Faren Bartholomew, Applied Data Analysis, Wesleyan University

Introduction

- Current research has shown that there are several mental illnesses, including depression, that are associated with going through a parental divorce in childhood or adolescence (Sands et al., 2017).
- However, diagnosable anxiety disorders (specifically generalized anxiety disorder) as a potential association of experiencing divorce as a minor is under researched.
- Some research examining mental health outcomes for children of divorce have found an increased risk for symptoms of anxiety (Short, 2002; Storksin et al., 2005; Wallerstein, 2005).
- A meta-analysis conducted on the association of anxiety and divorce found that the two were not associated. This finding was based on only 4 studies, and the authors acknowledged that the limited sample indicates that more research is needed (Sands et al., 2017).

Research Questions

- Is experiencing divorce or parental separation as a minor associated with generalized anxiety disorder?
- Does the association between divorce/parental separation and generalized anxiety disorder differ for individuals based on their sex?

Methods

Sample

- Respondents (n=43,028) were drawn from the 2001-2002 U.S National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), a nationally representative sample of civilian, non-institutionalized adults in the U.S.

Measures

- Parental Separation or Divorce was measured with the question "Did biological or adoptive parents get divorced or permanently stop living together before respondent was 18? Participants answered with Yes, No, or NA.
- Generalized Anxiety Disorder was evaluated using the criteria from NIAAA, Alcohol Use Disorder and Associated Disabilities Interview Schedule, also known as the DSM-IV (AUDADIS-IV). Based on criteria and respondent answers, the categorization of "Generalized Anxiety Disorder- Lifetime (Non-Hierarchical)" was created, and participants were coded as Yes or No.

Results

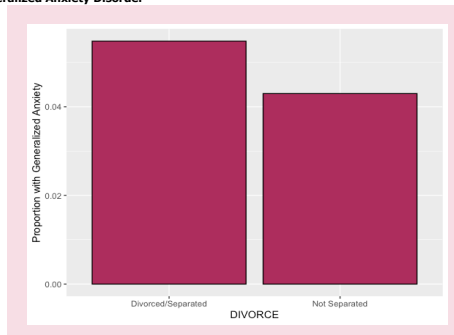
Univariate

- 18.6% of respondents experienced divorce or parental separation before the age of 18
- 4.5% of respondents met the DSM-IV criteria for generalized anxiety disorder

Bivariate

- A chi-square test of independence revealed that those who had experienced parental separation or divorce before age 18 were more likely to have generalized anxiety disorder over their lifetime (5.5%) compared to those who had not experienced divorce or parental separation as minors (4.3%), $X^2 = 17.961$ 1 df, $p = 2.254e^{-05}$
- My p-value is $2.254e^{-05}$, making my results statistically significant ($p < .001$).

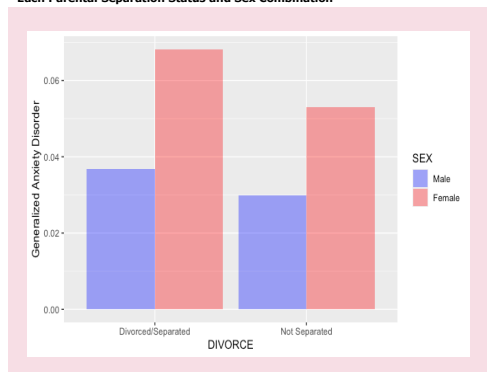
Figure 1. Relationship Between Divorce/Parental Separation and Generalized Anxiety Disorder



Multivariate

- A multiple regression showed that sex does not moderate the relationship between divorce/parental separation and generalized anxiety disorder (Figure 2).
- Children of divorce/parental separation have 1.3 times greater odds of having generalized anxiety disorder (CI=1.15-1.44)
- Females had 1.83 times greater odds of developing generalized anxiety disorder (CI=1.65-2.04).

Figure 2. Proportion of Subjects Who Have Generalized Anxiety Disorder at Each Parental Separation Status and Sex Combination



Discussion

- Undergoing divorce or parental separation as a minor is associated with developing generalized anxiety disorder over the lifetime.
- Divorce/parental separation status alone and sex alone predicted the likelihood of generalized anxiety disorder, but the interaction of sex and divorce/parental separation was not significant.
- This research indicates a potential need for greater vigilance among mental health professionals who work with children of divorce and tailored treatment protocols to achieve the best possible adult outcomes.
- Further research is needed due to a limited sample size.