

Stolen Youth: Case Study on Psychological Effects of Parental Separation

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Abstract. Family is the cradle of every person. It builds a foundation or core principles that a person carries throughout life. This study focuses on an in-depth investigation of the parent-child relationship, mental health, and academic life of a student with separated parents. This qualitative research was approached using a case study model and purposive sampling technique with one subject, after which semi-structured interviews were conducted through Google Meet, and then finally, results were analyzed thematically. Results revealed seven main themes with corresponding subthemes, such as, but not limited to, early independence, loss of a mother figure, and personal and academic life overlap. The parental separation negatively affected the subject, shown through depression, anxiety, abandonment and trust issues, exclusion, emotional isolation, self-harm attempts, and suicidal ideations. Negative impacts were also placed on the subject's interest in building a future family, affecting academic life, as the subject unhealthily copes with being dismissive of emotions. The subject lost contact with their mother, leaving the residential father as the only parent figure; hence, he needs a genuine and comfortable environment, especially family-wise. Nonetheless, the subject could use the circumstances as fuel to succeed. The findings provide grounds for further research on the psychological effects of parental separation on students while emphasizing the importance of giving undivided attention to children during such a challenging time.

Keywords: Parental separation; Familial relationship; Academic life; Mental health; Mental health problems.

1.0 Introduction

A family acts as the primary environment to build character and personality, and having a broken family hinders one's mental and emotional development, proving to be a significant threat to one's well-being. Families with strong bonds have respect for their communication and always have quality time. They are the ones who were active in participating in community activities that strengthened their bond (Sanguiliano et al., 2019). Healthy families often exchange sincere compliments and words of encouragement, developing goodwill and encouraging people to assert gratitude for their cordiality, which fosters love and healthy relationships (Carroll, 2020). Moreover, interparental relationships significantly influence children's and adolescents' psychopathology. If in conflict, children's future interpersonal relationships can be resentful (Harold, 2018). Frequent interparental conflict can harm interfamilial communication (Hess, 2022). Further, children may perceive their loyalty to their parents as torn (Johnsen et al., 2018). Philippine statistics regarding 86.33 million people aged ten years and over

in 2020 showed that 1.9% are divorced, separated, or annulled. Of these, 655.48 thousand (1.5%) are male, and 988.94 thousand (2.3%) are female, accounting for a total of 1.6 million people (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023).

Domestic violence is a social issue that destroys familial relationships. UNICEF's Global Statistics shows that six out of ten children from ages two to fourteen experience frequent physical, emotional, and mental punishments by their guardians or family relatives. This abuse can harm their cognitive functions, particularly language, influencing their behavior and key cognitive processes (Cobos-Cali et al., 2018). Another major familial issue and common cause of separation is infidelity. It leads to months and years of agony, misery, and mistrust. Moreover, it was evident that parental infidelity had significant psychological effects on the child, including academic abandonment, the development of mistrust, and commitment issues (Siguan et al., 2021). According to statistics, mental health problems affect approximately 10-20% of adolescents ages 10-19 (Chaulagain et al., 2019). However, what is even more threatening is that among Filipino students whose ages are 13 to 17, around 16.8% have attempted to take their own lives at least once (Concepcion et al., 2020; Malolos et al., 2021).

The parent-child relationship significantly impacts a child's academic success (Rathee & Kumari, 2022). Some struggles that students face due to parental separation include enforced independence, academic pressure, mental health problems, and family conflicts. Unfortunately, family conflicts leading to separation are becoming more common, and society's acceptance of these issues as "normal" blurs the ideal of family relationships (Grotan et al., 2019). Given that the Philippines has a substantial population with disabilities, notably mental illness ranking third, this study aimed to address a persistent issue in the country – mental health stigma, a major barrier to mental health service utilization among Filipinos. The study examined the impact of family dynamics and issues on mental health and academic life, aligning with Erik Erikson's Stage Theory on Psychosocial Development, which underscores the role of social dynamics and environment in an individual's psychosocial development. The research focuses on the perceptions, conditions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a student with separated parents. The researchers anticipate that this study sheds light on the experiences of those students and the importance of warmth and validation they may lack.

2.0. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The qualitative case study allowed in-depth investigation of the complex experiences of a certain subject (Rashid, 2019). The researchers conducted a case study that focused on one participant. Using this design allowed the researchers to conduct a participant-centered examination. The study set the scene for an extensive exploration of experiences, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, conditions, and perceptions through semi-structured interviews. Moreover, this allowed the researchers to delve deeper into the mental health, academic life, and parent-child relationship of a student with separated parents.

2.2. Research Participants

The study was conducted at Central Luzon State University (CLSU), Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija, Philippines, and through Google Meet for the formal interviews. The researchers selected the subjects purposively regarding their availability, suitability, and relevance. The participant was considered if the student, during the interview period, lived with separated parents for at least five years, experienced parental infidelity, was at least 18 years old, was open to sharing their experiences, and had granted interview permission to be recorded.

2.3. Research Instrument

This study collected data using semi-structured interview sessions. The researchers prepared fifty-five (55) questions as interview guides during formal interviews. Formal interviews were documented through privately recorded audio with the participant's consent.

2.4. Data Gathering Procedures and Analysis

The formal interview sessions with the research participant were conducted weekly for one (1) month. Interviewers incorporated the prepared questions into the interviews. For confidentiality, these interviews were conducted through a private session in Google Meet. The Data accumulated were evaluated using an inductive approach of reflexive thematic analysis (TA). The researchers started the data collection by transcribing audio

recordings per part. The subject's responses influenced the interpretation of data and allowed the themes to be determined.

2.5. Ethical Consideration

This research study followed ethical guidelines and practices as reviewed and approved by the Ethics Research Committee (ERC) of Central Luzon State University (CLSU) with code 2023-170. The participant provided their informed consent to participate in this study.

3.0. Results and Discussion

3.1. Early Independence

The subject expressed that they felt immensely negative towards their older brother. The destructive relationship of sibling conflict consists of major indifference and emotional detachment (Davies et al., 2019). The subject's negative emotions culminated firstly when they left their father for their mother once they got their financial support for high school from their father. Secondly, when the father made false promises about providing for the subject once he got a job. Initially, the subject had three family members who gave them financial aid—their father, mother, and older brother. As time went by, it went down to just their father as the other two started reproaching the subject for the expenses they willingly gave in the first place. Further, the mother did not want to perform her maternal responsibilities and duties on the subject's younger brother.

"What happened to me also happened to my younger brother."

Furthermore, as a solution to this dilemma, the subject made great efforts to become a parental figure for their brother. They helped him with school and provided him with time, money, and food even when they did not have much in the first place. A study by Borchet et al. (2020) suggested that having a quality relationship with your sibling may alleviate the negative effects of being a parental figure. All of these, along with parental separation, prompted the subject's early independence. When everything went too heavy, there were times when the subject would express solemnly.

"Do I not deserve to be happy?"

Borchet et al. (2021) stated that children get overwhelmed when acting as a parental figure to another family member, making it difficult to perform developmental tasks.

3.2. Loss of a Mother Figure

Unresentful the subject may be, years of abusive relationships led them to cut ties with their mother completely. Eventually, the subject expressed no longer seeing their mother as a parent. This post-separation response reflected the poor relationship of the subject with their mother before the separation.

"... It is not to the point of abhorrence, but I hold a grudge so deep I cannot bring myself to consider her my mother..."

Parental estrangement after parental separation affects the child's overall well-being (Almansa et al., 2022). Years of neglect led the subject to deny their mother as their parent. With the father's presence, the subject tries to fill the empty feeling left by their mother's absence.

Intrafamilial Conflicts

The subject encountered parental alienation from many of their maternal relatives against the subject's father. The subject emphasized that they are displeased with their relatives' false accusations against their father during reunions—from being the sole reason for the separation to being the strict parent beyond the normal level of restrictiveness. As a result, the subject no longer continued communicating with their maternal relatives.

"I no longer respect them, and because I am not comfortable anymore, I stopped going to my mother's side..."

Parental alienation generally occurs among children in high-conflict parental divorce (Mercer, 2019).

Father as the only Parent Figure

Despite their busy schedules, they still find time to sustain communication and an emotional bond with their father. The subject did not feel any form of distance in their relationship.

"...we still talk sometimes, and he still invites me outside; we still have bonding moments..."

However, the father is neither vocal nor expressive whenever the subject achieves triumphs in academics. Although frequently celebrated during the subject's primary school, these achievements were no longer celebrated at the beginning of high school. This led to the subject feeling unappreciated. In turn, the subject became distant when showing their vulnerable side to their father. Also, influenced by financial guilt, the subject refrained from asking for material things outside their necessities. On rare occasions, however, when the subject receives gifts from their father, they feel extremely grateful and satisfied.

3.3. Broken Connections within Family Relatives

The subject now resides under the father's roof and guidance, far from the mother's side of relatives, and only interacts with them during family reunions.

"...I no longer talk to my mother, but in the pandemic, we could talk, although it was very seldom."

Supported by a study analyzed by Oren and Hadomi (2019), it reflected the parental separation's effect on children's possible loss of relationships or downgrade of relationship intensity with some family members, and often a significant diversion. Moreover, the subjects refused to maintain their relationships in various aspects (especially in finance) as a response to the false promises and financial support complaints they received from them; thus, they developed ill feelings and lost sibling connection. Kamarudin (2022) names the child's deprivation of maintenance from the other parent as one of the problems generated by sole custody. Meanwhile, the family relatives (mother's side) shared continuous 'made-up,' 'blaming,' and 'bad-mouthing' stories against the father, which clouded the subject's view growing up. Due to frustration, the subject learned how to confront the relatives as a defense; confrontation voices out the subject's bottled emotions and thoughts. As Caksen (2021) mentioned, a conflicting or unstable connection between parents greatly influences the child's adaptation to family changes.

Connection Re-establishment

After discovering the other side of the story and leaning on the father's explanation, the subject develops urges to re-establish the connection between fatherly and brotherly (with half-brother on mother). Moreover, the subject consistently builds a familial bond with the younger brother. Further insights are provided by Vrolijk and Keizer (2021); children (from divorce) who have several conflicts with their parents develop loyalty conflicts where they feel they have to 'choose' or 'side' between their parents, which is associated with low-quality parent-child relationships.

Sibling Separation

Parental separation also affects children's connection with each other. The subject revealed that while growing up in a fragmented family, the older brother isolated himself and hardly initiated any communication with the subject. Additionally, the mother's younger brother does not live with the subject, thus allowing minimal time for them to bond.

"... I am unable to talk with my older brother anymore. No matter how I reach out, he does not give me any attention. I also cannot talk to my younger brother because he is with my grandmother; I and her are not on good terms."

3.4. Acceptance of the Separation

Shortly after the separation, the subject denied the impact of parental separation on their mental health, trying to convince themselves that their mother's absence did not affect them. Many unsuccessful attempts to persuade them led them to realize that their mother and maternal family's absence left a space their father tried to fill. Later on, they learned to accept that there was no hope for their broken family to repair its severed union and that the separation was for their family's good.

"...Even me, I do not want my parents to get back together because they will only pull each other down; there is no chance to bring our old family back..."

McGhee (2022) stated that children of divorce usually go through denial before learning to accept it.

Social Exclusion

Because of having separated parents, the subject had to live with the burden of feeling denied a warm and loving family. When going out in public and seeing other families have a joyous time with each other, the subject cannot avoid feeling abandoned and deprived of a genuine relationship with their family. As a result, the subject frequently asks the reason behind their fallen familial bond. Furthermore, a study on the effects of parental divorce suggested that having separated parents left a traumatic burden on a child in terms of emotional health and socialization (Finkenauer et al., 2019).

Infidelity and Domestic Violence

Infidelity stood as a major cause of parental separation. The subject expressed that this started successive parental conflicts that led to the separation. During their childhood, the subject was denied answers regarding the reason behind such daily fights. As a result, the distressed subject blamed their mother as the sole reason for the separation. A study on the impacts of parental infidelity on a child revealed that a lack of acknowledgment of the suffering of a child can lead to negative consequences on the parent-child relationship and the child's perspective of parental separation (Chaudry & Salih, 2021). However, it was also revealed that the father committed domestic violence against the subject's mother. This negatively affected the subject's mental health. This is also interpreted as a contributing factor to parental separation.

"My father responded with violence towards my mother's infidelity; it is wrong of him to hit a woman..."

Emotional Isolation

After the parental separation, the subject experiences anxiety attacks almost every night. Moreover, developing long-lasting relationships with others became difficult for the subject, as trust and abandonment always troubled their minds during socialization. Also, the subject indicated that their denial of the burden of coming from a broken family could be their form of trauma response.

"...I cannot tell if I was too traumatized or I just was not aware; maybe that is my trauma response as well..."

Furthermore, it was revealed that intraparental conflicts cause attachment-related anxiety and avoidance of the child (Adler-Baeder et al., 2020). The subject felt that they were the center of the situation. Hearing contradicting stories of both paternal and maternal relatives took its emotional toll on the subject. As a result, the subjects felt lonely in their struggles as the only receiving end to both sides' perceptions of the separation. The subject attempted to run away from home because of uneasy feelings towards their maternal relatives, who used to reside near the subject and their father's house.

Mental Health Problems

Although barely affected during their childhood, the subject's mental health went downhill after gaining a more profound understanding of the separation. Beginning at the age of sixteen, the subject's mental health deteriorated. Self-harm attempts accompanied this. Despite claiming that their mental health started to become more stable, there were unavoidable occasions when the subject experienced a decline in mental state after a short-lived improvement.

During the pandemic, where isolation and distance prevailed, the subject's loneliness and depression worsened. There were several times when the subject resorted to self-harm in the hopes of coping with their seemingly unceasing pain and suffering. The subject also exhibited suicidal ideation. There came a time when the subject saw death as the only solution to their pain. For them, ending their life may be the only way to end the fight among their families. The subject had no will to live. Also, in research conducted by Auersperg (2019), adolescents manifested suicidal ideation because of experienced parental separation.

3.5. Absence of Interest in Future Family Building

Having no interest in raising a child, the subject expressed no plans to build a future family or imagine themselves as a spouse. Consequently, the subjects want to feel their success first through self-spoiling, taken from childhood.

"...I want to enjoy my life first...You want to heal yourself first before you acknowledge other responsibilities."

According to Aprianti (2023), adolescents from divorce develop a trauma that serves as a deciding factor in not getting married and building their own families.

3.6. Genuine and Comfortable Environment Necessity (Including a Peaceful Household and Good Familial Interaction)

The subject defined family.

"...Not only when you live under the same roof...They are your support system; you still have somewhere to go when everyone else leaves you. You still have people who accept you."

Additionally, their ideal home is one where they can bond with family members other than their father. Both are far from their present situation; jealousy is a prominent emotion the subject feels whenever they see students their age with their parents. Nonetheless, they added that a complete family does not automatically mean they are problem-free. The subject wishes for a better childhood and reiterated that being non-traumatic would mean a clearer mind and more stable mental health. The subject accidentally displays moodiness as a defense mechanism, mainly towards their father. They shared that this stemmed from their negative thoughts. Aside from garnering strong negative effects on the mental health of children due to separation from divorced parents, childhood trauma victims depict low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety due to feelings of being inadequate (Wang et al., 2021; Downey & Crummy, 2022).

"... I am not that confident...I am scared that I will be compared to my mother...it affects my confidence sometimes."

Further, a study by Tahirović and Demir (2018) relayed that there is a significant gap in the anxiety levels of adolescents from separated and intact families. In contrast, the subject has a positive outlook toward their future despite their father's hindrance towards their career choice; they expressed that they could see themselves being successful one day. The subject's thoughts about marriage and parental responsibilities are fearfulness and hesitance. D'Rozario and Pilkington (2022) conducted a study wherein they suggested that parental separation accounts for anxious and avoidant attachment styles in the offspring. In line with this, Smith-Etxeberria et al. (2020) concluded that interparental conflict is strongly associated with avoidant attachment styles and romantic relationship expectations. The subject further expounded that after their first romantic relationship failed, they were scared of entering another one, factoring that what happened to their parents might also happen to their own family.

Home as Ideal Environment for Academics

The current house of the subject was deemed to be better than the previous one. This is quieter, so the subject can work and study better. Their father also usually does not bother them in their academics, which works better in their favor. Related to this is a similar study conducted by Ramli et al. (2021), wherein infrastructures, environmental health, and hazards significantly impacted students' academic lives so that students could reach their highest potential academically.

3.7. Personal and Academic Life Overlap

The parental separation caused the subject to have intrapersonal issues and other problems, which sometimes overlap with academic responsibilities. These events caused a disturbance to the academic life of the subject. However, as the subjects grew older, they learned to cope by dismissing their emotions. This coping mechanism, although it may cause negative effects on a person's mental health in the future, causes the subject to be able to concentrate better on their academics.

"I became dismissive of my own emotions, so even if I had problems with my personal life, I did not mind them much as long as I got to study."

Hindrance to Career Choice

Due to conflicts with parental preferences, the subject is having difficulty choosing their career. The subject's preference is nursing, which is similar to their mother's course (the reason they are restricted from that course), and due to this, the subject might choose to become an accountant instead. Nevertheless, the subject stated they could see themselves succeeding by that time.

Determination to Succeed

In times of immense pressure from academic responsibilities, the subject often experiences burnout and mental fatigue. However, due to the familial state of affairs, the subjects strongly want to prove themselves to their family. The familial issues between the two sides of the family trees motivate the subject to achieve and succeed, yet despite this, the subject cannot hide the fact that the road is steep and emotional breakdowns are bound to happen. According to a study by Widyastuti (2018), family-related issues can increase the motivation and resilience of students and families if the individual exposed to the stressors coped with the problem actively.

4.0. Conclusion

The semi-structured interview gave an in-depth understanding of the subject's mental health, academic life, and parent-child relationship. Results indicated that parental separation negatively affected the subject in the forms of depression, anxiety, abandonment and trust issues, exclusion, emotional isolation, self-harm attempts, and suicidal ideations. Additionally, it negatively impacted the subject's interest in building a future family. Unfortunately, this series of events affected the subject's academic life as the subject learned to cope unhealthily by being emotionally dismissive. Their familial issues also hindered the subject's career choice. Fortunately, the subject could use this as fuel for their drive to succeed. Regarding the parent-child relationship, the subject lost contact with their mother, leaving the subject's residential father as the only parent figure. From the data gathered, the subject needs a genuine and comfortable environment, especially family-wise.

5.0. Contributions of Authors

KEMCollantes-Conceptualization of the Study, Literature Review, Research Design, Gathering of Data, Data Interpretation, Writing and Editing, Formatting; **DJBAurelia**-Conceptualization of the Study, Literature Review, Gathering of Data, Data Interpretation, Writing and Editing, Formatting; **JJDCastillo**- Literature Review, Gathering of Data, Data Interpretation, Writing and Editing, Formatting; **GFPMangalindan**-Conceptualization of the Study, Literature Review, Gathering of Data, Data Interpretation, Writing and Editing, Formatting; **DVDNicolás**-Conceptualization of the Study, Literature Review, Development of Guide Questions, Gathering of Data, Data Interpretation, Writing and Editing, Formatting; **JAVillarama**-Conceptualization of the Study, Literature Review, Research Design, Development of Guide Questions, Writing and Editing, Formatting.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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