

## Parents' Divorce is More Strongly Related to the Self-Perceived Promiscuity and Drinking Behavior of Male than of Female College Students

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*A study of 357 students (112 males, 245 females) responding to an online survey at a Midwestern liberal arts college revealed that males and children from divorced families perceived themselves as more promiscuous and drank more than did students from intact families. However, a significant interaction between the gender of the students and the parents' marital status revealed that this effect was due almost entirely to the responses of the males from divorced families being so much higher than any of the other groups. There were no significant differences in the frequency of reported actual sexual activity. The results are discussed in light of the importance of identifying the factors that place college students at risk for reckless drinking and sexual behavior.*

Studies on the effects of divorce have revealed that young people with divorced parents engage in more frequent sex at younger ages than do children from intact families (Forste & Heaton, 1988; Miller & Moore, 1990), start drinking alcohol at younger ages, and suffer more negative consequences from drinking (Billingham, Post, & Gross, 1993; Bilingham, Wilson, & Gross, 1999). What is unclear at this point is whether these effects are more pronounced for male or female children of divorce. Some studies suggest that the effects

are manifested most strongly in daughters (Inazu & Fox, 1980; Thornton & Camburn, 1987), whereas others suggest that although the sexual attitudes of daughters are more strongly affected than are the attitudes of sons, the actual behaviors of sons show a stronger relationship to parental divorce (Whitbeck, Simons, & Kao, 1994). Because many of these studies have been done with younger adolescents, it was the goal of the present study to explore the gender-difference dynamics of the effects of parental divorce on the drinking and sexual behaviors of college students.

In the spring of 2008, an e-mail announcement was sent to the entire student body (approximately 1,300 students) at a Midwestern liberal arts college, soliciting participation in an online study of drinking and sexual behavior. No follow-up reminders were sent. Four hundred ten students responded to the online questionnaire that assessed the marital status of their parents and the frequency of a range of drinking and sexual behaviors. The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions. Two of the questions requested that participants evaluate (on a nine-point scale) their promiscuity and the likelihood that they would engage in sexual activity after drinking. Other questions solicited specific information about their drinking patterns and the nature of the sexual

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activities in which they engaged. No personal information other than gender and marital status of parents was requested. This original sample resulted in 357 completed, useable surveys including 24 males from divorced families, 88 males from intact families, 72 females from divorced families, and 173 females from intact families.

A correlational analysis revealed that most of the measures of alcohol consumption and sexual activity were positively related to each other ( $p < .05$ ). The specific correlation coefficients are too numerous to present in a brief research note, but more drinking in any context (average night, average Friday or Saturday night, last weekend) was associated with a greater number of sexual partners (lifetime and at college), a younger age for beginning sexual activity, higher self-ratings of promiscuity, and a greater propensity to engage in sexual activity while under the influence of alcohol. Furthermore, a 2 X 2 (sex of student X marital status of parents) MANOVA revealed significant main effects for both the sex of the student ( $p = .0001$ ) and the marital status of the parents ( $p = .049$ ) on self-ratings of promiscuity and amount of alcohol consumed. However, the nature of a significant interaction between the two independent variables,  $F(2, 353) = 2.17$ ,  $p = .029$ , indicated that these main effects were due almost entirely to the fact that males from divorced families rated themselves as significantly more promiscuous and drank significantly more on all measures than did any of the other groups. In spite of significant differences in self-ratings of promiscuity, there were no significant differences in the frequency or variety of actual sexual activities reported.

There clearly are some limitations as to how well these results might generalize to other populations. Aside from their gender and approximate age, we do not have information about other demographic variables that

might be associated with either drinking or promiscuity and that might be mediating the relationship between the two. Also, all of the participants were students at a highly selective liberal arts college in the American Midwest, and all of them voluntarily completed the online survey, so there was some degree of self-selection involved. Nevertheless, almost one third of the students at the college filled out the survey, and there is no reason to think that their responses to the divorce of parents would be qualitatively different than the responses of other American college students. Keeping these limitations in mind, our results clearly suggest that male children of divorce may be an overlooked at-risk group that should be studied more closely in college settings. Future researchers might find it useful to identify such students early and track them longitudinally through their college years.

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