

The trauma of Vietnamese children living in the incomplete families

El trauma de los niños vietnamitas que viven en familias incompletas

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Abstract: Children living in incomplete families have to suffer from more hardships than others including psychological trauma that could never be cured without safe approaches. In this paper, we used the Children Behavior Checklist (CBCL test) by Achenbach to initially filter the incidence of children in incomplete families with psychological trauma, the extent of childhood trauma and the signs of trauma. Moreover, the Self-esteem scale of Toulouse was also utilized to investigate children's self-esteem and determine the impact of psychological trauma on self-assessment of children. Based on these tools, the research conducted a correlation analysis of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through indicators of awareness of, emotions with, and behaviors towards family and social life (self-evaluated by children). The results showed that there are differences in psychological trauma of children in terms of awareness, emotions, and behaviors. The differences allow for a better definition of children's causes, influences, and degrees of psychological trauma. This is the basis for proposing timely filtering solutions and effective psychological support measures for these children.

Keywords: correlation analysis; signs of psychological trauma; children; incomplete family; Vietnam.

Resumen: Los niños que viven en familias incompletas tienen que sufrir más dificultades que otros, incluido el trauma psicológico que nunca podría curarse sin enfoques seguros. En este artículo, se utiliza la Lista de Verificación de Comportamiento Infantil (prueba CBCL) de Achenbach para filtrar inicialmente la incidencia de niños en familias incompletas con trauma psicológico, el alcance del trauma infantil y los signos de trauma. Además, la escala de autoestima de Toulouse también se utilizó para investigar la autoestima de los niños y determinar el impacto del trauma psicológico en la autoevaluación de los niños. Con base en estas herramientas, la investigación realizó un análisis de correlación del trauma psicológico de los niños en familias incompletas a través de indicadores de conciencia, emociones y comportamientos hacia la vida familiar y social (autoevaluados por los niños). Los resultados mostraron que existen diferencias en el trauma psicológico de los niños en términos de conciencia, emociones y comportamientos. Las diferencias permiten una mejor definición de las causas, influencias y grados de trauma psicológico de los niños. Esta es la base para proponer soluciones de filtrado oportunas y medidas de apoyo psicológico eficaces para estos niños.

Palabras clave: análisis de correlación; signos de trauma psicológico; niños; familia incompleta; Vietnam.

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1. Introduction

Psychological trauma is a phenomenon that has existed for thousands of years and has been recognized in many literary and historical works (Ezra, 2001). However, it was not until the 19th century that psychological trauma was officially investigated as a mental health problem (Waites 1993). In general, research works of authors worldwide mainly focus on significant issues such as origin, clinical symptoms, and treatment of psychological disorders (Lustig, 2004; Rayburn et al., 2005; McCann & Pearlman, 2015). Not only do researchers across the world study psychological trauma, but they also emphasize research on the psychological health of children in incomplete families (divorced-parent and single-mother families) (Rozita et al., 2016; Ruksana, 2017). This is one of the issues that has received a significant amount of attention from scholars in various domains because this problem affects the lives of children and proves to be persistent. Among various fields that have studied psychological trauma, psychology and medicine are the two sectors with the most works regarding this phenomenon (Briere, 2004).

Judith Wallerstein observed a group of children of divorced families from the 1970s to the 1990s (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975; Wallerstein, 1991). She interviewed them after the divorce when they were 18 months old and then 5, 10, 15, and 25 years old, assuming that they would recover psychologically. On the contrary, her research revealed opposite findings. Even 25 years after the divorce, these children continued to experience considerable frustration and fear of loss and controversy. Especially the psychology of the children in Ms. Wallerstein's study had abnormal features when they formed a loving relationship (Wallerstein, 2000; Amy Desai, 2007). According to Fagan and Churchill, which family member is absent, at which stage of the child's development the absence takes place, and what causes the absence all play a significant role in deciding the child's development in the future. Examining children with mental disorders transferred to health centers, many research studies found that among these children, the number of those from single-parent families (including the cause of separation) is far more significant than that of children of two-parent families. In addition, out of 30 children treated in health centers studied, approximately 11% of them experienced parents' divorce (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

A study from Spain on the Qualify and Outcomes Framework perceived by children indicated that the Qualify and Outcomes Framework of children from two-parent families is higher than that of children whose parents are divorced (Michalos, 2014). Besides, another study from Korean American showed that children and adolescents enduring parental separation and divorce are more likely to develop movement disorders (Sacerdote, 2007). Several studies show that the increase in the risk of hyperactivity and behavioral problems among preschool children is usually found in families with experienced tension or serious parental conflict (Van de Weijer et al., 2015; Leopold & Kalmijn, 2016; Arkes, 2015).

In general, in the world and Vietnam, there have been many studies on the psychology of children in incomplete families (Van, 2015; Thinh, 2016; Linh, 2014; Kiet; 2006; Hang, 2007). However, most of the studies only highlight some aspects of this theme, such as the reasons and consequences of divorce and psychological trauma of children due to their parents' divorce while paying little attention to signs and degrees of psychological trauma. Therefore, this paper analyzes the signs of psychological trauma, which was shared by children from incomplete families themselves, thereby assessing the correlation of signs of psychological trauma of children in the relationship with their families and society through three indicators: awareness, emotion, and behavior

2. Methodology

The study was conducted using synchronous methods including psychometric, questionnaire, and interview, among all of which psychometric is utilized as the primary method.

This study selected standardized technical scales to assess and measure a psychological indicator of a person or a group. These scales are built on comparisons between the tests and a standardized scale or a classification system on different social groups. In particular, the Children Behavior Checklist test by Achenbach T. M was utilized to help make an initial selection of the percentage of children in incomplete families with psychological trauma, the degrees of psychological trauma, and signs of the psychological trauma of children from incomplete families (Achenbach, 1991). The study also used the Self-esteem scale of Toulouse (ETES) to examine the self-esteem of children from incomplete families, thereby determining the impact of psychological trauma on the self-esteem of children in this type of family (Linh, 2017).

The selected objects are children of divorced parents and single-mother families (we do not include single-father families in this study because of the difficulty in sampling and its unpopularity in Vietnam) from 6 to 15 years old in Ho Chi Minh City, Long An Province, and Tay Ninh Province. The contact with them received the consent of school leaders and class teachers. The total number of participants is 336 students and 336 corresponding parents.

- As for gender, out of 336 students, there are 220 female students (65.47%) and 116 male students (34.52%). There were 297 female parents (88.39%) and 39 male parents (11.61%) out of 336 parents. The data mentioned above are relatively appropriate because the single mother is the main object of the questionnaire. Moreover, in most cases, children mainly live with their mother when their parent's divorce, so it is understandable that the number of female parents is higher than that of male ones.

- Regarding school level, among 336 students, there are 150 (44.64%) at the primary level and 186 (55.46%) at the secondary level. The number of parents corresponds to this figure.

- Regarding provinces/cities, among 336 students and 336 parents, the number of students and parents in Ho Chi Minh City is 115 (34.23%). That number in Long An is 110 (32.74%). In Tay Ninh, the number is 111 (33.04%). This shows that the number of students and parents in the three provinces has very slight differences (0.3% - 1.49%).

- About family status, among 336 students, 252 students (75%) have divorced parents, and 84 students (25%) are from single-mother families. Hence, it is clear that the number of students of divorced families is much higher than that of single-mother families.

In the data analysis step, we use T-test and ANOVA test to analyze the difference among the group of signs (awareness, behavior, emotion) and the terms of gender, education level, and family status.

3. Results

Analyzing the correlation of the psychological trauma of children living in incomplete families through the examination of children's awareness of family and social life.

Table 1.

Information on childhood trauma of children living in incomplete families through children's awareness of family and social life.

	Gender		Level of education		Family status	
	Male	Female	Primary	Secondary	Divorced-parent families	Single-mother families
M	2.88	3.1	2.90	3.08	2.49	3.49
p	1.345		1.76		0.01	

The correlation test results (T-test) on childhood trauma of children living in single-parent families through children's awareness of family and social life showed differences when the aspects of gender, level of education, and family status are taken into consideration as below.

Regarding gender, the T-test results gave information that p is 1.345 and p is higher than 0.05, which infers that there is no difference in childhood trauma of children in incomplete families. Regarding male children, the mean score is 2.88, and for female children, the number is 3.1. This is a slight difference.

Concerning the level of education, the results indicated that p is 1.76, and it is higher than 0.05. This means that in terms of education, there is no difference in the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families. At the primary level, the mean score is 2.90, and the figure for the secondary level is 3.08. As can be seen, the difference is not too huge, and this is entirely consistent with the psychological characteristics of this age period. In other words, compared to the primary level, at the secondary level, students start their puberty which associates with the higher development of their thinking, memory, and attention (Tien et al., 2016).

Accordingly, it can be seen that the environment - the family situation has a considerable influence on the thinking and awareness of children. The difference in awareness by children with trauma in divorced and single-mother families was more deeply analyzed, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 2.

The difference in awareness between children with trauma living with a divorced parent and those living with a single mother

The number of contents	Contents	Divorced-parent families	Single-mother families
		M	M
1	Awareness of family values	3.87	3.04
2	Awareness of the father's values	2.01	3.45
3	Awareness of the mother's values	3.13	4.41
4	Awareness about social life	0.79	2.23

The results showed the difference in the awareness of children with trauma in divorced-parent families and single-mother families as follows:

As for the first content in the group of children living in divorced-parent families, “awareness of family values,” the mean score is 3.87, at the high level. The same content in the other group - children in single-mother families has the mean score of 3.04, at the average level. It can be seen that the level of awareness of the value and the importance of families by children living in divorced-parent families is higher than that by children living with their single mothers. This is entirely consistent with the psychological development of children.

Regarding the second content, “the awareness of the father’s values,” children living in divorced families have a mean score of 2.01, which belongs to the low level, and the figure of children living with single mothers is 3.45, at the high level. As illustrated, the level of awareness of the father’s value of the two groups is different. This is entirely consistent with practical realities because, in most families, children mainly live with their mother, have witnessed conflicts between parents, and do not support their father’s behaviors. Meanwhile, children living in single-mother families mainly receive love from their mothers. They stay with their mother, have little contact with their father, and even do not know who their father is, so they wish to know about their father and are aware of their father’s important role. Student 1, a person from a single–mother family, shared once interviewed, “I hate my father so much. I only meet him once every three years, but he always hits me when we see each other. In the past, when they were still together, my parents were always fighting.”

Examining the third content, “awareness of the mother’s values,” children living in divorced families have a mean score of 3.13, falling in the average level, and the mean score of children from single-mother families is 4.41, which belongs to the very high level. It is clear that the mother is critical to all of the children surveyed, but for children living in a family with a single mother, the

value of the mother is far higher than ever since most of them mainly spend time with their mother. This view is similar to Duncan, S., and Edwards, R. about the relationship between single mothers and children in developed industrial countries such as Japan, Australia, Switzerland, Germany, and France. The authors showed that mothers often devote their love to their children and try their best to meet the cost of raising their children. Therefore, children in single-mother families in these countries truly love and sympathize with their mother and intensely feel their mother’s love (Duncan & Edwards, 2013).

Finally, the “awareness of social life” by children living with a divorced parent has a mean score of 0.79 (at the deficient level) while that by children in single-mother families has a mean score of 2.23 (at the low level). This indicates that the “awareness of social life” by children living in a family with a single mother is higher because they feel loved and protected even with the mother. These feelings cannot be found in children living with divorced parents. Instead, they do not feel safe in their own family, leading to skepticism about others and boredom. Information from the interview with Student 2 (living with a divorced parent) supports this assumption, “When I was with my father, I was terrified because he beat my mother all the time. He even beat my mother badly in the middle of the night when he was drunk. Then every time I heard the noise, I woke up and could not sleep again because I was afraid my father would keep beating my mother.”

Analyzing the correlation of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children’s feelings with family and social life.

Table 3.

Information on the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children’s feelings with family and social life

	Gender		Level of education		Family status	
	Male	Female	Primary	Secondary	Divorced-parent families	Single-mother families
M	3.55	3.29	2.86	3.98	3.57	3.27
p	1.78		0.005		2.45	

Comparative test (T-test) results of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children’s feelings with family and social life in terms of gender, education level, and family status revealed differences as described in detail below.

In terms of gender, the test showed that p is 1.78, higher than 0.05. This means there is no difference in the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families regarding gender. Concerning the mean score, the figure for male students is 3.55, and female ones have a mean score of 3.29.

In terms of the level of study, comparative test results showed that p is 0.005 and it is lower than 0.05. This figure means that there are differences in childhood trauma. At the primary level, the mean score is 2.86, which lies in the average level, and that of the secondary level is 3.98, at the high level. This is entirely consistent with the psychological characteristics of children at the primary and secondary levels.

Regarding the family status, the T-Test showed that p is 2.45 and higher than 0.05, which infers no difference in children’s trauma in terms of the family situation. The mean score of children in divorced families is 3.57, and that of children in single-mother ones is 3.27.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families, measured through their emotions and feelings with family and social life, is markedly different in terms of education level.

Analyzing the correlation of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children’s behaviors towards family and social life.

Table 4.

Information on the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children's behaviors towards family and social life

	Gender		Level of education		Family status	
	Male	Female	Primary	Secondary	Divorced-parent families	Single-mother families
M	3.10	3.26	2.45	3.91	3.17	3.19
p	4.32		0.003		3.54	

The comparative test results (T-Test) on psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children's behaviors towards family and social life revealed differences when the aspects of gender, education level, and family status are taken into account. To be specific:

In terms of gender, the T-test results showed that p is 4.32, higher than 0.05. It can be inferred that there are differences in the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families regarding the aspect of gender. As for male students, the mean score is 3.10, and that of female students is 3.26. Both of the scores belong to the average level. Esmeused to study the gender-specific association between childhood adversities and to smoke in adulthood. The results also reported that female children's negative behavior (smoking behavior) gets a little higher than male children's if they lived in an unhappy family from childhood (Esme, 2013).

Regarding education level, the T-Test results on the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children's behaviors towards family and social life showed that p is 0.003 and lower than 0.05. It means that there are differences in psychological trauma of children in incomplete families concerning education level. As for the primary level, the mean score is 2.45, while the mean score of the secondary level is 3.91, which lies in the high level. The main reason comes from the psychological characteristics of these age periods. With regards to children of primary school age, there are some characteristics as follows. People at this age have formed some personality traits considered positive such as curiosity, honesty, and imitation.

Nonetheless, since children at this stage imitate their parents, so they may not have a clear and thorough recognition of problems. Concerning children of secondary school age, people can be aware of themselves and others. They need to evaluate themselves, judge others, compare themselves with others to find their strengths and weaknesses, desire to become adults and be respected by others. They are more aware of their thoughts and sensitive to their behaviors. Apart from that, they start to feel embarrassed, show remorse and want to improve when realizing that they have done something wrong. However, at this stage, individuals' self-assessment ability has plenty of limitations, which causes them to have the arrogance or a sense of inferiority. Due to these characteristics, children with psychological trauma in single-parent families often show signs of inferiority, self-defense, and high-intensity behaviors compared to their peers. These findings are similar to Pagani, L., and his colleagues on developing children's behaviors in divorced families. This research showed that children tend to have behavioral disorders, increase worries, and raise hyperactivity and opposition to society when living in an unhappy family, which has parents often quarreling and witnessing their parents' divorce (Pagani, 1997).

Regarding the family status, the results of the T-Test on the psychological trauma of children at the two education levels from incomplete families through behaviors towards family and social life showed that p is 3.54 and it is higher than 0.05, which implies that there is no difference in psychological trauma in terms of education level. At the primary level, the mean score is 3.17, and at the secondary level, the figure is 3.19, both of which are at the average level. Besides, the interview results also support this finding. Student 4 (7th grade), an interviewee, shared, "At school, I always try to get along with my classmates. I can suffer from however they tease. However, whenever my

mom forces me to do something according to her wishes, I get angry easily. Hence, I often argue against her. I cannot control myself even though I try to calm down.” Living in the same environment as Student 4, his sister (8 years old) said, “My mom is always yelling at us, but I know this is because she has to take charge of so many things. I try to help my mother with housework. I love my mother very much, but my older brother often quarrels with my mother and makes her sad.”. The interview information showed that even though living in the same environment, two siblings at different ages and different stages of life have different awareness and behaviors. Thus, it can be seen that in terms of education level, there are differences in psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through their behaviors towards family and social life.

Results of the ANOVA Test showed that p is higher than 0.05 ($p = 1.92$). Hence, it can be inferred that there is no difference in signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through behaviors towards family and social life. This information is summarized in the following table.

Table 5.

Information on signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through behaviors towards family and social life

Group of signs	M	Ranking	P (ANOVA)
Signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through family-related behaviors	3.22	1	1.92
Signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through school-related behaviors	3.21	2	
Signs of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through society-related behaviors	3.11	3	

The first position is the content of “signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through family-related behaviors,” with a mean score of 3.22. The second position is the content of “signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through school-related behaviors,” with the mean score of 3.21, only 0.01 lower than the first position. The final content is “signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through society-related behaviors,” with a mean score of 3.11, which is at the average level. As can be seen, these are the three major operating environments for children. As for the first environment, family, children are substantially exposed to, especially for primary school students. Besides, more than anywhere, family is where children can easily show their personalities and habits.

4. Discussion

Regarding the family status, the test results of the psychological trauma of children living in incomplete families through children’s awareness of family and social life revealed that P is 0.01 and lower than 0.05. It can be inferred that there are differences in psychological trauma between children in divorced families and those in single-mother families. Children of divorced-parent families have a mean score of 2.49, while the figure for single-mother families is 3.49. The results show that the awareness of family and social life by children in single-mother families is better than that of children living in families with a divorced parent. This is entirely consistent with the reality because children living with a single mother may lack a father’s affection, but their mother’s love may fully compensate for this gap. The children living in divorced-parent families often have to witness their parents arguing, quarreling, and even fighting, which causes them to lose faith in life. The trauma is likely to worsen, especially at the end of the marriage when children’s parents often

criticize each other and tell their children negative things about their mother/father. These findings are similar to the views of Straus and his colleagues about issues that children may encounter when living in a violent family and often witness parental conflict. According to these scholars, among different types of violence which are common to and traumatic for children is verbal violence (Straus, 2017).

Specifically, most of the children living with a divorced parent at least witnessed parental conflict once, so they appreciate the role of family. Concerning the children from single-mother families, most of them receive love from their mothers, who tend to make up for the lack of care from their fathers and act as the father and mother. The findings are slightly different from the study by Manuel and his colleagues on the factors affecting the psychological health of single mothers, which affirms that stress related to economic difficulties, parenting, and physical weakness increases the risk of depression in single mothers, thereby more or less negatively impacting children's cognitive and emotional life (Manuel, 2012). Similar information was also found in many other interviews. Apart from that, according to Astrom children living in families with only the father without the mother (the mother passed away or left due to divorce) tend to perceive the values of the father in a fashion called unconscious defense mechanism (as for children who have positive thinking about their father) or homogeneous mechanism (as for children who have a negative perception of their father) to become a new individual with psychological features taken from the father, helping children overcome the psychological crisis at a certain period (Åström, 2015).

When researching the relationship between the family status and child development, Härkönen et al. (2017) also indicated that it is the family breakdown that is the main reason leading to the tendency to be violent, to live in isolation from society, and to cause trouble in future loving relationships amongst children (Härkönen et al., 2017). In other words, attitudes and behaviors from adults contribute to children's awareness of the world around them.

Specifically, at the primary level, children are gradually worried about their academic results even though this psychological feature may not be seen at first. Meanwhile, at the secondary level, teenagers' social and love life thrives, gradually forming high-level emotions that are diversified and thorough. Emotion at this stage has many changes in content and expression form compared to that at primary school. Plus, it has been strengthened and developed more deeply over the years (Hoa, 2008). One participant shared in the interview (Student 3, 9th grader), "I love my mother very much because she has sacrificed for my two brothers and me a lot. She has taught me how to be independent. Since the divorce, my mother seems to be much happier. Sometimes I want to stay with my father so that my mother will be less strenuous." This sharing showed the interviewee's maturity, thinking more about the mother.

Meanwhile, with the same question but Student 3's younger sister (6 years old) had different thinking, "I want to have both parents. Sometimes I pretend to be naughty and lazy to eat so that my parents will play with me, but my brother told me that it would make my mother sad." Thereby, it could be seen that although the environment and situation are the same, emotional expression in each age group has apparent differences.

According to Wigfield and his colleagues, family is the first place for children to develop their personality and solid psychological support. All influences from the family have direct impacts on children positively or negatively (Wigfield et al., 2015). Next is the school, which is considered as the second influential environment. With some families, their children even spend more time at school for extra classes than at home. Concerning the social environment, this environment receives the least exposure from children at these stages of life compared to the other two. Although the school environment receives more exposure from children than the social environment, children still do not feel as safe as they are at home. It is easy to form disputes and conflicts in the school environment, which is created by multiple characteristics. According to the research by Anderson

and colleagues on the causes of school violence, one of them is related to children's living in an unhappy family in which parents usually quarrel or divorce (Anderson et al., 2016). Therefore, it can be affirmed that incomplete families have severe impacts on children's psychological trauma, which is unified through behavioral indicators.

Thus, there is no difference in the signs of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families, whatever the environment is. What can be seen is that there are some environments which receive more exposure from children.

5. Conclusions

Correlation analysis of psychological trauma of children in incomplete families through children's awareness of, feelings with and behaviors towards family and social life, which are self-reflected by children, showed differences in awareness between the children in divorced families and those in single-mother ones. In addition, there are differences in children's emotions and affection for family and social life when comparing the school-level variables. The most evident difference is family-related behaviors, followed by school-related behaviors, and finally, social behaviors. This difference allows a better understanding of the causes, effects, and degrees of psychological trauma children have in various aspects of family and social life through three indicators of awareness, behaviors, and feelings. This is a basis to categorize the signs of the psychological trauma of children in incomplete families and propose some timely screening solutions as well as suitable and effective psychological support measures for these children.

Data (and Software) Availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Ethics approval

The authors assert that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

Author contributions

- Author 1: Idea, research implementation.
- Author 2: Manuscript writing, data coding and analysis.
- Author 3: Data collection, data coding, data analysis.
- Author 4: Supervisor, methodology.
- Author 5: Facilitator, editor.

Competing interests

The authors admit that this study have no conflicts of interest. All authors have read and approved the paper and have met the criteria for authorship listed above.

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