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* FAMILY DISRUPTION IN EARLY LIFE AND DRINKING IN YOUNG ADULthood *
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Abstact

The relationship between family disruption early in life and subsequent drinking in young adulthood was examined in a large, nationally representative British sample. No significant associations were found even though the nature and timing of the disruption and social class were taken into account. Contrary to popular belief, parental loss was not an antecedent to heavy drinking in young adults.

Introduction.

The influence of family disruption early in life upon subsequent alcohol use has concerned many researchers seeking an understanding of alcohol-related problems. A broken home is referred to repeatedly as an antecedent to such problems. Even so, the evidence is not always unanimous in supporting this relationship. Of two prospective studies conducted in the United States, the first by McCord and McCord [1] suggested that a broken home was only important in combination with poor family relationships. The second, by Robins [2] implicated early separation as increasing the child's probability of adult antisocial behaviour. However, Robins suggested that the relation between broken homes and delinquency was not necessarily causal, since having an antisocial father simultaneously produced adult antisocial behaviour in the child and marital discord and separation in the parents. A similar argument was made by Vaillant [3] using data from a third prospective sample in the US. Family disruption was one of several items included in a scale of 'childhood environmental weaknesses' and it was suggested that differences in this measure between future social drinkers and alcoholics could be explained by differences in alcohol abuse of parents.

Retrospective studies have not necessarily clarified the relationship between broken homes and later alcohol use. For example, Cahalan and Room [4] reported that childhood hardship, family disruption and childhood unhappiness were correlated with adult problem drinking in men and Gomberg [5] reported similar

findings for women; whereas, Tennant et al [6] showed that separation and divorce of parents was relevant to later use of drugs (amphetamines and opiates) but not alcohol.

Other deviant behaviours have been linked to previous family disruption [7,8] and adult psychological disturbance may also be influenced, although again this relationship is controversial [9,10]. Circumstances surrounding or following family disruption are likely to be critical, since some children may suffer adverse social and economic circumstances, for example, as a result of parental loss [11]. In another study, delinquency among young adults in Britain appeared to be influenced by the timing of disruption [8].

It is possible, therefore, that such circumstances could account for discrepancies that emerge when considering the relationship between family disruption and alcohol use, while other sources of variation could be the samples studied and methods of obtaining information. In order to ascertain the importance of family disruption on later alcohol use, ideally data should be collected prospectively and in a representative sample. The National Child Development Study fulfils these requirements and contains information which allows investigation of the role of family disruption, its cause (that is parental separation or death) and its timing, in relation to subsequent alcohol use. This paper describes how these data were used for this purpose.

Method

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) is a longitudinal

survey of all people in Great Britain born in a single week, the 3rd to 9th March, 1958. Information was collected on approximately 98 percent of births, some 17,000 children. Subsequent to the original enquiry, the cohort was followed-up by the National Children's Bureau at the ages seven, 11, 16 and 23 [12,13]. Immigrants to Britain born during the same week were included in the survey at each sweep, except at age 23. Data were obtained from parental interviews, medical examinations, school questionnaires, attainment tests and personal questionnaires at ages 7, 11 and 16, whilst a detailed personal interview was used at age 23. Response in the sample as a whole has been documented previously and, on the whole, rates of response have been high, although such attrition as there has been has tended to occur in those with more disadvantaged backgrounds [13]. At age 16, for example, response was poorer among those living in step-families at age 11, although conclusions regarding those remaining in the study were not, in general, found to be biased [14]. Further analyses have shown that the 23-year sample under-represents the group with lone parents at age 7 and 16 [15] and, in relation to alcohol, non-drinkers and lighter drinkers at 16 were less likely to respond at age 23 [16].

Data on alcohol consumption.

At age 23 individuals reported their usual frequency of drinking and they also estimated for beer, lager, spirits, wine and other alcoholic drinks, the amount that they consumed in the previous week. The amount of alcohol was converted into units (1 unit is equivalent to half a pint of beer, 1 measure of spirits or 1

glass of wine) and subjects were subsequently classified as follows:

1. Non-drinkers: Did not drink alcohol or only on special occasions.
2. Infrequent-light drinkers: Usually drank less than once a week and consumed 0-5 units (women) or 0-10 units (men) in the week prior to the interview.
3. Frequent-moderate drinkers: Usually drank most days or once or twice a week and consumed 5-20 units (women) or 10-35 units (men) in the week prior to the interview.
4. Heavy drinkers: Usually drank most days or once or twice a week and consumed 20+ units (women) or 35+ units (men) in the week prior to the interview.

Data on family disruption.

Information on family disruption was obtained at ages 7, 11 and 16 and individuals living with both their natural parents were identified from these data. Children who were not living with their parents were grouped according to:

- a) whether loss of parent had resulted from death or from broken marriage, and
- b) the stage at which disruption had occurred, that is before age 7, 7-10 and 11-15 years.

Given the nature of these data, the term separation refers to a permanent break from either parent (legal or natural) rather than a temporary parental absence.

Data analysis

Associations between drinking at age 23 and family disruption

were tested using Chi squared.

Results

Table 1 presents alcohol consumption (in four groups at age 23) for study members who had previous experience of family disruption compared with those remaining with both natural parents. As in previous analyses of NCDS data, it is apparent that a greater percentage of women than men were non-drinkers [16] and in respect of previous family circumstances, that fewer disruptions involved loss of mother than father [14].

Experience of disruption in childhood was not significantly associated, however, with drinking at age 23. This result applied irrespective of whether disruption had occurred through loss of mother or father and also, irrespective of social class of origin (table 1). Further, the similarity in the distributions of drinking groups at age 23 was maintained when reasons for disruption, that is, death or broken marriage, were compared separately (table 2). Stage of family disruption and subsequent early adulthood drinking are given in table 3 and again no significant differences emerged. Finally, analyses were repeated to compare family circumstances and teenage drinking (at age 16) and all results were non-significant (Appendix).

Discussion

Findings from this large nationally representative prospective sample of young adults in Britain do not, therefore, provide any support for the prevalent view that a broken family background is an important antecedent to later alcohol problems. In this

respect we concur with other studies of young adults in Britain [17] although upbringing did appear to be a significant factor for men but not women included in one study [18].

This conclusion does not appear to be modified by considering, albeit to a limited extent, some of the circumstances likely to be relevant when a family break occurs. Social class of origin, for example, was included in the analyses to allow for the mitigating or exacerbating effects of a families' social and economic circumstances, whereas reason for the family disturbance was used in order to indicate the extent to which discord and unhappiness preceded the break (separation or divorce were likely to be worse in this respect). Effects of disruption might be further modified by the stage at which such a break occurred and this was represented in the analyses but to no significant result.

Childhood influences related to other delinquent behaviours in early adulthood such as crime and illegitimate pregnancy [8] are not necessarily relevant, therefore, to alcohol consumption at the same age. Perhaps this is not so surprising, given that drinking at high levels is so common in this age group in many Western countries that it would not be regarded, usually, as 'delinquent' as other behaviours. Later on in adulthood, drinking which is more readily distinguished as deviant or problematic might be related to the experience of a broken home in childhood and this would not be incompatible with results reported here. Indeed, there is some evidence for higher alcohol consumption among middle-aged women with disturbed childhoods

[19].

While the findings from the NCDS suggest that a broken home does not constitute an important antecedent to heavy drinking, other aspects of the childhood environment, including family discord and unhappiness, may be relevant to later drinking, as several researchers have shown [2,20]. Also, there are other influences not considered here, such as remarriage, parent-child relationships and the role of the non-custodial parent, which may be relevant. Finally, it is possible that methodological features have obscured a positive association between disrupted family background and later alcohol use. Sample attrition had occurred by early adulthood and this has affected the representativeness of the 23-year sample in terms of those experiencing family breakdown. However, this is unlikely to alter the findings reported here, which are based on between group comparisons (disrupted backgrounds versus living with both natural parents). Data on drinking were self-reported and a categorical classification was used. Criteria adopted in this paper have been recommended by some [21] but are not necessarily the most appropriate [22].

In conclusion, this study provides little evidence to suggest that family disruption in childhood adversely affects drinking in young adults. Since the findings are specific to early adulthood they do not discount the possibility that the experience of family breakdown is an antecedent to problem drinking at older ages.

Acknowledgements.

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Table 1: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 23 according to family disruption in childhood and social class of origin

Drinking group at age 23	Men				Women			
	Both natural parents	Disrupted from:*			Both natural parents	Disrupted from:*		
		Mother	Father	Either or both parents		Mother	Father	Either or both parents
All social classes+	(2494)	(161)	(418)	(551)	(2515)	(151)	(429)	(550)
Non-drinker	12	19	11	13	36	36	38	37
Infrequent-light	10	11	11	11	17	17	21	20
Frequent-moderate	50	45	46	46	38	40	33	35
Heavy	28	25	32	30	9	7	8	8
Non-manual+	(698)	(31)	(92)	(120)	(700)	(28)	(79)	(101)
Non-drinker	10	13	10	10	29	25	24	25
Infrequent-light	10	19	9	12	16	22	19	20
Frequent-moderate	53	49	49	50	45	46	44	43
Heavy	27	19	32	28	10	7	13	12
Manual+	(1683)	(117)	(272)	(366)	(1701)	(110)	(289)	(378)
Non-drinker	12	19	11	13	39	38	40	39
Infrequent-light	10	9	12	11	18	16	23	21
Frequent-moderate	50	44	46	46	35	40	30	33
Heavy	28	28	31	30	8	6	7	7

Figures in brackets are actual numbers.

+ based on father's occupation in 1958.

* Permanent separation from a parent (by death or broken marriage) by age 16.

Table 2: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 23 according to type of disruption (deaths and broken marriages)

Drinking group at age 23	Men							Women						
	Both natural parents	Broken marriage*			Death*			Both natural parents	Broken marriage*			Death*		
		Mother	Father	Either	Mother	Father	Either		Mother	Father	Either	Mother	Father	Either
	(2494)	(92)	(261)	(328)	(72)	(167)	(238)	(2515)	(66)	(267)	(316)	(89)	(157)	(257)
Non-drinker	12	17	13	14	19	8	12	36	38	40	38	35	37	36
Infrequent-light	10	10	11	11	11	13	12	17	18	21	21	17	19	19
Frequent-moderate	50	46	43	44	46	48	47	38	38	31	33	41	37	38
Heavy	28	27	33	31	24	31	29	9	6	8	8	7	7	7

Figures in brackets are actual numbers.

* occurring by age 16.

Table 3: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 23 according to age at disruption.

Drinking group at age 23	Men				Women			
	No Break	0-6 Years	7-10 Years	11-15 Years	No Break	0-6 Years	7-10 Years	11-15 Years
	(2494)	(168)	(110)	(135)	(2515)	(180)	(112)	(128)
Non-drinker	12	13	14	12	36	39	38	37
Infrequent-light	10	9	9	15	17	22	18	15
Frequent-moderate	50	44	49	47	38	32	38	37
Heavy	28	34	28	26	9	7	6	12

Figures in brackets are actual numbers.

Appendix: Family Disruption and teenage drinking

Table 1: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 16 according to family disruption in childhood and social class of origin

Drinking group at age 16	Men				Women			
	Both natural parents	Disrupted from:*			Both natural parents	Disrupted from:*		
		Mother	Father	Either		Mother	Father	Either
<u>All social classes+</u>	(3251)	(218)	(564)	(741)	(3133)	(185)	(571)	(725)
Non-drinker	23	27	27	27	34	33	36	34
Infrequent-light	26	24	24	23	27	31	29	29
Frequent-moderate	18	16	16	17	25	21	22	23
Heavy	33	33	33	33	14	15	13	14
<u>Non-Manual+</u>	(910)	(44)	(110)	(147)	(881)	(35)	(111)	(141)
Non-drinker	20	16	23	21	29	17	27	25
Infrequent-light	24	23	23	22	27	26	31	28
Frequent-moderate	22	20	21	21	28	37	22	26
Heavy	34	41	33	35	16	20	20	21
<u>Manual+</u>	(2168)	(150)	(366)	(487)	(2101)	(134)	(373)	(485)
Non-drinker	24	27	29	29	36	37	37	37
Infrequent-light	26	25	24	23	26	29	29	29
Frequent-moderate	17	17	14	15	24	20	22	22
Heavy	33	31	33	33	14	14	12	12

Figures in brackets refer to actual numbers.

+ based on father's occupation in 1958.

* Permanent separation from parent (by death or broken marriage) by age 16.

Table 2: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 16 according to type of disruption (broken marriage or death)

Drinking group at age 16	Men						Women							
	Both natural parents	Broken marriage*			Death*			Both natural parents	Broken marriage*			Death*		
		Mother	Father	Either	Mother	Father	Either		Mother	Father	Either	Mother	Father	Either
	(3251)	(121)	(351)	(440)	(100)	(224)	(319)	(3133)	(82)	(371)	(436)	(106)	(215)	(313)
Non-drinker	23	24	28	27	31	27	28	34	27	35	33	38	36	36
Infrequent-light	26	26	24	24	21	23	23	27	34	28	29	28	30	30
Frequent-moderate	18	14	16	16	18	17	17	25	20	21	21	23	25	25
Heavy	33	36	32	33	30	33	32	14	19	16	17	11	9	9

Figures in brackets refer to actual numbers.

* occurring by age 16.

Table 3: Prevalence (%) of drinking groups at age 16 according to age of family disruption.

Drinking group at age 16	Men				Women			
	No Break	0-6 Years	7-10 Years	11-15 Years	No Break	0-6 Years	7-10 Years	11-15 Years
	(3251)	(217)	(141)	(191)	(3133)	(229)	(157)	(177)
Non-drinker	23	26	25	28	34	39	32	30
Infrequent-light	26	26	24	19	27	30	30	28
Frequent-moderate	18	15	17	16	25	19	23	26
Heavy	33	33	34	37	14	12	15	16

Figures in brackets refer to actual numbers.

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NATIONAL CHILD DEVELOPMENT STUDY

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) is a continuing longitudinal study which is seeking to follow the lives of all those living in Great Britain who were born between 3 and 9 March, 1958.

It has its origins in the Perinatal Mortality Survey (PMS). This was sponsored by the National Birthday Trust Fund and designed to examine the social and obstetric factors associated with the early death or abnormality among the 17,000 children born in England, Scotland and Wales in that one week.

To date there have been four attempts to trace all members of the birth cohort in order to monitor their physical, educational and social development. These were carried out by the National Children's Bureau in 1965 (when they were aged 7), in 1969 (when they were aged 11), in 1974 (when they were aged 16) and in 1981 (when they were aged 23). In addition, in 1978, details of public examination entry and performance were obtained from the schools, sixth-form colleges and FE colleges.

For the birth survey information was obtained from the mother and from medical records by the midwife. For the purposes of the first three NCDS surveys, information was obtained from parents (who were interviewed by health visitors), head teachers and class teachers (who completed questionnaires), the schools health service (who carried out medical examinations) and the subjects themselves (who completed tests of ability and, latterly, questionnaires). In addition the birth cohort was augmented by including immigrants born in the relevant week in the target sample for NCDS1-3.

The 1981 survey differs in that information was obtained from the subject (who was interviewed by a professional survey research interviewer) and from the 1971 and 1981 Censuses (from which variables describing area of residence were taken). Similarly, during the collection of exam data in 1978 information was obtained (by post) only from the schools attended at the time of the third follow-up in 1974 (and from sixth-form and FE colleges, when these were identified by schools). On these last two occasions case no attempt was made to include new immigrants in the survey.

All NCDS data from the surveys identified above are held by the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex and are available for secondary analysis by researchers in universities and elsewhere. The Archive also holds a number of NCDS-related files (for example, of data collected in the course of a special study of handicapped school-leavers, at age 18; and the data from the 5% feasibility study, conducted at age 20, which preceded the 1981 follow-up), which are similarly available for secondary analysis.

Further details about the National Child Development Study can be obtained from the NCDS User Support Group.